



The Re

PROPOSAL

NIA ARTHURS

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Written by Nia Arthurs

Edited by Jalulu Editing

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(V1)

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Cody Bolton is my ex-fiancé.

Yes, Mr. Bachelor of the Year and grumpy CEO of a billion-dollar company once belonged to me—a charity worker who can barely afford rent.

Ten years ago, we had the most painful breakup in the history of breakups.

I picked up my shattered heart and moved on.

Now Cody's back with those emerald-green eyes and bulging biceps, declaring I'm still his.

Not happening.

Even if his chiseled jaw, broad chest, and strong hands star in my dreams. Even if he throws his money at my charity and fosters a kid with a heart condition. Even if we end up sharing a bed.

Ignore the thickening tension, we're from totally different worlds.

He's powerful, ruthless in the boardroom and lives in a penthouse suite. I'm quiet, awkward, and live in a crumbling apartment.

There are so many reasons we shouldn't work.

But when he slides his fingers down my spine, pulls me possessively closer, and whispers how much he's missed me, all the reasons why I shouldn't forgive him start to disappear.

Can I let myself accept this growly billionaire's re-proposal?

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GRUMPY ROMANCE

GRUMPY ROMANCE CHAPTER ONE

Leave A Review

Also by Nia Arthurs

A BAD OMEN

CLARISSA

“NO ONE IS SMILING.” The warning floats to my ear when I wrap my fingers around the door to the boardroom.

I pause and look at the intern who’s been shadowing me for the past three weeks. Her intelligent brown eyes are hooded in worry.

“They’ll smile when they see the pictures,” I say.

“What if they don’t?”

“It’ll be fine, Laura.”

“We’ve had five rejections this week. This is the last stop. If we lose this one—”

“We won’t.”

“Look.” She points to the glass window. “Look at their faces. You said—”

I squeeze her shoulder. “I said the first rule of a pitch is to read the room. The *first* rule. Not the only one. It’s our job to turn those frowns into teary eyes and open wallets.”

Even as I assure her, I feel unbalanced on my feet. It could be the shoes though. I can’t remember when I bought these stilettos, but I know they were the cheapest on the rack. Even back then, they were nothing special. Now, they’re scuffed, slightly faded, and belong in the trash.

Please just hold out for this one meeting.

Squaring my shoulders, I saunter confidently into the conference room. There are seven suits around the table. All frowning. Hands clasped like a jury with a guilty verdict.

Laura was right. There’s a chill in this room that has nothing to do with the air conditioner humming against the wall.

I throw on my brightest grin, hoping it’s not as shaky as it feels. After two years of giving these pitches, you’d think I’d

rid myself of the nervous jitters.

No such luck.

“Good morning, Mr. Winifred.” I nod at the company liaison.

He gives me a blank stare, as if we haven’t met intermittently for the past two years to discuss projects for the foundation.

I walk past the side table and notice it’s free of pastries. Winifred has a weakness for sugar. He’d take every opportunity to swipe the company card at a donut shop, so why is there no powdered treats in sight?

“Everyone doing well?” I glance around the table, hoping to soften at least *one* person. The best way to win at these company pitches is to get someone on my side.

Unfortunately, I’m met with stony silence.

Laura sighs loudly.

I ignore her and remain upbeat. “It’s a pleasure to work with you again this year.” I set my laptop on the table. “For those who don’t know, your company is one of the biggest contributors to the Do More Project. Together, we’ve helped hundreds of families and touched thousands of...”

From the corner of my eye, I see Laura gesturing to me.

“... lives. Our mission at the Do More Project is to empower women and we’ve recently purchased a building to host entrepreneurs from the women’s shelter...”

“Clarissa,” Laura whispers in my ear, “there’s no wire for the laptop.”

“What?” My eyebrows cinch tightly.

“I can’t hook the laptop up to the projector.”

“Excuse me.” I swing my gaze to Winifred. “We need a connection so we can—”

“Don’t bother opening your laptop, Miss Maura.”

I blink unsteadily. I don't need Laura's whispered warnings or even supernatural writing on the wall to tell me what's about to happen.

Keeping a plastic grin on my face, I joke, "Are you handing us a check without question, Mr. Winifred? We'll gladly accept."

No one laughs.

Winifred glances away as if looking at me is painful.

Laura cringes in second-hand embarrassment.

The silence stretches.

"Like I said, Miss Maura. There won't be a presentation today."

My mouth feels dry. I pretend I don't understand. "No problem. We're open to reschedule."

"Reschedule?" Laura mutters behind me. "They're the ones who told us to show up at eight and left us waiting outside for two hours."

"Laura," I hiss.

She shuts her mouth but pins an angry stare Winifred's way.

The older man leans forward, folds his hands on top of the table and admits, "There's no easy way to say this. We're cutting the funding, Miss Maura."

"For this quarter?" I squeak.

"Forever."

My expression is a perfect deer-in-the-headlights. Or more accurately, deer-right-before-the-car-makes-impact. My figurative hooves are being swept from under me and I'm landing on someone's windshield with a crack.

"Why?"

"The company has a new owner and he's..." Winifred stumbles over his words, seeming to search for one he can share in polite society.

“*Psycho?*” someone mutters.

“Particular,” Winifred finishes.

“What does your new owner have to do with me?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but our company has been bleeding money. We need to cut off the hemorrhaging.”

“By cutting off the charity? You give less than one percent of your gross income to the project!”

“I’m not arguing with you, Miss Maura.” He gives me *that* look. The one that says he thinks I’m nothing more than an emotional creature with zero intelligence.

Panic lashes against my ribs. I’m too desperate to feel offended. “I would happily speak to your new CEO, Mr. Winifred. If you can make an appointment, I’ll sit down with him and explain our joint ventures.”

“That’s not possible.”

The pressure in my chest mounts. The charity’s lifeline is slipping through my fingers. “I’m willing to accept even a portion of last year’s funds. A little goes a long way.”

I can feel Laura’s eyes drilling into my back. She’s practically screaming *don’t bother with these bozos*.

She’s right.

I look like an idiot.

But who cares about pride? The charity is in the red. More and more companies have pulled their support.

We need this.

I keep pressing. “Mr. Winifred, consider our history. The Do More Project has done amazing things for the community and for you.”

Winifred straightens.

“You assured me that you would continue to support the charity. Especially after our work on your public relations tour.”

That's putting it nicely. Winifred paraded us and our clients in a media campaign to get a promotion. He swore to us that he'd have our backs when he took his corner office and pay raise. I should have known not to believe him.

Lips tightening, he grinds out, "Protesting won't get you anywhere. It is what it is." Winifred gestures to the door, subtly kicking us out.

I refuse to back down. "Mr. Winifred, can we at least have a private discussion?"

"No, that's not possible."

"But—"

"Miss Maura, unlike you, we have actual work to do. I don't have time for this."

My jaw slackens.

Laura bursts in front of me, red-faced. "At least we're doing something to help people. Unlike you, you selfish prick!"

"Laura..." I tug at her sleeve.

"No, this isn't fair! This guy's a poser. I heard all about how he begged Ms. Phoebe to take pictures of him working at the charity. He had no problems using you guys. Now he thinks he's so much better than us because we want a favor back?"

"Laura, that's enough," I say sharply. Turning to Mr. Winifred, I apologize. "She's interning with us to earn extra credit. It hasn't been long. She doesn't know how things work yet."

Behind me, Laura grumbles. "I know enough to say he's a prick."

I slant her a warning look.

"Kids these days." Winifred tilts his chin up. "Our education system should be teaching you the skills you need to get a job. Instead they have you going around begging for money."

My heart pinches. *Begging for money?*

“Say that again, you old fart. I dare you!” Laura launches forward, but I grab her this time and keep her in place.

Winifred juts his chin at the door with barely hidden annoyance. “Goodbye, Miss Maura. I trust you can find your way out.”

My voice cracks, but I force myself to remain professional. “Thank you for your time.”

Everyone watches our disgraced exit like we’re the last two survivors of *The Titanic*.

“Are we just going to leave?” Laura hisses.

“Yes,” I mumble, taking rushed steps to the door.

I’m halfway there when I hear a sickening *crack* and my right leg bucks like a new-born fowl just learning to stand.

The room tilts.

My arms flail.

Laura grabs me and screams, “Clarissa!”

Her yelp pulls the attention of everyone in the room. Heat stains my cheeks when I feel their eyes sliding from my bent knee to my tilted ankle. Swallowing back my horror, I glance down at the little stick that used to be attached to my heel.

“Are you okay, Miss Maura?” Winifred asks with the last shred of humanity he has left.

Crippling humiliation sweeps over my body. Laura feels the shame too because her cheeks are stained pink.

“Come on,” I tell Laura under my breath.

Head ducked and my ankle slightly throbbing, I stumble out of the room. My gait is uneven thanks to my broken heel and it feels like I’m walking on a see-saw. *Up. Down. Up. Down.*

Doing my best impression of a one-legged pirate, I increase my speed and burst into the hallway. Desperately, I stab the button for the elevator.

Laura pushes her silky black hair behind her ear. “Are you okay? That looked painful.”

“Are you talking about Winifred cutting our funding or the way my heel broke?” I smile in exhaustion.

“I meant your heel, obviously. But the way that went down was a nightmare too. Why’d you hold me back? That guy had a punch coming.”

“Sure. Great strategy. Punch all the corporations that refuse to donate. I’m sure that’ll loosen their purses.”

“It’s better than apologizing.” Her eyebrows form an angry V.

“He’s not obligated to give us money.”

“He’s not obligated to be a decent human being either. Clearly.”

The elevator doors open.

I walk in and hook my arm around Laura’s elbow to make sure she enters with me. “It’s fine. I’ll make an appointment and talk to the new owner. I believe I can change his mind.”

Laura purses her lips.

The doors open at that moment and I drag her into the spacious lobby.

“The least they could have done was let us present,” she mumbles. “You worked so hard on that powerpoint.”

“Powerpoint?” A sickening realization dawns. I groan loudly. “Oh no. I forgot my laptop upstairs.”

Laura narrows her eyes. “I’ll go back up there and get it.”

With a determined look, she stalks past me, pushing up the sleeve of her shirt like Popeye after a can of spinach.

“No, you most definitely will not.” I pull her back. “I’ll get it.”

“Your heels are busted,” she points out.

“And you’re too young to go to jail. Which is exactly where you’ll be headed if you pick a fight with Winifred. *I’ll*

go.”

“Fine,” she huffs.

“Here.” I hand her a bill. “There’s a cafe around the corner. Go buy yourself an iced coffee and cool down. I’ll meet you there after I get the laptop and we can catch a cab back.”

She snaps the bill from me and stomps away.

My lips curl up. Laura’s a spitfire, and a part of me is jealous of her confidence. At her age, I was never that sure of myself. Never that brave. Maybe if I was, my heart wouldn’t have been shattered...

No. I’m not thinking about that. It’s already been a crappy day.

Looking back and forth, I limp to the nearest bathroom.

It’s empty.

I let out a breath of relief and bend over to inspect my shoes. It’s busted. The only solution I can see is to break the other heel so I stop walking like a penguin. With a mighty heave, I slam my shoe against the sink. The stick breaks like a twig.

Now I have equally scuffed ballet flats.

I slip them on and realize that the shoes are still uneven thanks to the tiny bit of a heel at the end. But at least it doesn’t look as obvious.

I discard the stick and wash my hands.

Just then, two employees walk in. They smile politely at me. I smile back and mind my own business until their conversation drifts to my ears.

“Did you see the group chat?”

“Yeah, I wish I was upstairs when it happened.”

“Can you imagine breaking your heel at a moment like that? It must have been humiliating.”

I freeze in the middle of throwing away the paper towel. Slowly, my gaze drops to my newly-transformed flats.

“How pathetic do you have to be that you can’t even dress well during a pitch? I mean, come on. She can’t even afford proper shoes?”

“Exactly. Maybe *she’s* the one who needs charity.”

“Help yourself before trying to help others. It’s common sense.”

A lump forms in my throat. I squeeze the paper towel tightly, my body trembling.

Should I say something? But what can I say that won’t make me even more pathetic?

“How are *your* shoes? Can’t have you breaking a heel in front of our new boss.”

“Have you seen his pictures? He’s so hot.”

“I know! Why do you think I’m doing my makeup? My dream is to be a rich man’s wife.”

They laugh together.

I shrink into the background until the girls finish re-touching their makeup.

Finally, they’re gone.

My hands unclench and I release the paper towel. It sinks into the trash. Crumpled. Used. Discarded.

Just like me.

With a deep breath, I keep the tears back and find my brave face. I’m an adult now. Words can’t hurt me.

Or at least they shouldn’t.

But the shame is cloying, like cheap perfume, and I can’t outrun it.

I wait a few moments before tiptoeing out of the bathroom and sneaking into the elevator.

The words I overheard taunt me.

Help yourself before trying to help others.

Maybe she needs charity.

Ding!

The chime of the elevator snaps me out of my thoughts. I freeze when, beyond the doors, I see people crowding the hallway and peeking out of their cubicles. Heads turn in my direction. It feels like they're all staring at me. Laughing at me.

Look at us with our non-damaged stilettos and our 'real' jobs.

I try to keep my head up, but I feel the weight of shame bearing down on me. In that moment, I'm an insecure teenager all over again.

Sleeping in my mom's car.

Wearing hand-me-downs from the lost and found.

Eating free lunches alone in the cafeteria.

I curl my fingers into fists and keep walking forward when everything inside me wants to run away and hide.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

The sound of trolley wheels knocks me back. I jump out of the way just in time for a tray filled with delicate desserts to zoom past me.

"What the..." I blink rapidly and note the long line of dessert trays being whisked into the boardroom.

A light clicks on in my head. I'd been so caught up in myself that I assumed the employees lurking around were there to make fun of me.

With new eyes, I study the activity and realize no one is paying me any attention. People are whispering excitedly to each other. Women are doing their makeup. I sense the tension in the air and feel relief.

Something's happening.

Something that has nothing to do with me.

I wipe my sweaty palm on my skirt and re-enter the board room with a little more confidence.

Winifred is flitting around the desserts, barking orders. My eyes bug when I see the table that was bare during our presentation is now overflowing with food and drinks.

“How’s my teeth?” Winifred asks, baring his choppers at one of his assistants.

The guy lifts two thumbs up.

Winifred smiles wider. Suddenly, his attention shifts to me and that smile gets sucked into a frightened look. He leans back as if he thinks I’m going to swing at him.

“What are you doing here, Miss Maura?”

“Just here for my laptop,” I mumble.

“Take it.” He flits his fingers at me like I’m one of those pigeons in the park. “Quick. And use the stairs rather than the elevators. We have an important guest coming.” Winifred’s eyes drag down to my shoes with a measured frown. “I don’t want him to think you work here.”

My lips twist into a scowl. *Maybe I should have let Laura deck him. Maybe I should go totally insane and deck him myself.*

Imagining my fist sinking into Winifred’s cheek makes me feel better.

At least I stand up for myself in my imagination.

Eager to leave, I grab my laptop, tuck it into the case and exit. When I step outside, there are even *more* employees in the hallway. It’s like everyone is gathering for a parade.

Is the new owner going to promote someone today?

It would explain why Winifred bought gourmet snack food and is obsessed with his appearance like a girl before her first date.

I briefly contemplate sticking around so I can meet the owner myself, but I decide not to push my luck. With the stuffy, uber-rich CEO types, it’s better to make an appointment rather than ambush them with proposals.

I head left and crash through the emergency stairwell, heeding Winifred's warning about the elevator. My ankle throbs when I see all the stairs I have to walk down. With a sigh, I gingerly begin my descent.

After one floor, I'm sweating.

After two floors, I'm done.

The mysterious new owner of the company must have arrived by now. I'll take an elevator to the lobby. Winifred isn't omnipresent. It's not like he can arrest me for not using the stairs.

I open the emergency door and glance inside the office. This floor has lots of lights, grey carpets and cramped cubicles, most of which are empty. Their occupants must be upstairs, showering their new boss in confetti and champagne.

Ridiculous.

I cross the room but, by the time I get to the elevator, the throbbing is undeniable. Taking the stairs was definitely a bad idea.

Since I'm alone, I slip my foot out of my shoe and inspect my ankle. My brown complexion makes it hard to see any bruises developing. At least it doesn't look broken. Hopefully, it's just a sprain.

I squeeze my toes, noting that there isn't any pain.

So it's just my ankle then?

At that moment, the elevator dings and the doors open.

I drop my foot, face burning with embarrassment. *Did this guy see me massaging my toes like a lunatic?*

Geez, I hope not.

Without lifting my head, I stuff my feet haphazardly into my flats. I'm so jittery that I don't bother pushing it in properly and half-shuffle, half-limp forward, nearly walking right out of my shoes.

The air around me changes when I get close to the stranger. It's the weirdest thing. Like the stirrings of a flame

dancing over my skin.

“Clarissa?” A voice I haven’t heard in years rumbles around me.

My heart lurches to my throat.

The blood drains from my face.

No.

Not now.

Not here.

Not when I’ve had the most embarrassing day of my life.

I think of that night ten years ago...

Okay, second most embarrassing day of my life.

The stranger steps forward, bringing the scent of mint and spice. My insides tingle and I take a deep breath.

For a moment, I just stand there, my fingers tight around my laptop case and my body tense.

Then I glance up slowly, taking note of a broad chest and shoulders perfectly fitted in a navy dress shirt with the cuffs rolled up. Dark blonde hair, tousled. Eyes the color of spring, this glittering green-gold, like the leaves on the daises that painted my ugly childhood home with much-needed vibrancy.

Time has changed some things—there are a few wrinkles around his eyes and bracketing his lips—but those eyes, that deep voice, and that lethal charisma are the same.

It’s him.

Cody Bolton.

A.K.A my biggest heartbreak.

My biggest mistake.

My biggest life lesson.

Our gazes collide and, even though I’m one hundred percent sure I despise him, my body flashes with warmth. *Oof*. I hate that he’s more handsome now than he was in college.

His bone structure is chiseled, hewn from marble and granite. His lips are hard and firm, surrounded by the kind of stubble that I've only seen in men's magazines and cologne commercials.

If life were fair, terrible people should be ugly. So why does he still look like a Disney prince?

"Ris?" He whispers my name the way he used to. The way that once made shivers dance down my spine.

But I steel myself against it.

I'm not that girl anymore.

He destroyed her.

And I buried her body where it can never be resurrected.

"Excuse me," I snap, knocking into him as I try to get on the elevator.

He drops his hands a couple inches to bar me from entering. I careen to a stop, my nose mere centimeters away from his upper arms.

Really muscular arms.

Attached to delectable hands—wide palms, elegant fingers, a wrist coated by *the* most expensive watch I've ever seen.

My heart starts pounding.

"It's good to see you," Cody says. His tone is gentle, but it's wrapped in a voice that's too deep and gravelly to be innocent. Every word sounds way more sensual than it should.

Slanting him a scathing look, I grind out, "I can't say the same."

"I guess I deserve that."

What he deserves is my foot down his throat.

His hands dive into the pockets of his slacks. "What are you doing here?"

"None of your business."

Seeing that he's dropped his arm, I march past him and enter the elevator. Like a woodpecker going to town on a tree trunk, I stab the button to close the doors.

Cody spins around, his hand stopping the elevator from closing.

I let out a silent groan. *So close to freedom.*

"What do you want?" I hiss.

He watches me with a wrinkle between his brow. That wrinkle... I know it. It popped up frequently in college—first when we studied together and later, whenever he ran into a problem while building his start-up.

Cody was one of those overachievers who established his own business while getting top grades *and* being involved in the student council. It's not surprising to me that he's successful. Every choice he made back then was for the sake of his dreams.

Every choice.

Including the one that ended us.

His gaze drops to my feet. I cringe and try to pull my foot back, swinging my laptop forward as if that's enough to hide the fact that I'm wearing broken heels.

"Are you hurt?" Cody asks, his voice so soft and worried that I *almost* believe there's a heart beating behind that fancy Armani suit.

Almost.

Angsty and self-conscious, I glance away. "None of your business."

"You were limping."

"I wasn't."

"Did you drive here?" I open my mouth, but he studies me and says, "Let me guess. None of my business?"

I lift my chin defiantly.

A corner of his lips hitches up and a slight tingle starts at the base of my neck and travels south. An unwanted memory blooms. Cody's hands in my hair. His lips on my neck. His smile hot against my throat as he whispered, *'I love you so much'*.

My eyes drop to his lips before I force them to the side of the elevator instead.

I beat away the memories, but they keep attacking like deranged pigeons. Would his touch feel different? His kiss? What would that beard feel like against my skin. Soft? Itchy? Would I like the friction?

I bet I would.

My tongue darts out to trace my lips as all the air gets sucked out of the elevator.

I need this to stop. I need him to go away, banished to the realm of memories that I never revisit. Not unless I'm drinking wine and feeling particularly down on myself.

Just then, Cody's phone rings.

Never taking his eyes off mine, he answers. "I know. I got off on the wrong floor."

Biting down on my lip, I start poking the elevator button again. Why can't machine win over man *this once*? I wouldn't mind crushing my ex between two huge metallic doors and running off.

"I'll be there." Cody ends the call before the person on the other end finishes. I hear them ranting just before the phone goes black.

Finally, he takes his hands off the door.

Seizing the opportunity, I poke faster.

Cody slips into the elevator with me and grabs my finger just as the doors shut. His skin is warm against mine, and my heart ricochets like a heated game of ping-pong.

I drag my hand away.

Undeterred, he steps into my personal space and leans forward.

His face hovers on top of mine.

Closer.

Closer.

He's not stopping.

This jerk isn't going to kiss me, is he?

I close my eyes and brace myself.

At the last second, I feel Cody change directions. When I open my eyes, he's reaching past me and tapping the button for the lobby.

My jaw slackens and I croak, "What are you doing?"

"I'll walk you to your car," he says, a knowing smirk on his lips.

The tension in my shoulders gets worse and I feel totally stupid.

Of course Cody wouldn't kiss me.

For one thing, he knows I'd probably smack him in the face for daring to try.

For another, he might have a girlfriend or a wife.

Annoyance zips through me at the thought.

Not because I'm jealous.

No. Definitely not.

"I'd rather you didn't walk me anywhere," I grumble.

"Enough to tell me what you're doing here?" He arches a thick eyebrow. "You're not visiting a boyfriend, are you?"

There's a low, possessive note to his voice that annoys me. The truth is on the tip of my tongue but, in that moment, the absolute *last* thing I want to do is appear both injured, pathetic, *and* single in front of my ex.

“I am.” My chin lifts so high I’m practically pointing my jaw at the ceiling. “He works here and we’re very happy together.”

Cody looks amused.

Which is not the reaction I was hoping for.

His cocky smirk rakes on my nerves and I slant him a dark look. “What?”

He steps a little closer to me, filling up my personal space with his spicy cologne. “You’re lying.”

I glare at him.

“If you really had a boyfriend, you would have told me it was none of my business...”

My eyelashes flutter. “It’s none of your business.”

“Too late, princess.” He touches my cheek with the gentleness of a butterfly wing. “You never could look someone in the eyes when you lie.”

For a second, his finger on my cheek is like the center of my universe. The one connection my body craved for years.

Desperate for some kind of level ground, I smack his hand away.

“Don’t pretend you know me,” I snap. “I’m not the same as I was back then.”

He studies me. Unfazed. Unbothered. He always was the king of the poker face. “Neither am I.”

My breath hitches.

Cody’s phone rings again.

It’s loud in the silence. Incessant.

I huff in annoyance. “Are you going to get that?”

“Nope.”

“It sounds important.”

“Some things are more important.” He gives me a meaningful look that sets off a hundred butterflies in my

stomach.

Enough of this.

Cody and I are mortal enemies. Unfortunately, my body has the wrong memo and seems to think he's the best thing since sliced bread. Rather than continue to let him stir me up, it's better to retreat.

I limp forward and stab the button to the nearest floor. I'll take my chances with the stairs.

Cody arches a brow. "That's not the lobby."

"That's not your concern."

"Ris."

"Don't call me that," I spit. My eyes are sharp. So is my voice. "Let's pretend we didn't meet each other today."

The doors slide apart and I'm shocked by the beefy bodyguards crowding outside it. They glance at Cody, assessing him before giving me suspicious looks.

My eyebrows fly up. *Cody travels with bodyguards now? How rich is he?*

It doesn't matter. I muscle my way through the men, glad when Cody doesn't follow.

Laura's in the lobby when I limp there. She's holding a coffee and a pair of beach slippers in each hand. I nearly burst into tears when I see those slippers.

"Thank you." I choke, accepting them from her.

She scrunches her nose. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Let's just get out of here."

"Change your shoes first," she says, dragging me to a chair in the lobby. I want to run as far away from Cody as possible, but Laura is adamant. While I ease out of my flats, she sits beside me and grins. "Did you see him?"

"See who?"

"The new owner of the company. I heard the receptionists talking about him. Apparently, he's very rich and very scary.

They say every company he touches dies like he's some kind of billionaire Grim Reaper. His name is Carlton or Holton or...
”

“Bolton,” I breathe.

My broken heels clomp to the ground as the truth hits me square between the eyes.

The new owner everyone is buzzing about...

The CEO that Winifred kicked our charity to the curb for...

It's Cody.

CHERRY BOMBS

CODY

SEEING Clarissa outside the elevator stopped me in my tracks, but I have a feeling she would have caught my attention even if we didn't have history.

Every inch of her is crafted to have a man's pulse spiking.

That hair—curly, black and falling way beyond her shoulders.

Those eyes—doe-brown, pure, and wide enough for a grown man to drown in.

That mouth—plump and lush, her lips ripe for the plunder. She never was one for lipstick, and I sure appreciated her cherry-flavored preferences.

Does she still like cherry lip-gloss?

I'd pay a million bucks to have the answer. Hell, I'd pay ten times that to taste it myself.

I almost did. The way she closed her eyes, eyelashes fluttering over brown cheeks, when I moved in to press the button for the elevator made me think she wasn't altogether against it.

Then she opened her eyes, pinned me with a frigid stare and I felt the full breadth of her disgust.

Her anger is expected.

Our complicated past is a giant, sticky web between us.

Still, I was happy to see her.

No, 'happy' isn't the right word.

She was a ghost haunting my memories. A longing I never spoke out loud but always felt echoing in my chest. Seeing her in person, being close enough to touch her, it didn't just make me happy. It... filled some part of me. Some desperate need. Like water to a man who'd been roaming the desert for days.

“We’re here.” A giant brute with a scar down his eye gestures for me to walk out of the elevator.

Doberman is the head of my security. It’s not his real name. Not that I care to know his real name. When my older brother Clay foisted a protection team on me, he told me Doberman was trustworthy and thorough. That’s all the information I need.

I step into a hallway that’s busier than a nightclub on the weekends. My expression tightens with annoyance when I see my new employees staring at me. Eager eyes. Loud chatter. Wasting time.

“It’s him.”

“He’s here.”

“He’s beautiful.”

That last statement is from a brunette with a nose ring. I slant her a scathing look for being so daring. The only woman I want calling me ‘beautiful’ is currently driving away, probably raining curses down on me and three generations of my children.

Which is counterproductive, since those children will be hers.

Thinking of Clarissa limping home makes my scowl even darker. The brunette receives the sharp end of my fury and immediately drops her flirty smile, ducking her head in shame.

I don’t register it. My mind is moving at a thousand miles an hour. How did Clarissa get hurt? Did it have anything to do with why I caught her rubbing her foot outside the elevator?

Damn. I should have insisted on taking her home. If I hadn’t been so awe-struck by her, I would have thought of a better solution than letting her walk away.

I freeze in the middle of the hallway, getting more and more annoyed by my carelessness.

Doberman and his team come to a stand-still too.

The whispers that were flying back and forth stop as if everyone can sense I'm about to lose it.

With a deep breath, I put my emotions back in check.

Meeting Clarissa today threw me for a loop. Her hatred was a living thing. Breathing. Alive. As present as the chemistry we never lost. As sensual as the curves that filled out her body and sent arrows of lust straight to my pants.

Hate and desire are divided by a thin line and I saw both in her eyes when she looked at me. My response was much more one-sided. All heat. All desire. Every second that ticked by gave me another reason to crave her skin, her touch, her kisses. Little things. Like the slope of her shoulder. The moles on her neck. The flare of her hips in that sensible pencil skirt.

A slow, persistent fire burns under my skin.

Entirely consuming.

And inappropriate for the setting.

What the hell is the matter with me? I don't get distracted this easily.

I'm here to do a job.

Not to pine after the girl that got away.

Or more accurately, the girl I threw away.

The crowd goes deathly quiet when I glance to the left and right. Finally staring straight ahead, I snarl, "Anyone not seated at their desks in five seconds can hand in their official resignation."

For a moment, no one moves.

There's a hint of disbelief.

Can he do that? Will he do that?

The answer is yes.

With pleasure.

"One," I growl, hardening my expression. "Two..."

I stand still, a pillar in the roaring stampede that follows. Employees skitter back to their desks and charge to the elevator in droves. The slam of feet against the floor is deafening.

In three seconds flat, the hallway is clear.

“Was that necessary?” Vargas careens into my line of sight, a hint of a scolding in his voice. He’s a tall, thin man with a meticulously groomed mustache and square glasses.

I stride through the now-empty hallway. Vargas is hot on my heels. “You made a bad impression.”

“I didn’t realize I was here to make a good impression,” I tell him.

He humphs.

“Did you gather the HODs?”

“They were ready before we arrived. Speaking of, why did you disappear earlier?”

“Got lost,” I grumble.

“Humph,” Vargas says again.

He knows I’m full of crap.

I ran from my protection team for the sake of my sanity. After two months with bodyguards, I’m still not used to being shadowed. I get why it’s necessary and I get that Clay wants to look out for me. Still, it’s a hassle.

“At least I know you won’t get attacked today,” Vargas mumbles, glancing at Doberman and his team.

“You’re referring to what happened at Wui Limited?” I turn the corner, noticing the conference room at the end of the hall.

“And Infinite Slides. And Regitech. And...”

I lift a hand. “I get the point.”

It’s easier for people to blame me for their poor choices than accept responsibility. And Vargas is tired of dragging angry, disgruntled, newly-fired employees off me.

“There are pros and cons to a different strategy, you know,” Vargas says.

“My strategy works just fine.”

He arches thick eyebrows behind his glasses. “Things have changed. Thanks to that magazine, you’ve got the public’s interest. A lot more eyes are on you now than before the print last month.”

I grit my teeth. Accepting that interview for Bachelor of the Year was the worst decision I could have made. A slight stroke to my ego turned into a publicity nightmare.

In my defense, I’ve never been a candidate before despite having the financials to qualify. I like to win, even if the competition isn’t worth it. Unfortunately, that cockiness bit me in the butt.

“You’re the one who told me it wouldn’t affect us,” I grunt, sliding my assistant a dark look.

“I said it wouldn’t affect us *negatively*. Which it won’t. If you take a softer approach.”

I stare at Vargas. “Is that a warning?”

“A friendly tip.”

I scoff and wait until Vargas shoves the doors of the conference room open. The executives around the table shoot to their feet.

“Mr. Bolton.” Cheeks bunching with a giant smile, a thick man in a business suit speeds toward me. “What an absolute honor to meet you in person.”

I ignore his hand and take his chair at the head of the table, staring blankly at him when he continues to stand with his arm extended.

“Oh, yes. Yes.” He lets loose a nervous chuckle. “You can have that seat. It’s so much warmer over here.” He gestures to one of the other executives, hoisting them out of their chair and settling in at my right. “I’m Winifred. We spoke on the phone—”

“I know who you are.” My eyes narrow in his direction.

He swallows so hard that his Adam’s apple almost knocks out the guy across the table.

“I’m honored,” he says finally.

“You shouldn’t be.” My lips curl up at the corners when I see him squirm. I’ve long accepted the darkness inside me that enjoys this.

“What?” His jaw drops.

“The fact that I recognize you is not a good thing.”

He starts blinking so fast I feel a strong wind.

I hold my hand out. Vargas sighs before slapping a file into it.

My voice cold, I announce, “Let’s begin.”



“IT’S DECIDED.” I gesture to the mousy secretary standing to my right. “Ms. Colleen has been doing most of the work over the years and you’ve all taken credit for it.” I slice my eyes through the execs who can’t meet my gaze. “From now on, she will step up as department head. The rest of you...” I pause, “are fired.”

Shocked gasps ripple through the room.

Winifred wails.

Unaffected, I rise from the table.

My work here is done.

“Wait. Wait!” The thick man hurries in front of me. “I can’t lose this job. I *can’t*.”

Doberman moves forward, silent and deadly.

I lift a hand to stop my security. Winifred is making a scene, but he won’t harm me. Men like this only strike when they have an advantage and, at this moment, he has none.

Doberman settles down, but his body's still on alert.

Vargas stays a healthy distance away, not trusting to get in the line of fire.

"Please. I'll do anything." Winifred's eyes are glassy and his cheeks are flushed. "Please."

I face him, my voice calm and listless. "Anything?"

He nods enthusiastically, looking ready to drop to his knees and pant like a dog if I asked him to.

Not that I would ask for such a dehumanizing thing... today.

I step closer to Winifred and set a hand on his shoulder. Bending down until we're nose-to-nose, I tell him, "Return the hundred-and-fifty grand you stole from the company and I'll consider it."

His eyes widen until they look like they'll explode off his face.

So predictable.

So boring.

I straighten and wipe my hand on the edge of my jacket. His shirt was sticky with perspiration and now I have it all over my side.

"I-I never..."

"You never *what?*" I arch an eyebrow.

He clamps his mouth shut and stares guiltily at the floor.

It's too late. He's annoyed me now and there's no turning back.

"You never created fake companies and siphoned funds from the budget to feed your own greedy pocket? You never opened off-shore bank accounts hoping to throw off suspicion? You never rushed to cover your tracks when you found out the acquisition had gone through?"

"The money was for a good cause. You have to believe me."

“Is that why it conveniently hit your bank account every month?”

“I...” His mouth opens and slams shut. Suddenly, he throws himself down in front of me, knees to the ground. Sweat beads on his face and drips down his chin.

Behind me, I hear Vargas cough.

The other executives are watching the drama unfold with wide, fearful eyes. I have their rapt attention.

“You what?” I taunt.

Winifred sheds a crocodile tear. It slides down his ruddy cheek. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“I don’t want your apologies.” My lips curve up in a cruel smirk. “Do you have the money or not?”

“I don’t.” His eyes meet mine, wild and desperate. “But I can get the money. I swear I can.”

“How?”

He opens his mouth. Snaps it shut. Glances down.

I drop my voice to a whisper, “By taking the scraps left in your savings account and splurging it all at the Royal Heaven casino?”

Winifred goes pale.

“You’re lousy at blackjack, Winnie.” My voice is dark and apathetic. “If you’d taken the money and made some investments, I would have had more respect for you.”

Winifred is choking back sobs. The sound rakes against my ears.

I’m not completely heartless, even if I’m three-quarters of the way there. It’s hard to see a man’s entire world shatter—no matter how much he deserves it.

But he *will* have to pay.

I check my watch.

It’s time to leave.

As I'm walking away, the bottom of my Armani soles rolls over something thin and cylindrical. I glance down, a stormy expression on my face, and notice a strange black wand. Upon closer inspection, I realize it's not a wand. It looks more like the spiky end of a woman's high heels.

Vargas sees me staring down at the ground and looks too. "What's wrong?"

I bend to pick up the broken heel and lift it to the light. The color is the same as Clarissa's shoes.

My heart starts pounding faster.

I noticed there was something wrong with her flats, but it didn't make sense until now. Spinning around, I motion to Winifred while keeping my eyes locked on the heel. "Was Clarissa Maura in here?"

"Huh?" The man lumbers to his feet. Red splotches stain his cheeks.

"Was she here?" I bark.

"Y-yes."

My lips curl up and I wrap my fingers around the broken heel. Without another word, I leave the boardroom.

Vargas catches up with me. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm perfect." I swipe my thumb down the length of Clarissa's heel.

"Mm. Perfect. Right." Vargas frowns and eyes my new treasure. "Sane people don't caress the trash they found on the floor." When I don't respond, he huffs, "A sane person wouldn't survive as your assistant this long either, so I guess I'm not one to judge."

I barely hear him.

My thumb moves up and down. "Vargas."

"What?" He looks warily at me.

"I need you to buy me a pair of shoes..."

"Of course."

“... size six and a half.”

“Six? You’re not a six.”

I face him, my excitement soaring. “The most comfortable you can find. A heel that’s about,” I check, “three inches. Stilettos preferably.”

Vargas’s eyes jump to the wand I’m holding and then to my face. His eyes dawn with understanding. “Do you have a style you’re looking for?”

“Buy them all.”

“All?” His eyebrows hike.

Doberman, who’s been listening intently, does a little eyebrow quirk too.

My phone rings.

I answer while getting into the elevator. “Clay.”

“Just checking that you haven’t forgotten today,” my brother blurts.

I grin at his tone. Clay’s got a naturally gruff persona, and it’s been hardened from years in the military. He’s starting to soften up thanks to his girlfriend, but he still comes off as abrasive whenever he opens his mouth.

We have that in common, although I tend to only have that effect on people in business.

“Of course I haven’t forgotten. Do you think I’d skip my nephew’s commercial debut?”

“Just making sure you don’t forget. Abe’s looking forward to seeing you there.”

“What should I bring for my favorite niece and nephew?”

“Regan? Nothing’s changed in her giraffe preferences.”

“How do you feel about a live giraffe?”

“As long as you’re the one scooping giraffe droppings.”

I laugh. “And Abe? What should I get him?”

“Honestly? A pep talk. He’s nervous about how this thing turned out. It’s why Island went to all the trouble of organizing a party. According to her, he needs the support of family and friends.”

The elevators open.

I walk out with a smirk. “And according to you?”

“Even if he sucks, he needs to take it on the chin, but I can’t say that out loud. Island knows how to shoot a gun now.” There’s a note of fondness in my brother’s voice that I haven’t heard since Anya’s passing.

I’m glad he found a woman crazy enough to put up with him. Island is good for Clay. And it doesn’t hurt that she’s in love with Regan and Abe too.

I end the call and nod when my driver opens the door of my town car. Vargas slips in next to me.

“You’re going to be busy this evening?”

“Family first.”

“Someone’s getting soft in his old age.”

I snort because the comment is ridiculous on all fronts.

Vargas eyes me seriously as the car moves off. “Why didn’t you have him arrested on the spot?”

“Who? Winifred?”

“He stole from the company. A significant amount too. It’s not like you to save a card that powerful.”

“I’m allowing him to get his house in order before he goes to jail.” I slip a hand into my pocket and touch the heel again. “Aren’t you the one who told me to use a softer approach?”

“Since when do you take my advice?”

I smirk.

Vargas shifts in his seat. “That heel you found on the floor... why’s it so significant?”

I move my eyes from him to the window.

“Does it belong to her? The girl you’ve been in love with for a decade?”

“Hand me the files for the severance packages. I need to adjust something.”

Vargas does as I ask, but he doesn’t drop the subject. “It’s her, right? You met her. That’s why you were off your game with Winifred. That’s why you’ve been stroking that stick in your pants—”

“Come on, Vargas. Language,” I mutter.

He scowls at me. “I’m saying this for your benefit. Buying your first love a store full of designer shoes isn’t going to make her run into your arms.”

“How do you know that?” I glance up at him, an eyebrow arched. “I’ve dated other women who were glad to take gifts from me.”

“Don’t make me laugh, Bolton. You don’t date other women. You toy with them. And your gifts are parting presents. The only ones who don’t recognize that are the ladies getting their hopes dashed.”

I open the file and scan it, not bothering to respond.

“Fine. Don’t tell me. I know her name now. I can look her up. Clarissa Maura. Sounds pretty.”

My eyes flash to his.

Vargas smirks as if he won some kind of game. “What? She’s too precious to google?”

“You’re pushing it.”

“The Ice King has a weakness.”

“And you have a big mouth.”

“You melt at the mere mention of her name. What else do you call that?”

“Wipe that grin off your face or you’re fired,” I mumble.

“I wish you’d fire me,” Vargas grumbles to the window. “Then I wouldn’t have high blood pressure and cholesterol.”

“You have high cholesterol because you eat bacon with every meal.”

“Hey, bacon is a food group.” He frowns. “Get off my neck, Bolton.”

I let out a chuckle. Vargas sometimes feels more like a fussy older brother than an executive assistant.

“Hey, Vargas?”

“What?” he grumbles.

“Know where I could buy a live giraffe?”



ABE'S VIEWING party isn't being held at Clay's estate. Instead, the GPS leads me to Darrel Hastings' farmhouse.

Since Clay will be there, Doberman and his team get the evening off.

Which means I get to breathe a bit.

The farmhouse is set on a sprawling acreage with plenty of trees and a trail that disappears into a grove. I note the Victorian-style pillars, ornate railings, and varnished wood. The rustic finish doesn't fool me. Thanks to my real estate portfolio, I can tell that Hastings paid top dollar for this property.

Music thumps loudly. Just beneath that is the sound of laughter, childish squeals, and happy chatter.

My arms full of gifts, I saunter to the porch.

The screen door winds back with a creak and a tall woman with dark brown skin and high cheekbones motions to me.

I blink, not recognizing her face. “Hi, I'm here for—”

“Uncle Cody!” A streak of pink, brown and white flies in my direction. A moment later, tiny hands are wrapped around my leg and a child morphs her body to me.

“Hey, booger.” My instinct is to lift Regan up, but my hands are full.

“Is that for me?” My pretty niece hops back and hits me with intelligent brown eyes.

Six years ago, Anya and Clay adopted an adorable baby with dark skin and a thick head of hair. Since then, Regan’s been a part of our family. She’s not a Bolton by blood, but I swear she looks more like Anya and Clay every day.

“Yup. All yours.” I send the floppy stuffed giraffe in her direction.

She squeals and hugs it to her chest. “I love it!”

I laugh at her exuberance. After Anya passed, Regan grew quiet and withdrawn. I was really worried about her. Clay, even more so.

But since meeting Island, Regan came out of her shell.

No, not just that.

She exploded from it. I’ve never seen her more hyper in my life.

The woman who opened the door for me smiles at Regan. “Nice... giraffe.” A strange slur underlies her words and she gestures with her hands when she speaks.

“Thank you.” Regan touches her lip and moves her palm down.

My eyes bug.

Does Regan know sign language?

“Thank you, Uncle Cody!” Regan grabs my hand. Her neat braids—courtesy of Island—swing around her head as she twirls. “Uncle Cody, this is my friend Yaya.”

I start to say a greeting, but another woman who looks strikingly similar to Yaya approaches the door.

She taps Yaya on the back and gestures while saying, “You better get the brownies before they disappear.”

Yaya’s hands move quickly in response.

The woman who spoke about the brownies notices me.

“Hey.” I nod.

Her eyes light up. “You must be Clay’s brother.”

“That’s me.”

“You look so much alike.”

“I’m the hotter one.”

She laughs. “That’s weird. You have Clay’s face, but you crack jokes. I don’t know if I can get used to this.”

I smirk.

“Uncle Cody, this is Deej. She’s my friend too,” Regan says smartly. “Come inside. Let’s find Belle.”

As Regan tugs me forward, I mouth, “excuse me” to the ladies.

My niece drags me into the kitchen where several women are moving around. The music is coming from this area. It’s fast-paced and heavy on the drums.

“This is Belle’s mommy, Miss Kenya.” Regan points to a slender woman with a big head of curly hair. “That’s Miss Sunny. She’s Micheal and Bailey’s mommy.”

“Micheal and Bailey?”

“Abe’s friends.”

I have a near photographic memory, but I’m starting to feel a little lost with all the names and faces.

“Don’t worry about memorizing it all. You’ll get to know everyone soon enough,” Sunny says. “It’s nice to meet the famous Uncle Cody.”

“Famous?” I arch a brow.

“For your gifts. Clay complains that you outdo him every Christmas.”

Warmth hits my chest. “That’s not true.”

“You don’t outdo him?” Kenya asks.

“I don’t outdo him only during Christmas. It’s a year-long thing.”

The women burst out laughing.

“It’s so weird that he talks,” Sunny says, pointing to me.

“Clay doesn’t talk,” Kenya agrees. “I just assumed everyone related to him wouldn’t talk either.”

Usually, I’d shift in discomfort while being compared to my brother, but I don’t mind this time. I’ve only been here for about five minutes and already, this feels like home. Like family. It’s a far cry from my day-to-day life which is filled with numbers, law suits, and people threatening to kill me.

“Miss Kenya, where’s Belle?” Regan asks sweetly.

“She’s with her daddy out back. They’re popping the popcorn around the bonfire.”

“Without me?” Regan looks mortified. She releases my hand and goes flying out the backdoor.

I glance at her in shock. “I guess I’ve been abandoned.”

“I don’t think anyone can get between Belle and Regan,” a familiar voice says. “They might as well be sisters.”

A large smile spreads on my face. “Island.”

Clay’s girlfriend—soon to be wife if my brother’s casual question about proposal locations is to be believed—wraps her arms around me.

I give her a friendly squeeze and nod at her white hair. “You look like Storm from *X-Men*.”

“Thank you.” She laughs. “Are you the one responsible for that giant giraffe in Regan’s arms?”

“I can’t resist spoiling her.”

Island arches an eyebrow. “You know she has zero space left on her bed. It’s all been taken over by a giraffe sanctuary.”

“You’re welcome.” I wink. “Where’s Abe?”

She opens her mouth but, before she can tell me, the front door creaks. Max Stinton walks in. He’s holding hands with a

tiny woman in over-alls. A little girl with tawny-colored skin and hazel eyes skips in after them.

I stiffen when I see Stinton, my mind skating to the first and last time we ever crossed paths.

“Cody?” Island asks, touching my arm.

I focus on her. “Sorry. I missed that.”

“I said Clay’s gone to pick up ice cream. Abe’s upstairs playing video games with Micheal and Bailey.”

“How is he?” I ask in a low voice.

“He’s acting like he doesn’t care about the commercial, but I had to slip him some antacids after he threw up in the bathroom downstairs.”

“Abe isn’t the type to want a big viewing party,” I tell Island, keeping Stinton in my peripherals. Currently, he’s shaking hands with a tall Asian guy in a suit.

“I was just as surprised.”

“Did he give a reason?”

“Between you and me?” She leans forward. “This party is an excuse to hang out with a girl.”

My eyes swing to her. “What girl?”

“Do you really think Abe would give me that information?”

She got a whole lot more from my tight-lipped nephew than I ever have. And I’ve been in Abe’s life since day one.

“I’ll head upstairs.”

She waves me away.

I follow the sounds of video game music into a room with a Batman emblem on the wall and the coolest decals I’ve ever seen. If I were a teenaged boy, I’d want to live in here.

Hell, I’d probably want to take some of these design ideas to my house right now.

I spot Abe sitting cross-legged on the floor. He's got an arm slung around his stomach and he seems a little pale.

"Hey, Abe," I call.

All four heads turn to look at me. There's a kid with dark hair and a solemn expression, another kid with big eyes and window glasses, and another with a mischievous stare.

When Abe sees me, he hops to his feet. "Uncle Cody."

I motion for him to follow me and take him into another room.

"You okay, champ?"

Abe chews on his bottom lip. He's small for his age with frail shoulders covered in an oversized hoodie and a head of floppy hair that Island somehow manages to tame every month.

His eyes are filled with nerves when he looks up. "Uncle Cody, I'm starting to regret this. Can I go home?"

"Of course you can, bud." I kneel so I'm level with the eleven year-old. "It is more than okay to run away and come back when you're ready." I hold a hand out to him. "Want to take off now? I'll send your dad a text."

He grits his teeth. Slowly, he shakes his head. "I can't."

Gingerly, I broach the topic, "Why'd you push yourself to do something like this, Abe?"

He gives me a desperate look. "I wanted to be cool for once."

"What do you mean?" I ruffle his hair. "You are *very* cool."

"No, I'm not. I can't change a tire and fix cars like Beth." *Beth? Who's Beth?* My nephew continues. "I can't paint like Rowan. And I can't play piano like Nikko." His cheeks flush with color when he says her name. "I got this commercial and I wanted to show it off, but I think I might die before that."

"You're not going to die, Abe." I grab his shoulders and look him square in the eyes. "You're doing amazing. Any girl

would be lucky to have you.”

He clears his throat. “I didn’t say this was because of a girl.”

“Of course you didn’t. But you want some advice?”

“What?”

I tap his shoulder. “Just be yourself. You don’t have to show off or change who you are to impress anyone. Got it?”

He blinks. “Uncle Cody?”

“What?”

“If you’re so good with girls, why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

I freeze, taken aback by the direct question.

“I never had the time,” I hedge.

Abe tilts his head. “You always make time for us.”

“True but...”

“Are you scared too?”

Ouch. Burned by an eleven year old. “Maybe I am.” I rise to my feet and nudge him forward. “How about we make a pact, huh? You face your fears bravely.” I hook a thumb in my shirt. “And I’ll do the same.”

“Deal.” Abe shakes my hand.

I slip a couple hundred dollar bills into it. “Deal.”

His eyes light up.

Just then, Island calls from downstairs. “Abe, your dad is here! Let’s watch this commercial.”

“Boys!” Another voice rings. “Get off those video games and get down here!”

Abe groans.

I smack his back. “You ready?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” He slings an arm over his stomach.

“Just don’t hurl on the carpet. It looks expensive.”

Abe scrunches his nose.

The other boys join us as we move downstairs. Everyone is already seated in the living room and they’re all looking expectantly at Abe.

I place a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“Deep breaths,” I coach. “You got this.”

“Over here, Abe.” Island waves. She’s half-sitting on Clay’s lap while Regan is snuggled comfortably in her arms.

My brother meets my eyes and nods.

I nod back and settle into the couch next to DeeJ and her husband. Around me, couples are snuggled together, looking happy and content. Even Stinton—usually ice-cold and more heartless than I could ever hope to be—looks like a different man with his wife and daughter.

The ache in my chest that I usually fill with work starts throbbing. This laughter, this joy, this sense of family. I want it. I want it badly.

And I don’t want it with just anyone.

I want it with Clarissa.

If my shy, sensitive nephew can bravely set up an extravagant party just to impress the girl he likes, I can get out of my comfort zone too.

But first, I have to find a way to get Clarissa in the same room without wanting to choke me to death.

At that moment, the screen door swings open and, as if I willed her here with a wish, a harried voice rings out, “I hope I’m not late.”

My eyes widen.

I turn slowly, my heart skittering out of my chest when I find the object of my thoughts standing in the doorway, looking right back at me.

THE PAST

CLARISSA

“ISN’T he that guy who landed Mauler International as a freshman?” My roommate’s excited whisper jars me out of my economics textbook.

“Who?” I mumble, not bothering to glance up. I have a test tomorrow that I’m not ready for thanks to pulling extra shifts at the diner and helping mom at the soup kitchen.

“You’re not looking,” my roommate hisses.

Because I don’t care. But I keep that thought to myself. The girls in my roommate’s circle have no problems partying, skipping class and chasing boys, but I don’t have that privilege. I could lose my scholarship if I don’t keep my grades up.

“Look now or you’ll miss him.” My roommate smacks me on the shoulder. “Oh crap. He’s getting up. Clarissa, hurry!”

I sigh and lift my head. For a moment, all I see is blinding light from the library’s many windows.

And then I spot him.

He’s golden. Shiny. Like a Disney prince come to life. His lips are full and pink and his dark blond hair is long, brushing the collar of his shirt.

He senses us staring and his eyes sweep up. They’re green, like emeralds. Like that magical kingdom in the *Wizard of Oz*.

I watched the movie once. It was playing at the homeless shelter that first night mom and I stumbled in, dripping wet from the rain. The movie took me to another world, and I can see that world in his eyes—eyes that are watching me curiously across the room.

I dig my fingers into my economics book.

“He’s looking at me! He’s looking at me!” My roommate throws her hair over her shoulder and sticks out her chest. I’ve

seen boys drop like flies when she does that. “Should I go talk to him?”

A chorus of ‘yes girl’ and ‘go get him’ erupt from her friends.

I blink and drag my eyes away from Golden Boy’s. It doesn’t matter who he is. Princes like him go on to marry a princess.

Not a pauper like me.

THE CHOCOLATE PRINCE

CLARISSA

CODY IS the last person I expect to see when I enter Darrel and Sunny Hastings' farmhouse. The sun flashes against his face as he turns to look at me. The shine transforms his dark blonde hair into gold.

I freeze, my heart stalling.

What is he doing here?

The surprise in his expression fades, and I can see the sharp interest in his green eyes. It's the kind of look a hawk gets right before it swoops in and steals someone's precious dog.

In this scenario, I'm definitely about to become an airborne Fido.

Run, Clarissa! Run!

I grab my purse to my chest and take a giant step backward when Island springs out of the couch and throws herself at me.

"You're just in time!" She grins and nudges me forward.

My heart pounding, I dig my feet into the oakwood floors. If I could grow roots here, I would. Unfortunately, Island is too strong. Probably from all the hours braiding hair.

She wrestles me into the house. "Everyone, this is Clarissa!"

The 'everyone' she's referring to are the wealthiest men and women in the city. Billionaires. Business moguls. Legends. Names so exclusive, they're only breathed in polite society as if the mere syllables are too expensive for anything louder than a whisper.

Sazuki.

Mulliez.

Alistair.

Hastings.

I gulp, shaking in my boots. It's so obvious that I don't belong here.

For many reasons.

"Island, this doesn't seem like the right time. I really shouldn't stay," I begin.

"Nonsense! You *have* to stay."

"You're more than welcome, Clarissa." Nova, a professional-looking woman with a big afro, nods at me.

"You remember my name?" I croak.

"Of course I do." Her smile is as prim and proper as she is.

Nova is the CEO of Adam Harrison's billion-dollar company. She was also the first one of this group to write me a check. Beyond her generosity, there's something so... alluring about her confidence. Even now, her shiny gala dress traded for a pantsuit and flats, she screams 'boss lady'.

I would love to stay and learn from these women. But I'd rather jump into a vat of poisonous snakes than be under the same roof as Cody Bolton.

Island grips me tightly as if she senses I want to run. "Clarissa and I had an appointment today, which I completely forgot about. I asked if she'd mind meeting here and she agreed."

"We can meet another time," I mutter quietly.

"Absolutely not. We were just about to start the show. Why don't you sit over there?" Island points to the only free seat in the living room.

And because Fate hates me...

That seat is right next to my ex.

Why is nothing going right today?

I seize up. "I can sit on the floor."

"No way." Island pushes me forward like I'm a shopping cart on Black Friday.

"I really don't want to..."

“Just sit down, Clarissa.”

“I just remembered I have an appointment...”

“Can we get this over with?” A little girl stands up. “Abe’s about to faint.”

The girl’s mother—a beautiful woman in oil-stained overalls—slants the child a dark look. “Beth.”

“What? It’s true. Look at him.”

“Abe, are you okay?” Island asks a pale-looking kid.

Abe is sweating buckets. “Yup.”

A large man clears his throat. I recognize him as Island’s boyfriend. He has shoulders the size of boulders and legs the size of tree trunks. I heard Clay Bolton is ex-military. Which does not surprise me at *all*.

“You can sit here,” he says.

Bless you, sir.

I dart in his direction, relieved that there’s a sofa, a bunch of chairs, and about seven people between me and Cody.

Clay walks over to his brother. From the corner of my eye, I notice Cody glaring at him.

“Hello,” a pretty little girl who looks around six-years-old smiles at me. “I’m Regan.”

“I’m Clarissa.”

“You’re pretty.”

My heart melts. “So are you.”

She smiles, showing off a missing tooth.

“Alright.” Island smacks her hands together. “I’m going to press play.” Long white hair swings over her shoulder as she reaches for the remote and turns the television on.

A commercial starts playing.

It’s... about yogurt.

People lean forward like it’s the latest blockbuster.

I glance around in confusion. I have no idea why the city's most influential have gathered here to watch a TV spot.

Are they filming a reality show or something?

I'm not judging. I'd watch the heck out of that show.

There are so many recognizable faces in this room.

Vanya Beckford, plus size supermodel.

Hadyn Mulliez, heir to the Mulliez empire.

And of course, Cody Bolton...

Mr. Bachelor of the Year.

I scoff.

"Oooh!"

"Abe, look at you!"

The exclamations drag me out of my thoughts. I notice the boy called Abe on screen, smiling and shoving a yogurt carton toward the camera. "*Good for the tummy and really, really yummy.*"

"Oh no." Real Abe groans into his hands.

The commercial fades to black.

"I love it!"

"Fantastic!"

"You're the next movie star, Abe."

Abe blushes hard as his friends and family ply him with compliments.

I watch it all with a sloppy grin. The connections between these people might not be clear to me, but I know one thing for sure—there's nothing but love in this room.

Well, except between me and Cody.

There's definitely zero love there.



WHILE EVERYONE HOVERS AROUND ABE, Nova steals me away.

I look up at the taller woman, admiring her meticulously applied makeup and expensive earrings.

When will I ever look so put-together?

I shake the thought. The work I do doesn't require me to look pretty or elegant. There's no use comparing myself to these women who have the money and connections to buy designer pantsuits and fancy jewelry.

"Thank you for staying," Nova says.

I smile shyly.

"Island's been keeping us up to date on the construction." Nova hands me a glass of champagne with delicate fingers before grabbing one for herself.

"I really shouldn't drink."

"This is non-alcoholic." Her lips curl up. "I really shouldn't drink either."

I accept it from her and take a sip. *Bubbly.*

"I hear your Do More Project is open for business," Nova says, watching me carefully.

"It is." I bounce on my toes, genuinely excited. I love what I do. It might not be the flashiest job in the world and it might not have the best pay, but it's extremely rewarding. "Thanks to all"—I gesture to the living room—"the generous donations, we were able to move up our timeline and build this year."

"What about the interior?" Nova's eyes are steady and her gaze business-like. I feel like I'm an employee giving a report.

"We spent most of the investment on the property and construction, so we rolled up our sleeves and painted the walls ourselves. We got the stalls donated. And we've already begun testing our first five kiosks."

Her eyebrows hike. "Already?"

"We're motivated."

Translation: none of our reliable partners wanted to give us cash so we need to raise our own.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that? Creating homeless shelters for vulnerable women is one thing. Helping them sustain their own businesses is a lot more... complicated.”

I find myself getting defensive. “We brought in business owners from the local community to do lectures. We chose our first clients meticulously, and we are more than prepared to make this venture a success—”

“Clarissa,” Nova touches my arm, “I didn’t say that to offend you. It was just my subtle way of hinting that I’m willing to be more hands-on if you need my help.” She ducks her head. “I’m sorry. My words tend to come out a little colder than intended.”

“No. I... it’s me. I just feel a little out of place here and I guess...” I don’t even know what I’m saying or even if admitting that to her is professional.

Nervously, I gulp down my champagne.

Nova gives me an understanding look. “If you’re not one for socializing, this—” she nods to the living room—“can be intense. But everyone here believes in what you and Do More have to offer.”

It’s not the socializing part that bothers me.

It’s the fact that they’re all so obviously wealthy, worldly and the total opposite of me. I bet Nova Harrison never spent a night in a homeless shelter.

“Darlin’,” a tall man with a swoony Southern accent enters the kitchen and kisses Nova’s cheek, “you ready to head out? We’ve got that conference early tomorrow.”

“Right.” Nova sets her champagne glass down and glances at me. “You have my card?”

When I shake my head, she produces a fancy piece of paper with gold embossment. It smells like money.

“I’ll be in touch,” I tell her, hoping I sound more professional than I feel.

With a cool wave, Nova takes off with her tech genius husband.

Alone in the kitchen, I glance awkwardly at the party while gripping my empty champagne glass. Island is still in the living room with her family. She doesn't look like she'll have time for me right now.

Should I walk over there?

My stomach churns with nerves.

That ugly feeling of not belonging creeps up on me again and makes me nauseous.

Should I just leave?

"If you leave now, you'll miss out," a deep voice says. My eyes flash up to Cody's.

He's leaning against the counter, one long leg crossed at the ankles. My heart does a full Shakira, 'Hips Don't Lie' imitation when he cocks his head to one side. "Island always stashes a few extra brownies for later. I know where she hides them at home and I'm pretty sure I can find them here too."

I close my eyes for a moment to brace myself against his innate charm. Cody is gorgeous, and it's easy to trust someone who's attractive. Just ask Ted Bundy's victims.

But I can't forget that he's evil.

Evil wrapped in a sexy smirk and green eyes and offering me chocolate.

But still evil.

And a liar.

And a heartbreaker.

And everything I need to stay away from.

Unfortunately, he keeps turning up everywhere today.

"I don't want brownies from you," I say coldly, drawing from a well of irritation.

Anger is a far more appropriate emotion than the crazy butterflies that won't stop beating around in my stomach.

“The brownies are a peace offering.”

“If you think chocolate is enough of an apology for what happened that night—”

“I don’t. Not even close.” He straightens. His expression shifts from playful to earnest in a heartbeat. My stomach quivers. “There’s no apology big enough to erase what I did.”

I blink shakily. A ragged breath escapes me.

Why is he talking about regret now? After so much time has passed?

I steel my shoulders and beam a dark scowl in his direction. “For the record, that wasn’t an apology.” His lips curl up at the corners and I raise a hand. “Not that I want or need one. Like I said before, I don’t want anything from you.”

“That’s too bad.” He steps in close to me, taking my breath away with his sea-green eyes. “Because there’s so much I want to give you, Ris.”

My resistance shapeshifts from a lion to a mewling alley cat, pawing softly at my legs.

Cody glances down and his ridiculously long lashes hide his eyes. I once asked him if he’d gotten eyelash extensions and he looked at me like I was crazy. *‘Why would I do that?’*

It’s annoying that even his eyelashes are pretty. The man doesn’t have one physical flaw.

Gosh, I hate him.

“Does it still hurt?” Cody asks softly.

I’m too busy *not* noticing his eyelashes to hear.

Suddenly, Cody crouches in front of me and lifts my foot in his lap. His fingers on my ankle are like fire and a surge of messy emotions tangle over my skin.

I reel back. “What are you doing?”

He keeps his hold on my foot as if he has any right to touch me. As if it has any right to feel so good.

“I regretted it,” he whispers. When he lifts his head, his eyes are molten. “In the elevator, I saw you limping. I saw you in pain. And I let you go.”

“I didn’t need your help.”

His jaw flexes. “You never were the type to ask for what you need.” Cody traces a circle over my foot. The anger inside me turns to delicious tingles. “Your feet shouldn’t have touched the floor after I saw you wincing.”

I scoff to hide how he’s affecting me. “You’re just as arrogant as ever. Assuming I want to be rescued.”

“And you’re just as stubborn as you were in college. Assuming you’re the only one who needs saving.”

“Saving from what? You’re a man who has everything.” I gesture to his designer suit.

“Everything except you.” His eyes pierce mine.

My heart does a somersault.

I dig my fingernails into my palm. “I’m not doing this with you, Cody.”

“Talking?”

“Pretending that we have anything between us. You made your choice clear when you didn’t show up to our wedding.”

He flinches.

“Sweet words won’t sway me. Neither will your empty promises. I’m not a building. You don’t get to walk in and out of my life when you feel like it.”

“Ris—”

My eyes flash. “You think I don’t know what this is? You’re toying with me again because of some misguided nostalgia.”

“Of course not.”

My eyebrows crash together.

“I’m being sincere.”

“That makes it even worse.” I fold my arms over my chest. “I’m not going to come running because I finally fit into your game plan, Cody. No matter what, you and I are done. I will *never* make the mistake of getting close to you again.”

“You don’t have to,” he says calmly. “I’ll come close to you.”

My heart sputters like a car breaking down in the middle of rush-hour traffic.

Damn, he’s intense.

I’d forgotten. But I shouldn’t have.

It was this intensity that made me say yes to that first date. Made me think I could ever belong with a guy like him.

It was this intensity that made me say yes when he proposed.

The pain of that night falls over me again and I feel tears pushing at the back of my eyes. I want to forget. I really *wish* I could scrub it from my mind. But I can’t. Not with Cody kneeling in front of me like he did the night he offered me a ring. Eyes upturned. Hair falling over his forehead. Face full of promises.

Lies.

It’s like I’ve been transported back to that moment when I thought the impossible—that a prince and a pauper could fall in love and be happy somewhere other than the fairy tales.

The truth is that life is cruel and people like us don’t mingle for a reason.

It’s so pathetic to cry.

I will not cry.

I will not...

The tear pops out despite my fight to hold it in.

It’s not because I’m sad.

I’m angry at how foolish I was. How wholeheartedly I gave myself to him. Looking back, I was an idiot.

And it's embarrassing.

Cody's face crumbles. He rises swiftly and places his arms around me.

"Baby, don't cry."

His words are soft, disarming. It sounds like he genuinely cares. Which is impossible. The one thing I know about Cody Bolton is that he cares only for his own ambitions.

Right?

I find the strength to push him away.

Talking around the lump in my throat, I say, "I'm not crying. It's an eyelash."

His lips twitch.

I want the ground to swallow me up, but I've never been that lucky.

Facing my ex, I say, "You don't have to rehash the past. Ten years is a long time. We don't owe each other anything."

Cody gives me a heavy look, his eyes scouring my face.

The past is pressing too close to the present, like a nail sliding into a balloon. One more push and the whole thing might pop.

"I... should go. Tell Island I'll call her later."

"Wait." A ragged breath escapes him. It hits the back of my neck like a storm cloud. "I was a fool to let you go."

My fingers ball into fists.

My heart throbs like I stubbed it against a side table.

"I know words don't mean anything. And these words are ten years too late. But I'm sorry for leaving. I'm sorry for the way I did it. The way I hurt you. I'm sorry that I didn't walk down the aisle with you like I promised."

I flinch, forcing down all the memories that are trying to bubble up.

“It’s not much of an excuse, but I was young back then. And stupid. I regretted it the moment I left.”

“But you never came back,” I croak.

He’s quiet. Caught.

Just then, a little girl bursts into the kitchen.

“Uncle Cody and...” Regan grins up at me. “Miss... um... what was your name again?”

I blink rapidly. My arms are heavy like I’m slogging through jello.

“Her name’s Clarissa.” Cody swings his niece up and gives her a kiss on the cheek before meeting my eyes. “But if that’s too hard to remember, you can call her Ris.”

My mouth opens in shock.

“Ris?”

“Mm-hm.”

Regan bounces. “Is Ris going to be my auntie?”

Heat blazes in my cheeks.

“Not yet,” Cody says, glancing at me and then at Regan. “But I’m working on it.”

“Cody,” I hiss.

Regan wiggles out of Cody’s arms and marches right up to me. Looking up with her inquisitive gaze, she asks smartly, “You want to know why you should marry Uncle Cody?”

Something sharp hits my chest. My heart is in pieces.

“Because he’ll buy you *all* the giraffes you want.” She spreads her arms wide. “Giraffes this big.”

I chuckle in spite of myself. If only love could be boiled down to how many stuffed giraffes a man could bring home. The world would be so simple. And my heart wouldn’t look like it had been put in the shredder.

“Hold on, booger. Ris isn’t ready to marry me quite yet. We need to work some things out first.”

“What kind of things?” Regan blinks inquisitively. She lowers her voice and says in a conspiratorial whisper. “Like math homework?”

My body is tense with sorrow, pain, and ten years’ worth of emotional scab wounds but, somehow, Regan makes me smile through it.

“Yeah,” I say to the cutie. “But they’re problems that can’t be solved.” I glance at Cody. “No matter how hard you try.”

Cody gently draws his niece over to him. “That doesn’t mean you should stop trying, right?”

“Right.”

I scowl.

He smirks and holds a hand out to Regan. “How about I show you where Island hid the good brownies?”

“Yes!” She shrieks.

He places a finger on his lips. “I’ll only share if you get Ris to join us.”

The little girl flies over to me and tilts her head up. Those big brown eyes melt my very present and very loud discomfort.

Please ignore the painful memories you have with my uncle so I can get brownies, her eyes whisper. *Please with a cherry on top?*

I wrench my eyes away from Regan and spear Cody with them. “That’s low. Even for you.”

“A good businessman knows when to leverage the big guns.” He swings Regan into his arms and she laughs uproariously. “Come on, booger.”

I won’t pretend that seeing Cody with his niece doesn’t affect me. He dotes on her and she adores him. Her eyes shine whenever he smiles her way and she has no problems slipping her hand around his neck as they enter the large—and surprisingly well-organized—walk-in pantry.

Cody pulls out a bag of hidden brownies.

“Share?” Regan offers me a delectably gooey piece.

I smile my thanks, still feeling off-kilter. We’re talking and smiling in the moment for Regan’s sake, but there’s a giant elephant in the room named ‘CODY’S APOLOGY’.

The last thing I expected him to do today was ask for my forgiveness. It took the wind out of my sails and sucked most of the anger from my stomach.

There was a time when I longed for that apology. And maybe, in the back of my heart, I longed for him too. But as much as I acknowledge the sincerity in those words, they don’t change the truth that existed then and still does now.

We’re no good together.

I don’t fit in his world and I don’t want to leave my place to go to his. Trying to be something, to be someone, I wasn’t nearly killed me in college.

Since Regan is watching, I nibble on a brownie for her sake and then jump to my feet. “Thanks for sharing your brownies, Regan.”

“Are you leaving?” She pouts adorably.

“I have work to do.”

“Math?” She arches both eyebrows.

“No.” I move my gaze purposefully to Cody. “I already turned in that paper. There’s no going back.”

“Ris...”

Before he can say anything more, Island’s voice chirps behind us. “I *knew* I’d find you hiding in here. Cody, Regan’s had more than enough brownies today and I told her she couldn’t have more.”

“Sorry,” Regan says, her face crammed with chocolate.

“Sorry,” Cody says, looking equally sheepish.

“Clarissa, are you ready to meet now? I’ve got a few minutes.”

“Can’t. I need to leave. We’ll have to meet another day.”

“Is something wrong?”

“She has math homework!” Regan pipes up.

Island looks confused.

I squeeze out a more genuine smile. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Cody says.

I don’t want to fight in front of Island so I don’t argue. He escorts me through the living room where polite greetings are exchanged.

As we walk to the door, the back of our hands brush and my heart skitters with electricity. I’m disgusted by the fact that I want that touch again. He may have wrecked my heart in the past, but it seems like there’s still enough of it left for him to shatter.

We step outside and Cody turns to face me in the sunshine.

His eyes are impossibly beautiful and I can’t stare at him for long.

“I meant what I said, Ris.”

“And I accept your apology.”

His quick exhale is quiet but loud enough for me to hear.

“But I would be a fool to trust you,” I finish. “I will never let you destroy me again.”

He purses his lips.

A part of me hates hurting him, even after what he’s done.

Which is why it’s safer away from him.

It’s safer alone.

“Goodbye, Cody.” I move gingerly down the steps. My pain medication is starting to wear off and the throbbing is back in my ankle.

“Ris.” Cody yells.

I turn to face him. He looks like a painting standing on that porch. Like some kind of ridiculously expensive piece of art.

“I’ll give you everything you want. Everything you don’t even know you want yet.”

I let in a sharp breath.

“But,” Cody slants me a determined stare, “I won’t give you that.”

“That?”

“A goodbye.” He lifts his chin, looking so much like the Cody of ten years ago that my heart pangs. “Not until I’ve shown you how much you mean to me.”

THE PAST

CODY

IT'S HER.

I saw her the moment I entered the library. She was surrounded by a group of friends, her head stuck in a textbook.

We share three classes together, but I've never had the courage to approach her.

I'm too busy. Too worried about mom. Too...

Or maybe I'm just afraid of rejection.

This girl isn't like the others.

She's beautiful but... prickly. Or... I don't know. Distant?

Every lecture, she's at the front of the class, beautiful face staring straight ahead, pen poised. She doesn't talk to anyone. She doesn't smile at anyone.

I'm used to girls throwing themselves at me, but I'm pretty sure she'd do the opposite. I'm pretty sure she doesn't know I exist.

My phone buzzes.

Work. Emails.

None of it matters.

I have a meeting with the student council but, rather than leave with my book like I know I should, I walk to the windows and sit on a bench. From this angle, I can sneak peeks at her all I want without being creepy.

Okay, without being *too* creepy.

I'm pretty sure my obsession with this girl is bordering on light stalking.

It's totally normal to use my student council privileges to learn her name, right? And spending a couple hours looking her up online is within the realm of acceptable behavior, I'm sure.

Clarissa Maura.

Damn. Even her *name* is pretty.

Laughter explodes around her. She gets a pinched look on her face, as if she's desperate for some peace and quiet but isn't rude enough to get up and leave her friends behind.

She's kind. That's another thing I've noticed. She works at the school bookstore and she's pretty much taken over the cleaning duties from her supervisor, an older woman with bad knees who can't get around. She's patient with her friends and even works at a soup kitchen on the weekends.

Clarissa's hand slips into her curly hair, disappearing beneath the voluminous curls that she's wrapped into a ponytail. Sunlight dances over her almond-brown complexion and brings my attention to her lips.

Everything about her is sensual, but that mouth...

It's one of the most dangerous things about her. Soft. Full. Plump enough to bite. It's usually pulled into a thoughtful frown or tense in concentration. I want to taste them. Trace them with my finger. But more than anything, I want those lips smiling my way.

You need to stop staring, Cody.

Impossible.

The only way to hide my creeper status is by leaving. Once Clarissa's in the room, putting my attention anywhere else is like finding a money tree.

A nice thought, but never going to happen.

My phone keeps buzzing.

The student council group chat is going wild now that news of my internship is out.

I stand and tuck my book to my side.

At that moment, Clarissa looks up. My nostrils flare as she notices me looking at her, and then she freezes, cocoa-brown eyes going wide. She doesn't move, doesn't blink. Neither do I.

My heart thunders in my chest. A strange sensation passes through me, like I've been here before. In a dream or another life.

My brother's voice whispers through my head. *'When you know, you know'*.

Clay told me that after he met Anya in the military. I asked him why he was getting married so fast and he hit me with that phrase.

'It sounds cliché, man. But it's true.'

I didn't believe him until this moment. Until I looked into Clarissa's eyes and realized I was looking at my future wife.

"He's staring at me!" her friend squeaks.

Clarissa breaks eye contact and I feel the loss so keenly it's like a physical ache.

"Should I talk to him?" the friend gushes.

Clarissa stays quiet and pointedly avoids my gaze.

The other girl plasters a big smile on her face and saunters over to me.

Oh crap.

Heart beating fast, I get up and walk out of the library. She's not the one I want.

Unfortunately, the one I want looks absolutely uninterested in me.

AMNESIA FOR TASTEBUDS

CODY

“IT’S NOT LOOKING GOOD,” Vargas croaks, eyes on his phone as he sits stiffly in the sofa facing my desk.

On that I agree.

The fact that Clarissa forgave me is supposed to be a win.

She said she accepted my apology.

She said it was in the past.

But her eyes still held mistrust. She tried to close the door between us and lock it so tight not even a bull can charge in.

Unfortunately for her, I’m good at sticking my toe in a closing door and pushing until it opens.

Clarissa might think our story’s done.

She’s wrong.

I’m not ready to close the book.

Hell, we’re not even at the best part.

“What are you going to do?” Vargas asks.

“What else can I do?” I mumble. “I’m going to throw everything I can at her until she’s mine.”

“What?” His jaw drops.

“What?” I startle when I realize I’d said that out loud.

He points at me. “What are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about?” I lift my hand in the same way.

We stare each other down, arms extended, trigger fingers cocked like cowboys in a Western.

Vargas blinks a few times. “I’m talking about the online articles on your takeover yesterday.”

“There are articles?”

He swings the cell phone around to face me. “The HODs took their grievances public.”

“They signed an NDA.”

“Not their secretaries.”

I scoff. “They want to play games? I have their sins in black and white.”

“Shoot back and get hit by your own bullet.”

I crook a finger at him. “Explain.”

“This is different, Bolton. Our PR team has never handled a crap-storm like this before. It feels intentional and organized.”

“So what?” I casually walk around my desk and sit, shaking my mouse. The background on my computer screen is Abe and Regan.

“So what?” Vargas mocks. “You seem quite unaffected by the fact that people are literally calling for your arrest.”

“Arrest?”

“They say you’re abusing your power. They’re calling you a heartless billionaire who steals from the poor to line his own pockets.”

I snort.

“It’s too hot in the news. Mass-firing is a cuss word to these types. They’re making it sound like you committed genocide.” He raises his phone.

“Why should I be bothered about what some troll in his mom’s basement has to say about me?”

“It’s not just one person, Bolton.” Vargas shakes his head.

“Fine. Two people.”

He rolls his eyes.

“Come on, Vargas. If I was afraid of a public shaming, I wouldn’t have started this business.”

“It’s one thing if the business community knows you as the Grim Reaper. It’s different if public sentiment sways against you. Do you know how easy it is for you to get cancelled these days?”

Unaffected, I click open my email.

Two hundred messages.

With a sigh, I go through the trouble of clicking them all until they say ‘read’. Vargas will look through them later and forward the most pressing messages to my attention.

“Employees are talking about a walk-out.”

Those words prompt my eyes up.

“They want to ‘take back their power’.”

I frown. Public relations has never been my strong suit. Data doesn’t lie and I follow the numbers. It’s my job to find problems in the mechanics of a business, much like a workman in a garage. I take out the unhealthy parts. Replace them with new ones. Make the machine run again.

It’s simple.

“Fine. Fix it.”

“Me?” His eyes widen.

“Yes, you.” I check my watch and push away from the desk. “I’m not putting out a public statement or holding a press conference for this nonsense.” I wave a hand at him. “Short of that, you can do anything you want to out the fire.”

“Bolton.” Vargas whips around, gripping the back of the sofa. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got a meeting.”

“There’s no meeting on the schedule.”

I throw a backwards wave. “I want a solution by the end of the day, Vargas.”

His angry mutters follow me all the way to the elevator.

I smirk at his annoyance. I pay Vargas an insane amount of money to handle crap like this. He’s mouthy but good at what

he does. I have no fear that he'll be able to come up with a way.

The elevator doors open.

Employees hurl greetings at me and I acknowledge them with a curt wave.

Outside, my driver opens the back door for me.

“Where are we headed, sir?”

I open my tablet and lean back, “To the most important negotiation of my life.”



MS. PHOEBE SLAMS a cup of tea before me and hits me with a dark frown. The wrinkles around her blue eyes deepen like tissue paper.

“Thank you.” I stiffly pick up the drink.

It's cold.

The head of the foundation folds herself primly into a chair. Her face has a hint of a pinch when she settles in. She's getting too old for this, but she's not ready to admit defeat. Her shoulders are tense when she folds her hands over the table and looks at me.

For a while, she says nothing.

I take the chance to observe her office. It's cramped with cabinets, stacks of files, and colorful rugs. The photos on the wall tell a story. Snapshots of her receiving awards from governors and officials are stuck to her cabinet drawers. Faded. Unloved. Almost like an afterthought.

The more pronounced photographs are of her in service. Stills of newly-constructed houses. Orphanages. Children in hats and gowns holding diplomas.

My eyes linger on a picture with Ms. Phoebe and Clarissa. Ris is beaming at the camera, her smile so wide that it takes my breath away.

Damn. She's so beautiful.

Not just her face.

Everything about her.

She's giving. Loving. Willing to sacrifice herself for others. It was the easiest thing to fall in love with her back then and I realize those feelings are still there.

Ms. Phoebe folds her hands together and clears her throat. I switch my attention back to her.

"How can I help you, Mr. Bolton?"

"It's just Cody."

She doesn't blink. Or smile. Or call me Cody.

"I was a guest at my sister-in-law's gala a few months ago..."

Island isn't my sister-in-law *yet*. But it's basically a done deal. Besides, I need a viable connection to Ms. Phoebe so she'll stop looking at me like she wants to bludgeon my head in with her stapler.

"...I was moved by all the good work you've been doing, and I'd like to help."

Ms. Phoebe studies me with those sharp blue eyes and I hold myself perfectly still.

I have no doubt that she'll join hands with me. I'm offering her money on a silver platter. There's no way she'll reject...

"No."

I hear a record scratch in my head. Shock careens across my face before I wrestle my expression back into its usual indifference.

"No?"

"We will not be working with you, Mr. Bolton."

So we're playing hardball?

My eyes slide to the picture frames again. Business is all about finding problems and then solving them.

Me? I love challenges.

It gets me up in the morning.

“Ms. Phoebe, do you take issue with my proposal or with me?”

Her left eye twitches. “What would I have against you, Mr. Bolton? When we’ve just met?”

“Yes, I’m asking that question too.” I draw my leg over my knee and tap a finger against it. “This offer is a sure thing. I can write you a check here and now.” I keep my voice low, unhurried. The most important rule is to appear as if I have the upper hand. “I’m prepared to invest an amount that will blow even your wildest dreams to shreds.”

Her throat bobs.

I’ve got her on the hook.

Smiling, I lean back and wait for her agreement. People are rarely as complicated as they want to be. Money can solve almost anything.

Ms. Phoebe looks worriedly at the picture of Clarissa. I see her wavering and, when she shakes her head, I know why I’ve been rejected.

I quickly modify my pitch in real time. Ms. Phoebe is a woman who’s constructed her entire life around giving back.

Exactly the kind of woman that I would invest in.

Exactly the kind of woman that Clarissa would follow.

They both seem to have a passion for helping others and that motivates them in ways I could never understand. What I do understand is loyalty, and Ms. Phoebe has an impressive amount of it.

I lean back in my chair. “This is about Clarissa.”

“Of course not.” The older woman tugs on her earlobe.

No wonder she and Clarissa get along. These women have no idea how to lie.

“Mr. Bolton, I appreciate the offer, but this is highly unusual. I don’t quite understand how a small NGO like us would have gotten on your radar. Even more unheard of is someone of your caliber making such a proposal personally.”

I don’t blink an eye when I say, “I’d like to get more involved in charity. Throwing money at needy causes isn’t nearly as rewarding as pushing up my sleeves and getting in there myself. I have no intentions of making things complicated. I only want to help in any way I can.”

“I see.” She drums her fingers on the desk, working through it in her mind.

I let her, trusting that money speaks louder than I do.

This organization might be in the business of helping people, but it still *is* a business. One that runs on love instead of profits.

And they need cash.

I know that personally.

Ms. Phoebe pulls her lips into her mouth and eyes me with a little less suspicion. “Here’s what I can do for you. I’m willing to work with you, Mr. Bolton...”

My lips curl up. *Gotchya.*

“... if you convince Clarissa to sign off.”

The smirk of victory dies an immediate and fiery death.

I clear my throat. “Clarissa?”

“Yes.” Ms. Phoebe mimics my slouch, leaning back in her chair and looking smug. “Can you do that?”

Sneaky old woman.

I underestimated her. Ms. Phoebe should have gone into law. She would have climbed her way to the head of my M&A department.

“I’ll get it done,” I grit my teeth.

“We’ll see.” Her smile beams in my direction and screams only one word...

Checkmate.



A GIRL who looks no older than twenty-years-old bounces toward me when I step out of Ms. Phoebe’s office.

“Hi, I’m Laura Chen.”

“Cody Bolton. Do you know when Clarissa will be in?”

“No. Why?”

“I need to speak with her.” I check my watch. “Does she normally get to work this late?”

“Not usually.”

I purse my lips. Is something going on with Ris? Is her ankle still bothering her? Did she need to go to the doctor?

I pull out my phone and realize I don’t have her number. Maybe I should call Clay. My brother can find Clarissa’s location, email and passwords with his eyes closed.

The problem is I don’t want Clay in my business.

Not yet.

I glance down and find Laura still peering up at me.

“Can I help you?” I ask flatly.

She sees my frown and shakes her head as if to wake herself up from a stupor. “Sorry. It’s just... you are the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.”

I blink.

“But I guess you already know that.” She presses in. “Can I ask you a question?”

I motion for her to go ahead.

“How rich are you?” Laura turns a keen eye to my watch. “Because you’re dressed head-to-toe in designer. My brother

was obsessed with fashion for a while and I saw that logo on your suit all over his vision board. Plus I saw the car you pulled up in. And you have a driver. And all those guys outside...”

She’s referring to my security team. Doberman insisted on coming with me this morning. With all the ruckus against me online, they’re sticking closer than before.

It’s ridiculous.

“Are you, like,” she leans forward and whispers, “millionaire rich or is it the other one?” Eyes the size of saucers, she hisses, “the one with the ‘b’?”

“I’m... rich enough,” I say simply.

“Wow.” Laura giggles. “You just got so much hotter.”

My lips quirk. Her exuberance is contagious. She seems genuine and innocent. Besides, her hands are staying at her sides. Which is always a plus.

People think sexual harassment is a one-way street, but it actually goes both ways. I’ve had more than my fair share of women with tentacles for hands.

“Laura,” I pocket my phone, “how about you give me a tour while I wait for Clarissa?”

“Sure.” She gestures down the hallway, bouncing on her toes. “This section is the admin offices and the kitchen.” She points to a small room with a sink, a coffee machine and not much else. “As you can see, it’s a little dull, but we’re going to paint it and make it nicer eventually. When the co-op is making money.”

“The co-op?”

“We call it that so everyone feels a sense of ownership.” She scrunches her nose. “‘Do More Project’ is a mouthful.”

“You’re focused on helping women from the shelter, correct?”

“Yeah.” Laura’s eyes shine.

She takes me into a large atrium with high ceilings and wooden stalls.

“The co-op is like a pipeline, bringing women from the shelter straight into owning their own business.”

“Straight into?” I arch both eyebrows, already seeing holes in that plan.

“They get classes and stuff,” she says, her sneakers brushing against the light film of dirt on the ground. I frown when I notice the floor is unpainted cement.

Were they not able to finish the interior?

“But it’s pretty much ‘shelter’ and then ‘business’.” She makes a swooping gesture with her hands.

“Hm.”

“People haven’t been too supportive of us.” Her shoulders sag. “But I don’t think they understand what women go through. It’s really tough to move from depending on a douchebag and then getting thrust into the world to stand on your own two feet.” Laura scowls as if she’d like to punch every ‘douchebag’ in the city. “Life is tough enough without carrying all that baggage, you know? Without resources to help them, they often go back to harmful situations. Ms. Phoebe saw a gap in the system and that’s where the idea came from.”

“Was it her idea to go with a flea market concept?” I observe the layout.

“The stalls are here to help as many women as possible. If we could, we would have put in even more of them.”

My expression is carefully blank, but I disagree with that idea.

Moving closer to one of the kiosks, I run my hand down the frame. It’s made of wood. Unvarnished. Not that appealing.

Stepping back, I measure the width of it. A lemonade stand would have more room.

I turn in a slow circle and imagine sellers who barely know what they're doing stuffed into these tiny, restrictive kiosks.

“Laura, can you tell me—”

My question is cut off by the bang of the front door.

A sharp voice rings out, “What are *you* doing here?”

Laura and I both turn.

Clarissa is standing in the doorway, looking like an angel with all that sunlight streaming behind her.

Sure, she looks more like the angel of death the way she's stomping over to me with a stormy scowl, but she's a heavenly being none-the-less.

Laura squeaks. “She's angry. Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” I say simply. Clarissa's furious at me, not Laura.

The young girl breaks out into a nervous grin. “Clarissa, this is Cody Bolton. The *very rich, very interested* investor who wants to help our—”

“Laura, I got a call from the printers,” Ris growls, not tearing her eyes off me. “The flyers we ordered are ready. Can you go and collect them?”

“But...”

“Now.”

“Fine.” Laura sighs. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Bolton.”

“Call me Cody.”

Her cheeks blush pink.

I meet Clarissa's gaze and find her glaring at me.

Holy crap. A woman has *no* right to look so utterly divine with her nostrils flaring that wide.

“How's your ankle?”

Ris's angry brown eyes jerk to mine. “What are you doing here, Cody?”

“Business.”

“Business?”

“Mixed with pleasure.” The word rolls off my tongue with a darker connotation than necessary.

She stiffens. “I made myself clear yesterday.”

“And I did the same.” I take a step forward. “Backing off isn’t a part of my plan, Ris.”

Her eyes narrow. “It all has to go according to your perfect plan, doesn’t it?”

Her words are too harsh. Her eyes are on fire. Crackling at the edges. Hot enough to burn my skin.

“What does that mean?” I ask, moving in again. It’s so difficult to be close to her and not touch her. I can smell her light perfume. It’s calling to me like a beckoning finger.

Her hair is up in a messy bun, showing off her delicate face and the slope of her neck. Moles like constellations dot the side of her throat. I want to trace those constellations with my fingers. With my tongue.

She’s wearing a simple white blouse tucked into a long, flowing skirt. Nothing about that outfit is revealing and yet my body reacts like I have her spread-eagle and naked on my bed.

It’s always been this way. This... unexplainable. The things Clarissa does to me, the way she sits in my mind, in my heart, under my skin—I wish it made sense, but I’ve stopped trying to quantify it.

I’ve got iron-clad control of every other area in my life. I can switch my emotions on and off. Like a light. One flick and I’m cold.

But with her?

The switch gets hit by lightning and it surges, sparks flying everywhere.

Hell, I’d forgotten what it was like to have such a powerful attraction to someone. To feel—not just desire—but a near roaring desperation burning through me.

No wonder I was so miserable these past ten years.

No wonder no one else could measure up.

I was waiting for this.

For her.

“I don’t want you here.” She steps around me and stalks deeper into the room. “Go back to your world where you belong, Cody.”

“I’m here to help.”

That stops her in her tracks. She turns slowly. “You? Help?”

“Yes.”

She glides toward me, her hips swaying lightly with every step. There’s something sharp and calculating in her eyes that I don’t particularly like. “*You* care about female-led businesses? Why?”

“Everyone deserves an opportunity to provide for their families.”

“Don’t waste your time, Cody.”

“It’s mine to waste.”

She’s thinning her lips like someone desperate to find a flaw in a math problem. “I don’t—”

“Come on, Ris. At least hear me out.”

Her stare turns even grumpier. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“Let me invest in this place.” I step close to her. Voice low, I whisper, “*You need* this. The women from the shelter need this.”

Her eyes dart to the left. The first sign of a faltering conviction.

I know her soft spot. Clarissa cares about people. It’s a weakness and I’m in the habit of exploiting those.

“I heard that things have been tough around here.” I push my pitch a little harder. “This is the only option.”

Her head whips up and she takes a giant step back. “Quite convenient, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“I went on a little tour this morning. Re-visited all our corporate sponsors. And you know what I found out?”

Prickles of heat spreads on the back of my neck.

“You’ve been making the rounds with your CEO friends. Strangely, everyone you talked to was directly related to our foundation. And they all mysteriously decided to cut ties with us. Know anything about that?”

“Are you accusing me of something?” I ask in an even tone.

“Would you admit it even if I did?”

I glance away.

“What the hell were you thinking, Cody?” Clarissa pokes her finger in my chest. “Is this some kind of power trip? For what? So we would beg you? So we would be desperate and do anything you wanted? Do you see us as a joke?”

“Of course not.”

Her jaw tenses and there’s the faintest flash of angry white teeth around her lips. “This isn’t a game. This is our lives. You had no right to do that. You wasted everyone’s time. I spent hours on those pitches. I put my ego to the side and begged for them to reconsider, but no one would budge.” Her voice climbs. “Because the great Cody Bolton said to shut the door in our faces—”

“Ris...”

“You must really think we’re idiots.”

“I don’t. I only want to help.”

“Bull!” She lifts her chin. “You went so far as to buy a company *just* to block us. What the hell is up with that?”

I lift a finger. “*That* I didn’t do. The company has great potential. The fact that you were related to it was a

coincidence.”

“What are you going to do with that place?”

“I’m going to tear it down and sell it for parts.”

Her fingers clench into her skirt. “Is that what you do? Destroy things?”

“That’s one way to put it.”

Her brows knit together like an angry V. “Go to hell.”

“Ris.”

“*Don’t* call my name like that.”

I capture her hand and tug her toward me. My arm falls against her waist. She struggles to wiggle free, but I hold firm.

“I know my methods weren’t right.” A heavy sigh falls out of me. “I shouldn’t have been so... aggressive.”

Her bark of laughter is dark and unamused. I’m frantic to fix this, but not so much that I miss how she hasn’t pushed me away.

Anger I can work with.

Cold eyes. Clenched jaws. Apathy. That’s a bigger hurdle.

Clarissa Maura feels something for me.

Hatred, yes.

But at least it’s something.

“I went about it the wrong way, but the bottom line is the same. I do want to help. And I’ll back that up with actions. I’ll give you double what those companies combined would have donated.”

“This is not about money,” she fumes. “It’s about respect.”

“Of course.”

“I hate looking like an idiot, Cody.”

Seeing the genuine distress in her eyes makes me feel like I’m stuck in hell. She was never supposed to find out about my interference. She was never supposed to get hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

She scoffs.

“I won’t do it again,” I whisper.

“Ten years later, and you’re just full of apologies, aren’t you? Why don’t you just print out a card and hand them out whenever you make a jerk move. It could say ‘I’m sorry for being such a rich entitled bastard—’”

“I’m sorry for being such a rich entitled bastard,” I repeat.

She shoves at me, her lips trembling like she’s trying not to smile. “Don’t. Don’t do that. This is serious, Cody.”

“And I’m serious about fixing my mistakes.” I slide my hand over a curl that fell out of her bun. My fingers graze her brown cheek.

In an earnest voice, I tell her, “Why don’t you consider me?”

She gives me a defiant face.

Undeterred, I coax her, “Let me invest in your charity.”

“No.”

“My money’s green.”

“Your money’s dirty.”

“Everything I do is legal.”

“Just because it’s legal doesn’t make it good.”

I study her face and decide to play it cool. “What kind of things have you heard about me?”

“Enough.”

I wait.

She doesn’t disappoint. Clarissa never could hold back when she’s on a rant.

“You’re heartless. Cold-blooded. They call you the Grim Reaper because you don’t just take companies apart. You fire everyone who doesn’t bow down to you. You break contracts

with subcontractors, suppliers, long-time associates, disregarding them like they're nothing."

I'm not surprised by her assessment. Most of it is true.

Even back then, Clarissa and I clashed on our values. She saw the world as purely black and white. Good people. Bad people. Moral. Immoral. I was always more willing to color in grey.

Rather than feel offended, my lips curl up. We used to have these arguments back then too, neither of us really coming to a solution. It usually ended with me kissing her, shelving our disagreement for another day.

"You're *smiling*? Right now?" She huffs.

"You're feisty." It's an observation. A relief. A compliment. There's a hint of amusement in it too. Clarissa appears so demure and harmless at first. It's fascinating when she starts getting mouthy.

Her eyebrows quirk up. "I have never punched anyone in the face, Cody Bolton, but you are tempting me."

"Welcome to the club, princess," I wink. "All you've done since that night at Island's gala is tempt me."

Her scowl falters, but she quickly picks it back up again.

Before she can spit more angry words from that delectable mouth, the door creaks open and an older woman sashays in. She's carrying two trays and her voice has a cheerful beat when she says, "Hello, hello!"

"This *isn't* over," Clarissa says, jamming a finger in my direction. Turning to face the woman, she chirps, "Erica."

"Hi, Rissi."

"*Rissi*?" I smirk, glancing in Clarissa's direction.

"Don't even think of calling me that," she hisses. To the woman, she says in a wooden tone, "Did you bring more goodies for us?"

"Yes. I was whipping some things up in the kitchen and then I got to wondering—why don't we use ketchup in

brownies? I mean, what's better than eating chocolate after pasta? It's practically gourmet!"

Clarissa's smile fractures. "Did you say... ketchup?"

"Yes." Erica sets a tray on top of a kiosk and rakes back the cloth. "Tada!"

Nestled inside are brownies that smell absolutely foul.

"Go ahead. Try one." Erica looks behind Clarissa to me. "You too, handsome."

Clarissa's smile is positively evil. "Yeah, Cody. Try one."

"I'm actually lactose intolerant." I touch my stomach.

"These don't have any milk or butter!" Erica declares.

I throw up a little in my mouth.

"Go on." Clarissa tilts her head coquettishly.

Like a gift from God, my phone rings.

I sweep it out of my pocket. "Gotta take this."

Clarissa hits me with a dark look of betrayal.

I hold her stare and lift my chin smugly as I answer Vargas's call. "What?"

"I got your solution. I'm bringing him to the office. Can you meet me there now?"

"I'm busy," I say, watching Clarissa try to find an excuse that'll keep her from eating the brownies.

"This is important, Bolton. It can't wait."

"Then meet me here," I say. I'm not leaving this place. Not yet. I'm having more fun in the five minutes I've spent with Clarissa than I have all year.

I type something quickly and press send. "There. You've got my location."

"Bolton—"

I hang up and swing my attention back to Clarissa. Ms. Phoebe has wandered out of her office and joined the other

women.

Clarissa is already nibbling on a piece of those cursed brownies.

“Well?” Erica clasps her hands together and leans in.

“It’s... different.”

“Right? I was thinking of selling these at the grand opening next month. Really make a name for myself in the gourmet dessert market.” Erica grins wide and reveals a gold tooth. “People are tired of the same-old, same-old. It’s time for something fresh.”

“Well, this... certainly counts.”

My eyebrows wrinkle when I see both Clarissa and Ms. Phoebe smiling politely. Aren’t they going to tell this woman the truth?

I step forward, firmly wearing my businessman hat. “Hi, I’m the co-op’s newest investor.” Clarissa’s eyes shift to me and widen. I ignore her outraged frown. “Did you say you’ll be selling these to customers?”

“Yes. Would you like one?”

I hold a hand out, ignoring Ris’s surly, do-not-approach signals.

“I want your honest opinion,” Erica says.

Pinching the brownie between my fingers, I taste it. The flood of disgusting flavors that hit my tongue has me making a face. It’s a miracle that I manage to swallow. All the warning bells in my brain are signalling that I should not be putting this mess into my body.

“Well?” Erica beams.

“Do you really want my opinion?”

She nods.

Behind her, Clarissa makes a slashing gesture over her neck.

“Are you sure?” I ask Erica.

“Lay it on me. I’m ready.”

The slashing motion gets more frantic.

“Your brownie...”

“Yes.” Erica clasps her hands together.

I lift my chin and tell her the truth. “Is awful. I wouldn’t feed a dog something like that.”

Ms. Phoebe looks horrified.

Clarissa gasps.

Erica covers her mouth. “Is it *that* bad?”

“It’s terrible. Like regurgitated dung.” I grab my handkerchief and wipe the side of my mouth, wishing I could use that amnesia spray from *Men In Black* on my tastebuds. “If I could take those brownies out back and shoot them to put them out of their misery, I would.”

“Cody!” Clarissa hisses.

“I’m... sorry.” Erica’s eyes glaze over. “I didn’t... I didn’t...” Tears streaming down her face, she runs outside.

“Erica, wait!” Ms. Phoebe waddles after her.

Laura returns just as Erica runs out crying. She glances at me and then at Clarissa. “Did someone finally break the news to her?”

“Yes,” Clarissa growls out.

Before I can defend myself, the door opens again and Vargas walks in. A kid in a wheelchair rolls with him.

I stalk toward my assistant. “Who’s the kid?”

“Your solution.”

“What?”

“You asked for a way.” He gestures grandly. “Here he is. I got you a kid for Christmas.”

TRAILER TREASURES

CLARISSA

I'M SO TICKED off at Cody that I might have fried some brain cells, but I'm sure I heard that correctly.

Cody has a child?

It's a gut punch that almost slams me to my knees.

My eyes jump to the teenager in the wheelchair. He looks way older than ten. Which means Cody met and impregnated someone long before we got together. It has nothing to do with me. So why do I feel so massively devastated?

I want to know everything, even if it hurts.

Who did he fall in love with?

When did it happen?

What was her name?

Is that why he didn't show up to our wedding? Was he fooling around with her even when we were dating?

Maybe I'm an idiot, but the thought of Cody betraying me with another woman is inconceivable. He was so busy with his start-up, he barely had time for me.

Besides, Cody wasn't... the easiest for girls to flirt with.

Our relationship went down in a pile of burning flames, yes.

He's a jerk who didn't show up to our wedding, yes.

But the one thing I can say for sure is that Cody Bolton never entertained other women. They were interested. And willing. And it was the most annoying thing ever to have a boyfriend who was so handsome that girls routinely gave him their number. But he shut them down with the same heartlessness he displayed while critiquing Erica's brownies.

Cody slants the mustache guy a tight look, grabs his elbow and drags him across the room. They're out of earshot, but not so far that I can't hear their mutterings.

“What the hell are you talking about, Vargas?” Cody mumbles. “I don’t have a son.”

“Well, it’s more like a foster son.”

“A what?”

“You told me to find a solution. Here it is,” Vargas responds. “Trust me on this.”

“I told you to solve my PR problem, not make it worse,” Cody barks.

Relief hits my blood stream like a flood. So this isn’t Cody’s biological son. It’s some kind of gimmick for his business.

My curiosity burns brighter than the asteroid that hit the dinosaurs. I can smell drama. It’s like a thick steam rising to my nostrils, and I can’t resist shuffling toward the men, straining to hear more.

The whisk of a wheelchair grabs my attention.

“Hey.”

My gaze drops to the boy. He’s got dark hair and light brown eyes. At first glance, he seems like a normal teenager—albeit in a wheelchair.

On closer inspection, however, I see the tubes running out of the sleeve of his baggy graphic T-shirt. The tube is hooked up to some kind of machine at the back of the wheelchair.

“Hey.” I smile warmly. “What’s your name?”

His voice is deeper than expected. “Joel.”

“I’m Clarissa.”

“Clarissa.” He rolls his tongue over the syllables of my name.

I smirk, already sensing that Joel is a character.

“Can I ask you something, Clarissa?”

“Anything.”

Joel drapes one lanky arm over the handle of the wheelchair, face upturned. “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

I bite down on my bottom lip and glance at Cody. “No.”

“I didn’t either.” He leans toward me, hearts in his eyes. “Until I saw you.”

Laura chokes.

I whirl around, having forgotten that she was even there.

Joel doesn’t pay Laura any attention. Eyes still locked on me, he murmurs, “Has anyone told you you have beautiful eyes?”

“Uh...”

“They’re like the sun right before it touches the clouds,” he says. “Unfathomable.”

Laura snorts again.

“Joel, that’s... that’s very kind.”

“Kindness implies I’m not telling the truth. I’m one-hundred percent real, Clarissa.”

I shuffle my feet.

Joel keeps staring at me.

Flustered, I rope Laura into the conversation. “Laura, you and Joel probably share common interests. Why don’t you take him on a quick tour while I talk to his—I mean to Cody.”

“I’d rather stay with you.” Joel maneuvers his wheelchair right beside me.

“Fine by me.” Laura points to the tubes. “What’s that?”

Joel’s cocky smile shatters for a second. He quickly fixes it back in place and wiggles his eyebrows. “A ventricular assistant device. Sexy right?”

“I guess.”

“What does it do?” I ask.

“It’s a machine that keeps my heart pumping.”

“Oh.”

“But I don’t think I’ll need it anymore.”

“Why not?” I ask, alarmed. Can’t he *die* if he doesn’t have that machine?

“Because,” Joel whispers, “my heart is now beating for you.”

Laura coughs so hard she might hack up a lung.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Joel asks.

I squirm. Time to nip this in the bud. “You’re very sweet, Joel, and you seem like a bright young man, but I don’t think this,” I gesture between us, “is appropriate.”

“What’s inappropriate about it?”

Isn’t it obvious? “You’re way too young for me.”

“Age is just a number,” he coos.

Alright, Jail Bait Cassanova.

Laura stifles her laughter by covering her mouth.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” I hiss darkly, noticing her reddening cheeks.

“What was that?” She shades her eyes and arches back dramatically. “You’re like the sun. I can’t look at you.”

“Very funny.” My eyes slide to Cody again.

He and his assistant are still locked in heated conversation.

I pick up the tension in Cody’s muscular shoulders. The way he’s rolling his hands through his hair is a sign that he’s really at the end of his rope.

“Take him back, Vargas,” Cody hisses.

“Sorry, boss. There’s no return label for *a person*. Do you know how many strings I pulled to get this done quickly?”

Cody lets out an angry huff. He swings around, his eyes meeting mine.

That fiery green gaze sends an instant shock of adrenaline down my spine, and my whole body tingles. My toes curl inside my dusty sneakers—the only other work-appropriate shoe I could find in my closet this morning.

I'm annoyed with him.

Mostly for what he did with Erica.

And for what he's doing with Joel.

Even though I don't have all the details, I'm one-hundred percent certain that fostering a heart patient just for publicity is a low move.

Cody's doing that thing again—the thing where he values money over people. It's yet another reminder that we're vastly different individuals who value vastly different things.

I hate that he only cares about the bottom line.

I hate that he doesn't seem to see a problem with it.

And I hate that my body really doesn't give a crap about any of my misgivings.

Be annoyed, body. Don't melt.

Do not melt.

It's no use.

Cody's a green-eyed beast who can electrify the blood in my veins with one look, and the fact that we've got an audience doesn't seem to matter at all.

It feels like we're the only two people in the room.

I'm fighting back butterflies the size of mammoths in my stomach.

The struggle to remain angry isn't one-sided.

Cody's jaw flexes and there's still a hint of indignant fire in his eyes, but the longer he looks at me, the more his expression softens. It's like the Grinch slowly turning into a human being right before my eyes.

One eyebrow arches higher than the other. I can hear him silently prodding me. *You okay, Ris?*

I glance away, desperate to break eye contact. And half scared I'm going to tap back into that silent communication stream.

I will not be on the same wave length as Cody Bolton.

Nope.

Not again.

My emotional defenses are up.

I'm the Great Wall of China. Cody and his voodoo green eyes can never invade me.

"Oh no. What's putting that frown on your face, my love?"

I look at Joel, startled.

Joel's gaze moves between me and Cody. His face sours. "Is he my rival in love?"

Both my eyebrows arch significantly.

Ms. Phoebe returns just then, slightly out of breath. Sweat coats her face and sticks her shirt to her back.

Laura and I both run to her.

"Where's Erica?" I ask, glancing behind the older woman.

"I couldn't... catch up with her," Ms. Phoebe wheezes.

"Laura, can you take Ms. Phoebe back to her office and get her some water? I'll finish up here."

"I'm on it," Laura says.

As I watch Ms. Phoebe, the stirrings of anger singe my soul again.

She's been in and out of the hospital lately. Although she swears nothing's wrong, I can see that her health is deteriorating. I don't know how much time she has left.

This initiative means so much to my mentor.

It *has* to be a success.

Tilting my chin up, I stomp toward Cody.

His assistant is mid-explanation, “You hired me because I can see the bigger picture. Say yes to this and you’ll hit two birds with one stone.” Vargas throws a meaningful look at me.

I have no idea what that look is about and I don’t want to know either.

The men go quiet when I stop in front of them.

Cody has a hand in his pocket. His jaw is clenched tightly. He looks like a model just standing there with his head bent and his eyes narrowed.

But I won’t let that distract me.

“Thank you for your offer,” I gesture to Cody, “but my answer is no. Your way of doing things doesn’t match our vision here at the Do More Project.”

“It doesn’t match the foundation’s vision or yours?” His voice is a low growl.

“Does it matter?”

His eyes jerk to mine again and, this time, I don’t melt. I hold my glare steady.

Cody’s phone rings.

It’s a wonder it was silent for so long. Even in college, everyone wanted a piece of him. I bet that problem has multiplied now that he’s so rich and important.

Vargas checks his watch, “Bolton, you have that meeting at nine—”

“I know what I have,” Cody barks, still not moving a muscle.

“It seems like you’re busy, Mr. Bolton,” I say in a level tone, making it clear I want him to leave. “I won’t see you out.”

I’m fully prepared to model-walk back to the offices. But before I unleash the power of my sashay, wheels creak and Joel zooms in front of me.

“My love.”

“My love?” Cody hisses. I can *feel* his death-glare even though I’m not looking at him.

“It seems we must part.”

I want to be mad, but Joel’s earnestness bemuses me. He’s so... different. I admire his upbeat attitude. Even under normal circumstances, he’d have a reason to be moody. Most of the teenagers that pass through the women’s shelter are quiet and withdrawn.

Joel is the opposite.

I break out a smile despite my efforts to remain serious. “It was nice to meet you, Joel. I mean that.”

“The pleasure was all mine.” Joel draws my hand away from where it was fisted at my side. He lifts it to his mouth. A shocked sound flies out of me but, before I can pull away, Cody appears.

He smacks Joel’s hand down like a fly-swatter on a mosquito.

“Hey!” Joel yelps, nearly jumping out of his wheelchair.

A lightning bolt flings from Cody’s green eyes. “Hands off, kid. You don’t kiss a lady without her consent. Don’t you know that?”

“This has nothing to do with consent,” Joel argues. “You’re just jealous because she likes me and not you.”

Cody rakes a hand through his hair as if we’re all getting on his nerves. “We’re leaving. Vargas, take the kid back to school.”

“He’s not going to school. He’s staying in the hospital,” Vargas says.

Sympathy pinches my chest. How hard must Joel have it that he’s too sick to go to school?

“Take him there then,” Cody grits out.

Vargas grabs the handles of the wheelchair and pushes.

“I’ll be back, Clarissa!” Joel yells, twisting his neck.
“Don’t forget me!”

I cringe.

Cody sighs. “I apologize for him.”

“And for Erica?”

He studies me. “She needed the truth, Ris.”

“There’s a way to talk to someone, Cody. You broke her.”

“What was the alternative? Let her believe she has a gift when she doesn’t? If it wasn’t me, it would have been the customers who broke it to her. And they wouldn’t have stopped at words. They have lawsuits and bad reviews. It would have affected the entire co-op.”

He has a point.

I know he does.

But I’m too stubborn to admit it.

Besides, he’s so arrogant that it makes me want to argue with him even if he’s right.

“Erica’s dream is to be a baker. It was that dream that allowed her to leave her abusive boyfriend and forge a new path for herself. Just because she’s not the best now doesn’t mean she won’t get better in time.”

“Yeah, but that’s—”

Cody’s phone is now a wailing pitch.

I ease back, slipping into the Clarissa From College. The one who knew she was never the priority. The one who knew that her boyfriend had to leave even if they were in the middle of something important.

“Go,” I say heatedly.

Cody’s eyes linger on mine. It’s clear he doesn’t want to leave, but it’s equally clear that he won’t stay.

“I’ll come back.”

“Don’t bother.” I turn away from him, my resolve hardening. “No matter what, there’s no reason to see each other again.”



MS. PHOEBE DOESN’T MENTION anything about Cody’s visit nor does she offer her opinion.

That’s how she is.

She’ll wait until I’m ready to talk rather than prod me for information.

Which is a horrible tactic.

Because now I’m left with the strain of initiating conversation.

Cody’s offer is a big fat elephant stomping around the building. It sits with me at lunch and follows me around while I prepare for the grand opening.

Ms. Phoebe is right by my side, doling out advice on kiosk placements and helping us set up the banner behind the stage. Her knowing looks in between conversations are heavy. She’s waiting for me to say something.

Unfortunately for her, I’ve learned all her tactics.

There’s no way I’m bringing up Cody first.

If she wants to pretend this morning never happened, that’s fine by me.

It’s not until work ends in the evening that she lightly broaches the topic.

“Still no call back from Regitech?” she asks, helping me drag down the shutters.

“No.” I slide the padlock through the bars and secure it. “But I’ve left a million messages with his secretary.”

“We can’t have a grand opening without sponsors.”

I clear my throat. “I’ll find new ones.”

“In a week?”

My shoulders slump.

“Is there no other option?” She gives me a pointed look.

“No. None,” I say firmly.

“It’ll work out,” Ms. Phoebe glances at the dusky sky.
“These things have a way of doing that.”

“Maybe,” I say. But inside, the pressure mounts.

Am I doing the right thing by driving Cody away?

One side of me argues that I am. He intentionally blocked all the charity’s funding so we had no choice but to call him. He made us vulnerable. He used his power to put us in our place.

How can we work with someone like that?

But what’s the alternative if we don’t?

I can’t let my selfishness ruin the co-op.

It’s because of me that we’re in this mess anyway. If I wasn’t running point on the Do More project, Cody wouldn’t have gotten involved at all. My past is causing this mess. It’s not fair to the women who are completely innocent.

The debate runs circles through my mind. I’m heavy and thoughtful all the way to my tiny studio apartment.

Inside, I shuck out of my sneakers and fall face-down on the couch.

“What do I do?” I moan to the silence.

If I was waiting for a voice to hand me the answer, it’s not forthcoming.

At my wit’s end, I do the only thing that makes sense—I call my mother.

She answers on the third ring.

“Hi, Rissa.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling a wave of comfort. Mom’s voice conjures images of cooking noodles in the park over an

electric stove and a pot filled with fountain water. It reminds me of dollar store snacks. Gas station showers. Two days of Christmas—the actual day and the one we celebrated when mom was off-shift.

My mother has this magical quality about her. She could twist the most devastating moments into gold and make a struggle feel like an adventure.

When I was younger, I never knew we were poor. I thought we were normal. I thought we were happy.

It wasn't until I got older that I realized how much mom suffered. And it wasn't until recently that I recognized how hard it must have been to smile and pretend we were happy through that kind of pain.

“Mom,” I grab one of my fluffy cushions and pick at the threading, “I need your advice.”

“Give me a second. Let me put this soup to boil.” In the background, there's the click of a stove.

My mother is a traveling Good Samaritan.

That's not her official title, but I don't know what else to call it. She travels small towns and forgotten cities, volunteering and giving back to the community. I rarely get to see her, but I also know that she's doing what she loves.

“Alright, sweetie. Tell me what's bothering you.”

“Remember I told you we'd been having trouble getting funding for the co-op?”

“Mm-hm.”

I turn on my stomach and dig my chin into the cushion. “We got an offer today.”

“That's great—”

“From someone I'd prefer not to work with.”

“Okay...” She sounds hesitant, “why don't you want to work with this person?”

“He's... in it for the wrong reasons.”

“Is he a drug dealer? The mafia? Do they want to wash the money so it looks legal?”

“What? No!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, mom. I’m sure.” The only thing ‘mafia’ about Cody is how ruthless he is in business.

“Clarissa, you’ve got to be careful.” Mom makes a disgruntled sound. “You’re too trusting. That’s why that bastard in college walked all over you.”

“Mom,” I groan.

“You gave that boy three years of your life. Three years! You were willing to do anything for him. Everything out of your mouth was ‘Cody-this’ and ‘Cody-that’. And look what happened? He left you high and dry without another word. The jerk.”

I cringe. “Mom, please. That’s in the past.”

“I’m only saying that to remind you. All that glitters isn’t gold. Don’t trade your dignity for a couple hundred dollars.”

“It wouldn’t be a couple hundred.”

“A few thousand then,” she says flippantly.

I tell her the number Cody’s offering.

There’s shocked silence on the other end of the line.

“Mom?” I croak. “Are you still there?”

“Take the money.”

“What?”

“Take. The. Money.”

“What about not selling my soul for a donation?”

“Honey, do you know how much good you could do with that kind of cash? Think about all the women you could help. All the families that could benefit.”

“Really, mom?”

“Sometimes, saving the world requires working with the broken system.”

“All of a sudden?” I laugh.

“The rules are there to protect them, not us. It’s okay if we break them for the right reasons.”

“I just love your sudden change of heart, mom.”

I’m laughing but, inside, I cringe. Mom’s reaction reminds me of just how scary money is. And just how easy it is to lose yourself and become another person when presented with it.

“Be serious. I don’t want to make the wrong choice,” I mumble.

“If you’re making the world a better place along the way, it’s worth it.”

“What if it’s not, mom?” I picture Cody in my mind.

The cut of his chin.

The thick dark-blond hair.

The cheekbones, the eyebrows, the five o’clock shadow that hints there’s a rogue hidden under all his sculpted muscle and custom Italian suit.

I clench the phone tighter. “What if I’m playing with the kind of fire that leaves scars when it burns?”

I picture his green eyes.

Hands down, Cody Bolton’s eyes are my Kryptonite.

Ocean-green. Turquoise. Rippling with a lashing, untamed energy. As if he’s a force of nature. A walking storm. The Bermuda Triangle. A place where women drown and never find their feet again.

“Is it still worth it?”

“Clarissa, that’s a question only you can answer.” Mom pauses. “You’re the one who decides what you’re willing to sacrifice to save the world.”

“That’s not helpful.”

Mom chuckles. “The ends don’t always justify the means. Let your heart take the lead on this one.”

My heart has a mind of its own. I can’t trust that either.

At that moment, there’s a knock on my door.

Curiously, I lift my head.

“Someone’s here.” I push off the couch and lumber to the front door.

“Who is it?” mom asks.

I peer through the peephole. An unfamiliar face looks back at me. “I have no idea. I’ll call you back.”

“Keep me updated on the sponsor issue.”

“I will.” I hang up and open the door.

The woman on the other end is tall and sharp-looking. Her face is all cheekbones with watery blue eyes and a thin stretch of pink lips.

“Can I help you?”

She tsks at me. “Help me?” There’s a hint of an accent in her words. “You are *clearly* the one who needs my help.”

“Excuse me?” I have no idea who this stranger is or why she’s coming at me with so much attitude.

The woman looks me over sharply, head to toe. Her scowl deepens as if she can see every shortcoming in a single glance.

“Shoes,” she mutters, “you need more than just shoes.”

My annoyance at everything that happened today bubbles over and spews out on her.

“Look, lady, I don’t know what you’re selling, but you should probably work on your sales pitch. It’s severely lacking in the customer service department.” My eyebrows slant together. “Have a nice day.”

“Ah-ah.” She stops the door with a hand.

I glare at her. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Come with me,” she says like a stern ballet teacher about to show me how to perfect a *grand plie*.

I frown.

She stops, turns and beckons with a finger. “Come.”

I let out a disbelieving laugh.

Her eyes meet mine again and they narrow when I don't move.

“Mr. Bolton said you would give trouble,” she mumbles.

“Bolton?”

She gives me a look one would give a stinky dead fish. Lifting her phone, she dials a number. “Bring the girl up.”

“Which girl?” I choke. “Who the heck are you, lady?”

Seconds later, I hear an *eep!*

I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

“Laura?” I stumble back when the intern veers into my line of sight. “What are you doing here?”

“Clarissa, you *have* to see this.” Laura grabs my hand and drags me down the stairs of my apartment. It's three flights. And she's moving at lightning speed.

The arrogant woman takes her time, hands folded primly in front of her as she alights the staircase like a queen.

“Laura, what's going on?” I demand.

“You'll see!” Laura yanks me outside and gestures dramatically. “Tada!”

I stare at the U-Haul trailer. It looks like a regular cargo truck. “Are you interested in being a trucker now?”

The stern lady joins us outside. Without a glance at me, she motions to a man. “Open it.”

Metal creaks.

Joints snap.

The door yawns wide and my jaw hits the grass.

There's a shoe store hidden in that trailer. Dazzling shoes of every style and color line shelves that go back so far, it seems endless.

"Come."

This time, when the scary lady beckons me, I follow like a cartoon cat floating in the air.

Laura is right on my heels.

Our feet plunk up the stairs of the trailer but, when inside, a thick carpet swallows every sound. LED lights illuminate the rows of designer shoes. White benches set further back invite us to recline. The air smells sweet with not even a hint of car exhaust to shatter the illusion. It feels like we're in a fancy department store instead of a trailer.

Jazz music plays lightly. There's a side table with cheese platters, fruits and wine.

Everywhere I look dazzles the eyes.

"What's... going on? Why are you here, Laura?"

"Mr. Bolton's secretary told me to show up at your apartment and get in this truck."

"You got in a strange truck just because someone told you to?"

Laura scoffs. "Of course not. I got into the truck *after* I met Mimi Roach."

"Who's Mimi Roach?"

Laura looks scandalized. "You don't know *People's Magazine* stylist of the century?" She gestures to the other woman. "Mimi's a *legend*. She's dressed celebrities, three generations of First Ladies and actual royalty. She's got millions of followers online."

Mimi's chin tilts up a fraction, gloating in Laura's praise.

I blink rapidly. "What is a big shot like that doing *here*?"

"I was told you need shoes." Mimi's voice is dry.

My stare is blank.

Clearly tired of my cluelessness, Mimi gestures. “This way.”

As if they’ve practiced this dance a million times, servers step out of the shadows.

I startle. “Where did they come from?”

Mimi doesn’t answer.

“Would you like a drink?” Someone offers a glass of champagne.

“Um...”

“Try this cheese stick.” Laura shoves something at me.

“I...”

A second worker kneels with a towel. When she starts peeling off my sneakers, I pull back. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a massage before your shopping session,” she says, eyeing me like *I’m* the one with the problem.

My heart pounding, I shoot to my feet.

Breathing is suddenly difficult and my chest expands with every ragged intake of air.

Laura rises too. She touches my shoulder gently. “Are you okay?”

No, I’m not okay! This is too lavish! Too extravagant. “Too much.”

“Huh?” Laura dips her head in further to hear me.

“This is too much.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “I’m sorry for wasting your time, Miss Roach. But I can’t accept this.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

I freeze.

She glides over to me. “I’ve been in this business for a long, *long* time and you know what I’ve learned? What makes a woman cheap isn’t her clothes. It’s her attitude.”

My eyebrows tighten.

“These shoes are worth thousands. Some are limited edition. Women would kill for a chance like this. I could dress you in the finest. I could give you a whole new wardrobe. I could change your makeup and your hair. And you would still look as shabby as you do now.” She taps her temple. “Because class comes from here.” Her hand tugs at my sleeve. “Not here.”

My heart burns. It feels like she’s peeling away at my wounds, exposing my fragile heart. My deep-set scars.

You’re never going to be good enough. You’ll never fit in, no matter how much money you get.

I lash out with heat. “You don’t know me.”

“I know your type.” Mimi Roach steps toe-to-toe with me. “You want to storm out of here in a fit of righteous indignation. You want to tell yourself you don’t need it. Or that you’re not this shallow. Or you’re not the type of person who likes nice things.”

“I’m leaving,” I grind out.

“There’s the door. I won’t stop you.”

Laura grabs my hand before I can stomp away. “Clarissa, wait.”

“For what?” My voice is thick with annoyance. “I’ve had a long day, Laura. I don’t need this.”

“When will we have an opportunity like this again? At least look at the shoes,” Laura begs.

“Go ahead and look.”

“You’re the reason they’re here. If you leave, when will I have another chance to touch a designer Lleore again?”

“You’ve got five minutes,” I grind out.

I grab a glass of champagne and down it while Laura flocks to the shoes.

Mimi Roach approaches.

I stiffen when I feel her come up beside me.

She stares straight ahead, her voice dry. “You’re offended.”

“You called me cheap!”

“To clarify, I called you shabby. You’re the one calling yourself cheap by assuming my definition of ‘cheap’ describes you.”

I bristle. “So what? If I think I’m cheap and shabby or if I really *am* cheap and shabby, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Why do you think I’m here, Miss Maura?”

I turn to face her. “Because Cody paid you... probably an insane amount of money.”

“He did.” I scowl until she adds, “But I’ve got lots of money. Money alone won’t move me.” She folds her arms over her chest. “I came because I know what you do for a living, Miss Maura.”

I turn to her. “What do I do?”

“You convince women who’ve lost their sense of value and self-worth to start again. You teach them they can be better. They can be more than their circumstances. You pour into them, but who pours into you?”

My stomach clenches. I glance down.

“Whatever shoes you do not choose will be donated to your foundation. You can sell them. Give them away. Do as you please.”

I don’t want to be swayed, but the thought of other women benefitting from today’s grand display is tempting.

“This is an opportunity from me to you.” Mimi meets my eyes. It’s still cold, but there’s a hint of a thaw. “Let me, let *us*,” she gestures to the servers and staff, “do this for you.”

“Do what? Give me shoes?”

“It’s not just shoes.” Her lips quirk up. “Let us show you how to change up here.” She taps my temple. “Not just out here.” Her chin lifts a fragment. “So that way you can teach other women to do the same.”

“So this is charity?”

“This, Miss Maura,” Mimi Roach takes my hand and leads me to a bench where the worker takes off my shoes again, “is saving the world.”

ICE CREAM TOSS

CODY

BACK AT MY OFFICE, I loosen my tie and run my fingers through my hair, sinking into my custom-leather chair with the extra back support.

Turns out, working like a horse from my youth comes with health problems. Maybe I shouldn't have gone so hard at the gym yesterday.

My landline rings.

“What?” I bark.

“Mr. Bolton, it's the police. It seems they're looking for Mr. Winifred. He wasn't at his home last night when they got the warrant to arrest him.”

“Tell them I'll call back later.”

“Yes, sir.”

I drop the phone back into the cradle.

The to-do list in my head gets longer.

Follow-up with the police about Winifred.

Get back to my regular gym routine.

Set a meeting with my law team.

Rip Vargas a new one for going out and finding me a son.

Foster son.

Whatever.

My assistant has, wisely, not returned to the office yet. Probably because he knows there will be consequences. Or maybe our young sacrificial lamb changed its mind before we could lead it to the altar of public opinion.

Still restless, I get up and pour myself a finger of whiskey. Swirling the liquid, I gaze out the window.

The view is to die for.

It's why I bought the building.

My penthouse is upstairs, occupying the highest floor and almost touching heaven. This corner office is a breath away from the clouds.

I'm as close to ruling the world as I can get.

Don't be controlled, Cody. Always be the one in control.
My mother's voice whispers in my ear.

I wonder if she'd have been proud.

I wonder if this is the life she imagined for me when she drilled those words into my head.

All the money in the world... and no one to share it with.

My door swings open and Vargas barges in with his hands up like a criminal at a drug bust. I set my empty glass on the desk, turning slowly.

"Have a seat." I gesture to the chair.

"I'll stay out of throwing distance." Vargas indicates the doorway where he's hunkering away from me.

"Are you unhappy with your job here, Vargas?" I lean against the edge of my desk and cross my ankles. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"My instructions were to find a solution by the end of the day."

"I hear Belle's Beauty is opening a branch in Europe. They could use a new manager."

"If you'd get over yourself for five minutes—"

"Get over myself?" My eyebrows arch.

A heavy sigh falls out of him. "You know what I meant."

"I know you brought a bag of hormones in a wheelchair to the foundation and told me I was a dad."

"He's a kid with a health condition and you're the one who gets to save him. You're welcome."

“What does he need saving from? He’s Romeo with a pacemaker. Let love conquer all.”

“*This* is how we change the narrative.”

“Are you insane?” I snap, my brows tightening. “I barely have time to *eat* every day. I don’t have time for a kid.”

“Foster kid.”

“Same freaking difference.”

“Besides he’s sixteen, not six. There’s a lot less micro-managing. A lot less confusion. He doesn’t expect anything from you. He knows what the deal is.”

“Oh? So you negotiated with a teenager and think things will go according to plan? Damn, Vargas.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “We’re not that desperate that we need to hire sick kids from hospitals.”

“It’s a mutually beneficial exchange. The kid’s mom died and his dad is in the wind. He needs money for a mounting pile of medical expenses. You need armor from the bad press.” Vargas lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug. “He gets a heart. And so do you. Everyone loves *Annie*.”

“And I’m supposed to be Daddy Warbucks?” I tug at the hair on my scalp. “Are you trying to make me bald before my time?”

“Mr. Clean is bald and he’s a hit with the ladies.”

I shoot him a dirty look.

“It’s a good plan. You need Joel for the press and...” he eyes me carefully, “it won’t hurt your chances with Clarissa.”

“Careful,” I growl.

“This morning, when you said you’d do anything to have her, did you mean it?”

I glower. Vargas is damn good at his job and he knows me too well. A deadly combination when his powers for evil are turned on me.

“I saw the way you looked at her today. In all the years we’ve worked together, I’ve never seen you go soft for a woman. Not like you did with one glance from her.”

“I’ll get Clarissa back on my own,” I insist.

“Good luck with that.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Vargas rolls his eyes. “Come on, Bolton. Don’t let me spell it out for you.”

I fold my arms over my chest, daring him to go ahead.

“She’s sweet, kind, and dedicates her life to helping the disenfranchised. On the other hand, you—” he gestures to me, “are demanding, condescending, and you only care about the bottom line. You work twenty-hours and sleep four. You get two hundred emails a day and you have no time to read them because the minute you stop, you’ll get two hundred more. Holidays? Work hours? You don’t care what time it is or what day it is. If work needs to be done, you’re hauling people out of bed, away from birthday parties and anniversaries. With all you demand, you don’t even know half your employees’ names.”

“In fairness, I have too many employees,” I grunt.

“You offer a salary that’s above and beyond anywhere else, but it’s only to compensate for the torture, not to raise the minimum wage or make the world a better place.”

What a glowing review of me. *Cody Bolton. One star. Too heartless. Would not recommend.*

Vargas stops his ruthless assessment and eases back. “Look, I’m on your side. Always have been. Always will be. You’ve trusted me with bigger decisions than this because you know I’m right.”

“You’re delusional.”

“I play chess. I look ahead. I’ve seen where this can go. Take the kid, Cody. I’m giving you two moves in one. Again, you’re welcome.”

“Fine. But you’re dealing with the kid.”

He shrugs. “Of course. The car’s waiting downstairs.”

“Car? What car?”

“We’re going to the hospital to pick up Joel and bring him here.” Vargas pauses. “He’s moving in with you.”



I HATE HOSPITALS.

The smells. The sounds. The desperation.

The lack of control.

Money can buy almost anything, but it can’t buy health. It can’t buy immortality.

It can’t buy my mother’s life back.

It makes me feel off-balance.

Anywhere I go, I own the space.

But here? Too many people walk through these doors and don’t walk back out.

“You coming?” Vargas asks.

“In a second.”

He glances across the roof of the town car and nods at the paparazzi. The tabloid reporter Vargas called is hiding out across the street.

I have no idea why he’s snooping like a thief when he has permission to film this. It could be habit. Or he’s trying to preserve the ‘authenticity’ of the shoot. Can’t convince people our genuine private moment has been invaded if the pics look too professional.

“I’ll go find his doctor. Make sure I haven’t forgotten any last minute instructions. Come in when you’re ready,” Vargas says.

I nod curtly.

Once I'm alone, I suck in a deep breath and call Mimi.

She answers without preamble. "Yes?"

"Did you convince her?"

"Who do you think I am?" Her accent thickens. She's smug.

I lean back in my chair, smiling. "Did she put up a fuss?"

"She did."

"I told you."

"I was prepared, but... she is stubborn. She only accepted the gift when I agreed to donate shoes to the women's shelter."

"She's passionate. Especially when it comes to the things she believes in."

Her voice holds a hint of amusement. "You thought I would fail."

"There was a fifty-fifty chance."

Mimi goes quiet. "Cody, do you know why I'm so good at my job?"

Because you're as cut-throat in your fashion world as I am in the business world?

My inclination is to fill in the blanks, but I wait for her to tell me. People think I know all the answers, but the truth is that I listen more than I speak. When I *do* speak, it's because I've learned from someone more knowledgeable than me.

"When a client comes to me, they're not just asking for clothes. They're asking me to look into their hearts, their souls, to pry up their insecurities and hide them or flaunt them or make them believe it's a strength. They're asking me to change their minds. Do you know that changing a mind is the hardest thing in the world?"

"And yet I do it every day. *Every day*. I convince someone to love the parts of their body that they hated. I convince them to love themselves. To love the world. To change the world. Or steal from it. Sometimes, I help them lie, fool everyone. To

step out into the spotlight or sink into the background. Do you think it's just clothes? Shoes? A new outfit?"

I chuckle. "You sound like a woman on fire."

"That better be a compliment."

"It is."

"Good. I like your girl, Cody. She's a blank canvas. Pretty. Humble. Obedient. She listened to everything I said."

"She tends to do that when she's uncomfortable." I grin at the memory of our heated fight earlier. "When she trusts you, the claws come out."

"You like the claws?"

Warmth spreads in my chest. "I love the claws."

"You love her." Mimi's not asking. "Why stop at shoes?"

I glance through the window at the hospital. An ambulance screams into view, lights flashing. Doctors rush out. Nurses. A crying family member. An awful reminder that life is fragile.

"She's not ready yet. For all of it. I'm taking it slow."

"They say if you buy someone shoes, they'll walk away from you."

I frown. "Then I'll walk right behind her."

Mimi laughs. It's rare to hear that. "If you call anyone else to style her, I will take it personally."

"Noted."

I hang up, smiling at the thought of Clarissa with all her new shoes. Mimi is amazing at what she does, which is why I trust her to style me for the many stuffy networking parties I attend.

The fact that Mimi convinced Clarissa to accept a gift from me is fantastic. I make a mental reminder to add a generous tip to Mimi's sky-high fees.

Every cent is worth it.

I leave the comfort of my town car and enter the hospital.

The reporter is behind me, stalking my every move.

Doberman and his team are out of sight. I informed them of our new guests and instructed them to stay incognito.

Vargas and the doctor greet me when I stop in front of Joel's hospital room. The kid is already waiting in the hallway. He's sitting in the wheelchair, looking pale. He'd seemed bigger when we first met. I guess it was all attitude.

The doctor shakes my hand. "We're assigning a home nurse to his care. Joel needs to avoid too much external stimulation. No scary movies. No excessive exercise. No jump scares. His heart is holding on for now, but he can't push it beyond its limits."

"I understand," I say soberly.

This kid is more vulnerable than a gold fish. Did Vargas think this through? What if the boy turns belly-up on my watch? What kind of press will we have then?

"When it comes to the heart transplant surgery, we're hopeful. Joel's name is on the list and I informed your assistant that—"

My phone buzzes.

It's the head of my law team.

I lift a hand. "If you informed my assistant, then consider me clued in. Excuse me."

I walk away to answer the call.

When I return, the doctor is gone. Vargas is waiting with Joel. The kid is scowling at me.

"Here." Vargas motions to me. "You push him outside. I'll have the reporters film you getting him into the car."

I grab Joel's wheelchair and we take off through the hallways.

Women turn and stare when I stalk past. Their eyes drip from me to Joel and then back to me with a soft expression.

I take note of it.

Maybe Vargas was right.

Maybe Joel is my secret weapon to breaking down the walls around Ris's heart.

"Is that a thing?" Joel grunts.

"What?" I stop the wheelchair so an older couple can waddle past.

The grandma wiggles her fingers at Joel.

Joel smiles at her but, the moment she's gone, he goes back to scowling at me. "You walked off in the middle of a conversation."

"I had a call."

"It's like 'rude' is your default setting."

I stare down at the little gremlin. "I'll remember my manners when you remember who signs your checks."

Joel purses his lips like he's just bitten into an expired lemon.

Vargas chuckles nervously. "Why don't we get some ice cream? Joel, I asked your doctor. He said you could have a little."

"No wonder Clarissa doesn't like you. You're a jerk-hole in a suit," Joel mumbles.

We're outside now and, I admit, I want to push his wheelchair down the ramp a little faster than necessary.

"Is that a no on the ice cream then?" Vargas asks, his voice high-pitched.

Doberman and his team shadow us to the car.

Joel notices the security guys and his eyes widen. "Are they with you?"

"Yeah." I glance coldly at him. "They hide the bodies."

The kid gulps and says nothing after that.

Vargas helps Joel into the car. The kid is self-sufficient though. He uses the wheelchair to stand on his own and walks

carefully, holding his machine above his head.

Listening to him wheezing once he's seated makes a piece of my heart thaw. Joel was right. I am a jerk-hole. Guilty as charged. But I'm not Satan in a suit. I don't relish the sight of a kid in pain—even if that kid is annoying as hell and has heart-eyes for my woman.

Vargas tries to keep the conversation up. He's telling the kid all about his new home and his new room.

The fact that Joel already has medical equipment moved in is news to me. But it makes sense. That's probably what Vargas was doing before he came to my office.

“Sound good?” Vargas asks when the kid doesn't respond.

Joel nods tightly.

I take out my tablet. “Vargas, I don't think we have enough pictures. How about we take a few at that ice cream shop you mentioned?”

Joel's eyes shine with excitement and he quickly ducks his head. The kid is more innocent than his sarcastic bite would have you believe. I wonder what convinced him to say yes to this mess?

We stop at the ice cream shop and I get out first. Vargas is helping Joel and Doberman is parking the car.

I turn in a slow circle, buttoning my suit.

Out of nowhere, I hear someone shriek my name.

“Bolton! I hope you burn in hell!”

A moment later, a cup of ice cream lands against the side of my face. I stiffen in shock as the cold stings my cheek before sliding down to my shirt collar.

“Get down! Get down!” Doberman appears out of nowhere and throws himself over me while the rest of his team surround the assailant.

I peer through the man's bulk, seeing an angry woman in a pink shirt flinging herself against a wall of bodyguards.

“Get off,” I growl, shoving at Doberman.

The bull of a man climbs off me and I pounce to my feet, glaring across the parking lot.

“I advise you to get in the car,” Doberman says in a low voice.

Ignoring him, I take out my handkerchief, fix my expression into a blank stare and wipe the ice cream off my face.

“You don’t deserve to walk free after what you did!” the woman shrieks.

Doberman remains slightly in front of me, an arm extended as if to keep me from walking forward.

I stare at the woman, not recognizing her. “Who are you?”

She freezes. Pink rises in her cheeks and her eyes dart back and forth. “You... you don’t even know who I am?”

I lift a brow, waiting.

Vargas winds the window down. “You okay, boss?”

Rather than answer, I take a step toward the woman.

Doberman stops me with a cold look.

I shove his hand down pointedly and approach my attacker. The security team steps apart so I can walk through.

Coldly, I assess her. She’s wearing a T-shirt with a logo of the ice cream shop. Her hair is in a net and her shoes have splotches of ice cream all over them.

“I was the HR director at Regitech. You walked in one day and ruined my life on a freaking whim.” Her finger pokes close to my nose. “You’re a bastard, Cody Bolton. And all the noise they’re making online isn’t half the story.”

A door opens and slams shut. Vargas joins me on the sidewalk. He hands me a fresh handkerchief.

I accept it and wipe my collar, one corner of my lips curling up.

The woman’s eyes widen. “Are you laughing?”

“HR director, huh?” I draw the cloth down my neck. “How under-qualified were you that you moved from being an HR director to an ice cream scooper?”

Her cheeks turn a mottled red.

I flick her a dark look. “Regitech was raging with corruption and sexual harassment cases. Whoever their HR director was, she conveniently turned a blind eye to the many complaints filed by female workers.”

The ice cream assaulter glances away.

“Given you’re here instead of in another corporate office convincing women that no one will listen or believe them even if they’ve been assaulted, it probably means that you weren’t qualified for that position in the first place.”

Her mouth parts and her eyelashes flutter rapidly.

“It means,” I lean in to whisper in her ear, “that not only are you a sad excuse of a human being, you were also a fraud. One who only got the job for your ability to look the other way when the higher ups stuck their hands in places it didn’t belong.”

She trembles. Eyes stained with hatred find mine. “You sure are cocky with your bodyguards and your money. But there will come a day when you won’t be so arrogant. And on that day, we’ll see who’s laughing.”

The woman whirls around and stomps down the street.

Vargas moves as if he’ll follow her.

I shake my head.

He grits his teeth, but nods and returns to the car to get the wheelchair for Joel.

“Are we still eating ice cream here?” Joel asks, wheeling toward me. “After all that?”

I glance back at him. “You don’t want to?”

“What if it’s poisoned?” He shudders.

“Only one way to find out.” I lead the charge into the ice cream shop and calmly order for myself, Joel, Vargas, my driver and the team.

I don't bat an eyelash when I take a bite and I calmly return to the car, studying my tablet while I finish the cone.

“Is he always like this?” Joel whispers loudly to Vargas.

“Yeah.”

“He can work even after someone threatened him?”

“Yup.”

I pretend not to have heard and focus on the contract.

Being the head of an M&A firm means I make the hard decisions. I'm the face of severed connections, rejections, and change.

I'm not going to win any popularity contests.

As long as my family still believes in me, as long as Regan and Abe are safe, I really don't give a damn what people think.

The ride back to my building is quiet.

Vargas takes Joel through the private elevator that leads to my penthouse.

Not long after, he returns downstairs.

I see him watching me expectantly, as if he's waiting for me to bring up the topic of the ice cream incident. Or ask about how Joel is settling in.

It's like he doesn't even know me.

“Did you prepare the files for the law team? I have a meeting at five.” I walk purposefully past him, rolling up my sleeves.

“On it,” Vargas mumbles.

I lose myself in work for the next few hours. It's not until my belly growls that I come up for air.

Vargas knocks on the door and walks in with a greasy paper bag that smells amazing.

“Yes, I fed the kid. Three hours earlier than you because he’s not a machine like his foster dad.” My assistant plunks the food on my desk. “The pictures we took have been published. We’re boosting it in all the headlines. Your name is trending again, but for a good reason.”

“I didn’t doubt you for a second.” I rip the paper covering the burger and dig into it, using my free hand to scroll through my computer.

Vargas stares at me.

I pretend not to notice.

He sighs pointedly.

I ignore that too.

“Are you really going to do this?” he asks.

“Do what?” I shove the rest of the burger into my mouth, dust my hands on my slacks and continue typing.

“The three of us know he’s a publicity stunt, but he’s still a human being. Shouldn’t you,” he waves in the general direction of the penthouse, “get to know him?”

I snort. “You think he wants to get to know me?”

“He definitely won’t if you act like you’re not interested.”

“He’s annoying.”

“Because he has a crush on Clarissa? If anything, that just proves that you two have more in common than you think.”

My fingers freeze on the keyboard and I send a frosty glance Vargas’s way.

“Whatever. Just remember you’re supposed to be a harmonious father and foster son. People want a smiling Orphan Annie with housekeepers who burst into song, not one who looks like he’s still being held hostage by Miss Hannigan.”

I notice Vargas grabbing his book bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

Alarm rises in me. “Where are you going?”

“Home.” His tone has a distinct *duh* hidden in it.

“You’re taking the kid with you, right?”

Vargas scowls at me. “No, Bolton. The kid is staying in your house which is why all the journalists are praising you online and our stocks are stable again.”

“Vargas, the kid is your responsibility. I told you to deal with him.”

“And I will. During work hours. I’m off now.”

“Vargas!”

“Have fun bonding.” He tosses me a backward wave and traipses through the door.

I throw my pen down and rake both hands through my hair.

Great.

Yesterday, I was an ordinary man running an empire. Today, I’ve got a back-talking teenager with a bad heart who can’t get angry or scared waiting in my penthouse.

Since I’m the type to tackle the hardest problems first so I can relax later, I force myself to go upstairs.

Thankfully, the living room is empty.

I have no idea what my new houseguest is doing, but I sink into the peace and quiet like a man soaking in a hot tub.

A pile of letters on the table catches my eye. I asked Vargas to collect my mail. I regularly get hate mail, so I tend to let it gather for a few weeks before I tackle everything.

Pouring myself a glass of brandy, I sit and open the letters.

Charity Invitation.

New York Fashion Week Invitation.

Hate mail.

Career Day invitation.

Die, pig.

I snort. How unoriginal.

I'm almost done with sorting when I see a red envelope. I notice a familiar handwriting. When I open the letter, a card slips out. It's a drawing of a teddy bear with a knife stuck through its head. Underneath, someone wrote 'you will pay' in all caps.

Cute.

My door bell rings.

I let the letter drift to my table and take the brandy with me to open the door. There are only a handful of people who have the access code to my elevator. Plus Clay has his security team monitoring the hallway feeds twenty-four-seven.

I smirk when I see my brother glaring at me outside the front door.

This will be fun.

Clay marches into the room, ever the soldier with his straight back, tense shoulders and rigid lips. As a kid, I worshipped my brother. There was nothing cooler to me than being a soldier. But when I told mom about my dream of joining the military, she cried her eyes out and made me promise that I wouldn't.

You can't join something that controls you, Cody. You've got to be the one in control.

I shake my head to clear the memories. "Did you call?" I turn and patter back to the kitchen to pour my brother a drink. "I didn't get the message. Then again, I haven't been on my phone."

"What the hell is going on with you?" Clay asks.

I pour another glass of brandy. "You have to be more specific. There's a list."

"I got a progress update from Doberman today. Apparently, you've been giving your security team the slip."

"Oh that," I say, taking a sip.

"You got accosted today—"

“Accosted? That’s a stretch.”

My brother’s eyes are as startling and vivid as mine, except they’re blue instead of green. And right now, they burn with annoyance.

“And,” Clay grits out, “I had to hear that you’d taken in a foster kid from the news.” He accepts the drink from me. “Why did I learn something as huge as that from social media, Cody?”

“It’s a temporary arrangement. Don’t worry about it.”

“Where is the kid?” Clay glances around.

“Holed up in his room, plotting my demise probably.”

“You should bring him over. Introduce him. Island wants to throw him a party.”

“No need.”

“Why not?”

“Like I said, it’s temporary.”

“Having a child is a responsibility—”

“I know about responsibility, Clay. You don’t have to lecture me.”

Damn. I love my brother, but this overbearing father routine he’s gotten into lately rakes on my nerves.

Clay scowls. “I think it’s best if I leave now.”

“Probably.”

He makes his way to the door. On the way there, his eyes land on the letters. He notices the red one. Immediately, he stops. “The stalker came back?”

“I’d like to think of him as more of a morbid admirer.”

Clay grabs the letter and opens it. His face tightens. “The threats have gotten worse.”

“If an ugly drawing is all they have to offer, I don’t have anything to—”

“Dammit, Cody! Why don’t you take this seriously? People already see you as a target because of your wealth. Now with all this hate online... You need to be careful.”

“I am.”

“Running from Doberman. Not immediately reporting *this*.” He flails the letter. “Don’t make it difficult for me or the details assigned to you. I want to keep you alive. You’re my brother.”

“Alright. I got it.” I roll my eyes. “Being with Island made you fussy. You’re worse than mom.”

His eyes fall to the ground.

I note his sagging shoulders and wipe the smile off my face. “I’ll be careful.”

“And bring your kid around so we can meet him. I don’t care how temporary it is. He’s family now.”

“I will.”

Clay marches out as sternly as he’d arrived.

I sink into the sofa, fighting back a weight in my chest. Seeing my brother always makes me feel off-balance. Like I’m that scrawny kid reeling from our parent’s divorce, screaming for him not to leave me.

My phone rings in the silence.

I answer with my eyes closed. Exhaustion steams in my voice. “Hello?”

“Mr. Bolton.”

I zip to attention. “Ms. Phoebe.”

“My apologies for calling this late.”

“Don’t apologize. You can call me anytime.”

“I spoke to Clarissa...”

I hold my breath.

“... And she’s agreed to accept your sponsorship.”

All the exhaustion disappears and I pump my fist, grinning.

“But,” Ms. Phoebe adds, “we have a condition.”

“Anything.”

“You must get Erica back. Preferably without using bribery.”

I freeze.

“On top of that, we want you to come in once a week and work with our ladies. Teach them business skills. Help them to think like the CEO of a major company. You said you wanted to roll up your sleeves and help. This is your chance to show it.”

“Was this your idea or Clarissa’s?” I ask.

“What does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“Clarissa just wanted the investment.”

It’s exactly what I expected, but I can’t ignore the disappointment that detonates like a bomb in my chest.

“But,” Ms. Phoebe continues, “I think there’s more to you than your suits and your swagger, Mr. Bolton. I want to give you a chance to show it. Do you accept those terms?”

I switch the phone to my other ear. “You know I’ll say yes. I haven’t hidden my intentions.”

“Then you have two days to fix what you broke.”

“Done.”

“And Mr. Bolton?”

“Yes?”

“If you hurt Clarissa again, there is no security team on earth that can stop me.”

I chuckle, glad that Ris has so many good people around her. “Don’t worry, Ms. Phoebe. I’m not the same man I was in college. I will never hurt Clarissa again.”

SEXY TACOS

CLARISSA

CODY and I are sitting side-by-side and I'm trying not to hyperventilate. Or drool. Or stare at him for longer than two seconds.

He's in a button-down shirt and slacks. His jacket drapes over broad shoulders. The navy of his shirt contrasts his deep green eyes.

I'm awkward and alert.

Very alert.

Especially when his powerful arms ripple as he takes his time flipping through a document.

We're heading to Erica's house. Together.

Ms. Phoebe's orders.

When my director told me to accompany Cody, I fought her tooth and nail.

'Let him handle it himself.' I grumbled.

'Do you really want to set him loose on one of our girls without supervision? What if he makes it worse?'

She made a good point.

So here we are.

Me and my ex-fiance, in the backseat of his fancy car, the tinted windows wound down so I can breathe in the crispy air from outside while trying not to drown in his wonderfully minty cologne.

"Are you cold?" Cody asks.

"I'm fine."

"Ris."

"What?"

"Can you say that again? To my face?"

I point my gaze on his nose. Another part of him that's perfectly chiseled and hatefully gorgeous. "I'm. Fine."

Unfortunately, a cold wind rips through the window and I tremble like a dog shaking off water.

Cody swivels his body toward mine. It causes our thighs to brush. I can feel the heat of his skin through the fabric of the trousers. He shrugs out of his jacket and drapes it over my shoulders.

It feels like I'm getting a warm, Cody-scented hug.

For a moment...

Just a moment...

My defenses are eviscerated and I allow myself to soak in the comfort of having a piece of him touching my skin.

Then I remember that I'm supposed to be keeping him at *arm's length*, not pretending those figurative arms are around me.

Snap out of it. He's an uptight Count Dracula with the personality of a bull. He'll do anything to get what he wants. You can't make it easy for him.

I stiffen, my fingers moving toward the lapels of the jacket so I can slide it off me.

"Keep it on." His fingers cover mine. They're warm, swallowing my hand whole.

A surge of heat slams into me.

It doesn't matter how innocent Cody's touches are. Once his skin gets anywhere near mine, my body goes wild.

Get a grip, Clarissa. He's your ex, and he left you standing alone in front of Elvis. You will not fall for him again.

I clear my throat and force the jacket off. Shoving it at him, I say, "I'll just roll up the window."

He accepts the jacket, a twinkle in his eye. "You're in a mood today."

"You don't know my moods anymore."

“It’s hard to misinterpret a scowl that dark.”

“Funny.” I roll my eyes.

Apparently, Cody lives for the thrill because he can’t help poking at a bear. “Nice shoes.”

I whip my head up and our eyes lock. Linger.

Is it just me or is it getting hot in here?

“I’m glad you wore them, Ris,” Cody says.

I clear my throat and glance down at the delicate pumps with the transparent sides and 3D butterflies. I want to pretend that I don’t care and fancy shoes don’t make a difference, but I can’t. Just stepping out of my house in these made me feel like a woman on a mission. A woman out to change the world.

“I wore them for Mimi’s sake, not yours. She put in a lot of effort and it would be rude to her and her staff if I didn’t.”

“Of course.”

“I told her to thank *whoever* arranged it.” I stare straight ahead, not giving him the satisfaction of thinking I’m going to fawn over him because he bought me a department store in a truck.

“He doesn’t need thanks,” Cody says.

“What does he need then?”

“You.”

My eyelashes flutter.

Cody’s not wearing a smile to soften the words. His face is earnest, implicitly stern. As if the balance of the world hangs on my response.

Oh.

Oh.

I’d forgotten what it was like to receive the full scope of his attention. All that intensity. That magnetism. It’s tripled now because he’s no longer the scrambling college student working to build a business from the ground up.

He's a powerful man with money, connections, and the ability to get anything he wants with a snap of his fingers.

Right now he wants me.

It's simmering in his green eyes. Oceans of desire flowing in my direction. There were hints of it when we met in the elevator that day, when he touched my cheek, when he apologized, but today... it's heavier.

Or maybe it's just dawning on me that he's serious.

Cody gave his apology and I accepted it. He could have skipped off into the sunset without regrets, sure that he'd closed this miserable chapter of his life.

But he's still here.

He's still saying he wants me.

My stomach quivers.

Focus, Clarissa. I can't be this naive. He was an absolute beast to Erica and, if the tabloids are to be believed, he's atrocious in the boardroom. Like one of those villains from a classic black-and-white film. Mustache-twirling. World-destroying.

It won't be long before he shows that side of himself to me. I can't be all goo-goo eyes and blind affection or I'll miss the signs.

I shake my head and change the topic. "How's fatherhood treating you? You and Joel haven't killed each other yet?"

One corner of his lips tilts up. "It's the early stages."

"You didn't just leave him in his room and ignore him all night, did you?"

He squirms.

"Cody," I swivel to him, "what are you thinking?" Our legs are touching again, but I'm too stirred up to care. "Joel's staying in a stranger's house. Never mind the fact that 'hiring' him in the first place is questionable. You could have at least made him feel at home."

“Trust me. He’s no more interested in getting to know me as I am in getting to know him.”

“If you’ve agreed to take care of him, you should do it properly.”

“I didn’t agree to anything.”

“Whatever the circumstances, you’re his guardian now. You can’t just ignore him.”

“He’s annoying.” Cody scowls.

“Kids are annoying. It’s kind of their thing. And you’re supposed to be the adult.”

His eyes narrow in amusement. “Am I getting scolded, Miss Maura?”

“I…” Heat invades my cheeks. “I mean, you deserve it.”

“The only time you give me what I deserve is when it’s a punishment.”

“Do something right and that might change,” I answer back.

Cody’s eyes turn smoldering.

Crap. That was *not* supposed to come out so flirty.

“I thought gifting the women’s shelter with new shoes would make you a little less prickly.”

“Is that why you did it?” I narrow my eyes at him. “To shut me up so you could weasel your way into the foundation without any arguments?”

“I don’t weasel into anything.”

“No, you just slither on the ground like a snake.”

Cody sets down the folder decisively and slides across the backseat. He leans in, dancing green flames for eyes. Up close, his classically handsome features are glaringly apparent, far too intimidating, and almost otherworldly.

“You compared me to a weasel and a snake,” he whispers. “Any other animals you want to throw in there before I retaliate?”

My heart bangs around my ribs like a patient trying to escape from an asylum. “That depends on your method of revenge.”

Cody takes my whispered words as an invitation. Before I know it, his hands are reaching for my face. I let out a gasp when his skin grazes my cheek and down my chin, lifting my head slightly.

His thumb caresses my jaw and a sizzling spark flashes through the both of us.

Electricity.

I feel it snap through my own body but, from Cody’s darkening gaze, I know he feels it too.

I tell myself to look away, but his dark, delicious eyes hold me fast, demanding my surrender. Our gazes are fused and I can’t untie the knot.

The car stops at that moment.

Through my peripherals, I see Cody’s driver looking curiously at us.

“We’re here,” I croak, breaking the connection. Scooting backward like the car’s on fire, I throw the door open and spring into the cold air, sucking in buckets and buckets of oxygen.

I’m getting way too caught up in him.

Cody Bolton with his designer suits and arrogant voice can render any woman speechless. But when he lays all that thick charm on me, I go temporarily mad.

Stay strong, Clarissa.

But that’s easier said than done.



CODY MOVES out of the car and brushes close to me. I battle the instinct to grab his hand when I lead the way to the front lawn.

Hopefully, once we focus on our mission, all this flirting and tension will go away.

“Interesting design scheme,” Cody mumbles.

I glance at the giant banner on the rusty trailer that reads ‘Beware the Second Coming’. Religious symbols litter the unkept yard and there’s a giant red slash that looks like blood on the trailer’s front door.

“This is... unexpected,” Cody says, buttoning his suit. “Maybe I should have brought Doberman.”

Nerves twist in my stomach.

I wish he’d brought his security team too.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I mumble. “Erica said her parents were religious, but she never mentioned them being dangerous.”

Cody looks unconvinced.

I knock on the door.

A thin woman with a face that looks like a prune that’s been drying in the sun for years opens the door. Her brown eyes slash through me and Bolton.

She grunts. “Are you tax people?”

“No,” I draw out the word nervously.

“Then what do you want?” she snaps.

“We’re here to see Erica.” I give her my brightest smile. “We’re her friends. Business partners, really.”

“Business partners?” The woman arches an eyebrow. She sets her elbow on the door and peers at us again.

“Who is it, honey?” A man’s voice calls out.

“Erica’s business partners.”

“*Who?*” The man booms back.

“A black girl and a guy in a fancy suit.”

I flinch. These two give me the creeps. “Is Erica home?”

“Yeah, she’s inside.” To my surprise, the woman opens the door without a fuss. It creaks, yawning wide. “Come in.”

I take a step forward.

Cody wraps his fingers around me, tugs me backward and steps in first. I trail him closely.

Erica’s mother eyes the way he’s holding my hand. One eyebrow arches. “You two married?”

“No,” I say quickly.

Cody’s face remains impassive.

The woman looks between us and mutters, “Fornication is a sin.”

“O...kay,” I say.

Without another word, she stalks off. A moment later, I hear her banging on a door.

“Erica! Get your lazy butt out of bed and get out here! You got visitors!”

Cody squeezes my hand and I realize he’s still holding on to me.

“You okay?” he whispers.

I nod and slip my hand out of his. I’ve been in more desperate situations than this before. You don’t work with vulnerable women for this long without getting some experience.

“It’s starting to make sense, right?” I whisper as we wait in the living room.

“What is?”

“I feel like I can understand Erica more.”

“So do I.”

“You see it too?”

“Of course I do.” He folds his arms over his chest. “She’s a... how old is she again?”

“Fifty-seven.”

“She’s a fifty-seven year old woman living with her parents. No job. No vision. This isn’t the type of person who should be viable for a kiosk.”

My eyebrows tighten at his harsh assessment. “She’s been through a lot.”

“No, she’s made a lot of bad choices. There’s a difference.”

His callousness makes me want to smack him in the face. “Like I said, you don’t know the full story.”

“I know that you don’t end up here,” he points to the floor, “at fifty-seven by making good decisions.” His eyes meet mine. “And I know you wouldn’t even have met her if she hadn’t ended up in a women’s shelter. Which means, somewhere along the way, she made another stupid decision with someone she had no business making decisions with.”

Angry heat stirs in my gut. “Is it so easy for you to judge others?”

“I’m being objective.”

“You’re being heartless.”

“Fine.” He folds his arms over his chest. “You tell me what you see.”

I lean in close to whisper in his ear so I’m not overheard. “I see a woman who needs a purpose.”

Cody’s expression remains cold.

“Doesn’t it kind of make sense why she likes baking and experimenting with new recipes? I’d need an outlet to vent my stress too if I were living with...” I try to find a polite word and can’t so I finish lamely, “with strict parents.”

He tilts his head and purses his lips as if he’d never thought of that.

The sound of shuffling footsteps grab our attention.

Erica stands in the mouth of a small hallway. She’s wearing an oversized hoodie and baggy jeans. Her hair is scooped into a thin ponytail, making her look older than she is.

“What are you doing here?” She gives Cody suspicious eyes.

He watches her back frankly.

I clear my throat. “Is there somewhere we can talk?” I notice her mother peering at us through the curtains in the hallway and add, “Privately?”

She gestures to the backdoor. It’s just off a small, messy kitchen. There are dirty dishes piled up in the sink and baking racks occupying half of the counter space.

As we move behind Erica, I tap the back of Cody’s hand. “Do *not* speak.”

“Why not?” he whispers. His lips brush my ear and it sends my heart-rate spiking. “I’m the one who’s supposed to bring her back.”

I shake my head tightly.

Given his opinion of Erica’s circumstances, Cody’s going to be harsh. I don’t trust him to fix this. He already tore her down at the foundation. We’re supposed to be getting her back, not hammering the nail in the coffin.

Cody flattens his lips. He obviously disagrees with my instruction, but I don’t care.

The screen door smacks behind us. We step into a small backyard enclosed by a chain-link fence. Sunshine dusts the overgrown grass and draws my eyes to the cheerful dandelions.

“You have a beautiful home,” I start.

Erica scoffs.

“How are you doing?” I speak kindly. “We were all worried about you.”

She says nothing.

My heart pinches, but I keep trying. “I called you yesterday—”

“What is *he* doing here,” she bites out. Her eyes ping-pong to Cody before jumping back to me.

“He’s here because he’s concerned about you too.” I rub her shoulder. “We all are. You’re a very important part of the co-op, Erica. We want you to come back.”

“I will...”

My smile is tinged with relief.

“... if he apologizes.” She points to Cody.

Internally, I groan. Cody would probably eat grass before he uttered the words ‘I’m sorry’ to anyone.

“Erica,” I try to keep the panic out of my voice, “Cody is only one opinion among many. Feel free to ignore him.”

Cody gives me a pointed look.

I pretend not to notice. Grabbing Erica’s hand, I appeal to her. “Ms. Phoebe and I believe in you. Isn’t that enough?”

“No.” She lifts her chin. “I want him to apologize.”

“Apologize for what?” Cody growls.

I withhold a groan.

The Ice King is fully activated.

He stalks forward. “Your ketchup brownies are terrible. That’s not a stab at you as a person. That’s an evaluation of your product.”

“Screw you!”

“Believe it or not, Erica, I’m just trying to help.”

“Well, you’re not,” I hiss.

Cody’s eyes burn into me. “It’s better for a person who cares about her future to tell her the truth. Even if it hurts.” He swings that electric gaze on Erica, fully in control. “You want to run a business? Here’s a hard lesson. Customers are ruder than I am. And they’re the ones who matter. You can cry. You can hate me. Whatever. It doesn’t change that your product stinks.”

Erica's cheeks are red.

"But I believe that you have the talent and the imagination to make this work."

"You do?"

"The problem isn't breaking the rules. If you break something, you have to replace it with something better. There's a skill to experimentation. And you already have the first ingredient. Now you just need the knowledge on how to make it work. I want you to be so good at what you do that people line up in droves to taste what you come up with."

Erica stares thoughtfully at the ground.

I look at Cody with a hint of awe.

He moves in close to Erica. "I can't help you if you're hiding out at home hating me. I need you at the foundation."

"Going back to the foundation won't fix my brownies."

"No, but given your persistence in baking, it's only a matter of time." Cody gestures to me. "Clarissa's told me a bit about what you've been through."

I wince, holding my breath. If Cody rants about Erica making bad decisions again, I really won't hold back.

"It's clear that you're the type who doesn't give up. That's exactly the kind of mentality that'll lead to success. *If* you're pointed in the right direction." He lifts his chin and scrolls through his contacts. "Do you know Chef Baley?"

Erica's eyes widen and she springs forward. "Of course I know Chef Baley."

"Who's Chef Baley?" I ask.

"He started as a food chef and kept experimenting with pastries on the side. Now he makes the best meat-fusion desserts in the world."

I see literal stars popping up where Erica's eyeballs should be.

“He also runs a very successful chain of bakeries along with a thriving social media presence and he’s been signed to a network for his own in-audience cooking show.” Cody rattles off the chef’s accomplishments in a bored tone. “I’ll see if I can set up a one-on-one for you to learn from him.”

“Me?”

Cody squints at his phone. “As you can imagine, his schedule’s booked but—”

Suddenly, Erica pounces on him and gives him a tight squeeze. Cody’s eyes widen in surprise and he looks down at her as if he doesn’t know what to do.

I smile softly in the background. When his gaze meets mine, I can’t find the strength to wipe the smirk away.

“Thank you,” Erica sobs.

“No need to thank me.” Cody awkwardly pries Erica off him. “Just don’t take off again. According to the schedule, you’ve got a meeting at the foundation this afternoon.”

“I’ll be there. I promise.” Erica grins so wide that we get a perfect view of her teeth.

Cody straightens his tie and motions to me. “Ris, do you have anything else to add?”

“Just let me say goodbye.”

“Then I’ll wait for you in the car.” He nods sharply and stalks through the tiny gate at the back of the house. Above the chain-link fence, I see him hotfooting it around the bend.

I turn to Erica. “Glad to have you back.”

“Chef Baley! Is he serious? Can I seriously meet my idol?”

“I think so...” I say hesitantly.

In my heart, I don’t know if I’m giving her false hope. It could just be another tactic from the Ice King, a way to move all the chess pieces on the board so they do exactly what he says.

Erica is over the moon.

And, despite my misgivings, I really hope Cody keeps his promise.



ONCE I GET BACK in the car, I notice Cody on his phone.

“That was Baley.” The redness in his face has cooled and he’s back to being the stoic, in-control Ice King. “I made an appointment for Wednesday afternoon. He’s agreed to fly in and give the lesson at the co-op so the other ladies can attend if they want to. I’ll have Vargas arrange the details.”

I nod, my eyes stuck to his sharply-hewn face.

Cody focuses on his phone.

I continue to stare at him.

He doesn’t look up as he mumbles, “Careful, Ms. Maura. If you keep looking at me like that, I’ll start to think you don’t hate me.”

His tone is dark, bristling with a seductive thread.

Clearing my throat, I stare straight ahead. “You didn’t have to go as far as bringing in a celebrity chef. She was already being swayed.”

“Time is money. I could have closed the deal right then by dangling Baley.”

He sounds so stern, so calculative. “Is that all?”

“Yup.”

“Why can’t you just admit you went the extra mile because you care about her?”

“It’s just business.”

“Is that why you blushed when she hugged you?”

His head rams up. “I did not blush.”

“Right.”

“That was sunburn.”

“Of course.” I laugh.

He tries to glare at me, but it’s diminished by the way his lips turn up into a ghost of a smile.

“You felt good helping someone in need. I saw it. Why can’t you just admit that there’s a heart beating under that cold, cruel robot armor?” I nod to his chest.

“Robot armor?” He smiles fully.

The sun shines a little brighter and I swear it’s like that moment in the movies when the hero shows up for the first time, backlit by light, rainbows and singing birds.

For a second, I wish we were just Clarissa and Cody.

No painful past.

No canceled wedding.

No impossible future.

But we’re not.

I pull back a little. “It’s nice to take a break from ruining lives every now and then. Everyone needs balance.”

Cody shuts off his phone and twists his body so he’s facing me. “You really have a terrible opinion of what I do, don’t you?”

“I don’t think I’ve made that a secret,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “Besides, if what you did was so amazing and helpful, would you need to take in Joel as damage control?”

“That was Vargas’ idea. Not mine.”

“Vargas works for you.”

His eyes narrow. He knows I’m right. “You got a lot mouthier since college. I remember you being more agreeable back then.”

“That’s because I was blindly in love. Everything you did was like gold to me.”

He stares into my eyes but doesn’t say a word.

I tack on. “Things are different now. Obviously.”

He frowns.

The air turns darker.

Bringing up the past shifted something between us and the tension is palpable.

I squirm in my seat. “How much longer until we get back to the co-op? I have a ton of work.”

“We’ll get there soon,” Cody grumbles.

I awkwardly set my fingers in my lap.

Silence fills the car, and my stomach chooses that *exact* moment to gurgle like a whale in mating season.

Cody’s eyes flash to my middle and then back up to my face which is seizing in terror.

“Hungry?” he asks, a teasing note to his voice.

“Nope. Just... practicing my whale calls.” I clear my throat and stare out the window.

Cody chuckles and motions to his driver. “Take us to Julio’s.”

“What are you doing? I have to get back to work.”

“Food first.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I am.”

I sit stiffly against the door.

Cody smirks at me. “By the way, you should find another hobby.” His lips twitch. “Whale calls aren’t your thing.”



I’M surprised when Cody takes me to a food truck. I fully expected him to drag me to a fancy breakfast place that serves five-dollar eggs for fifty bucks just because it’s garnished with mint.

He orders at the window while I grab a table. A few minutes later, he returns with two greasy platters.

I take my first bite into the juicy chicken tacos, not sure what to expect.

But the moment the flavor hits my tongue, I see heaven.

“Oh.” I moan so loudly that the women behind us whip around to look. “*Oooh.*”

“Princess, you’re making me jealous.”

I cut him a sharp look.

He smirks, takes a napkin and wipes the corner of my mouth.

I ease back and wipe my face myself. Then I twist my hand and lick up the side of it, chasing the taco juices that fell on my wrist.

Cody clears his throat and glances away. “You’re the only one who could make eating tacos so erotic, Ris.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Bolton.” I speak with my mouth full. This is not the time to be dainty. The tacos demand my full attention. “How did you know about this place?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I thought gods didn’t leave Mount Olympus to eat like us regular humans.”

He studies me with those crystal green eyes. “You know there’s not that much of a difference between you and me.” His eyes drop to my chest and a dark smirk curves his lips when he meets my eyes again. “Apart from the obvious.”

“Keep your eyes where I can see ‘em, buddy.”

He laughs.

“And don’t pretend like your world and mine are the same. We might as well exist in two separate *universes.*” I set my taco down so I can face him squarely. “You have celebrities like Chef Baley on speed dial. You have a dedicated driver and

a *really* fancy car. You probably sleep in a giant bed with Egyptian cotton sheets and a massage function.”

“You are more than welcome to have a massage in my bed, Ris. You know that.”

I glare at him. “I’m sure it’ll be too crowded in there, Mr. Bachelor of the Year.”

I’m half-joking.

But Cody doesn’t laugh.

With a determined tilt of his chin, he sets his hand on my thigh and slides me across the bench. I gasp, falling backward from the inertia. Our knees buck and he releases my thigh to wrap an arm around my waist.

He pulls me toward his chest. His smile is almost feral, and those gemstone green eyes darken a shade. “The only woman I want in my bed is you. You can believe whatever you want about me, but that much,” his finger slides down my ear to the side of my throat, “needs to be very clear.”

“Cody...” I roll his name off my tongue, tasting it the way I savored the flavors of our tacos.

He sets his forehead on mine and I sweep my eyes closed.

Then I pull back.

“Let’s not make this confusing.” Lifelessly, I push my sauce around with a spoon. “It’s better if you stay in your lane. Let me stay in mine.”

“Ten years ago, I made that choice.” He shakes his head. “But I won’t make the same mistake again. I don’t care how far you think my world is from yours, Ris. If you can’t enter my world,” he narrows his eyes slightly, “I’ll make my home in yours.”



CODY’S PROMISE is still ringing in my head when he drops me off at work. Thankfully, he’s on a call and can’t leave any

more heart-wrenching parting shots about ‘entering my world’ or ‘only wanting me in his bed’.

Every time he talks like that, my heart skips a beat and it gets harder and harder to remember why I’m resisting him.

Cody’s town car drives away and I wander into the main room, noticing the women preparing their kiosks.

“Maggie.” I wave to a small, frail girl with sad eyes. “It’s good to see you.”

Maggie’s story is particularly tragic and I understand why she was hesitant to join the co-op at first. But I’m glad she did. Her knitting skills are top-tier. The girl can spit out knitted creations like a 3D printer.

“How are you feeling? Ready for the grand opening?” I ask, touching her shoulder lightly.

She winces. “About that... I don’t think it’s such a good idea for me to join.”

“Why not?”

Her eyes dart to the side and she rubs a spot right under her ribs. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Of course you’re ready.” I note her skittish behavior. Her eyes keep darting to the door and she looks pale. “Maggie, are you okay?”

“I’m just tired.”

My alarm bells are wailing, but she doesn’t seem interested in talking about it and I won’t force her if she’s not ready. “If you really don’t want to participate, that’s okay. But why don’t you stay for the meeting, take a day and think about it? I was really excited about seeing your work in action.”

Her lips curl up slightly. “O-okay.”

Time flies as we prepare marketing materials for our co-op’s social media. We take some pictures as a group and then break off to make arrangements for our stalls.

This is new for all of us and it’s clear that our clients are on edge at the thought of exposing their work to the masses.

Erica is our mood-raiser, singing, whistling and alleviating the pensive mood.

At the end of the day, people leave one-by-one, but I notice Maggie lurking behind. She's sneaking glances at the door with a fearful look on her face.

I approach her. "Maggie, are you expecting someone?"

"No." She clears her throat. "No, I'm just checking if it's going to rain."

"In that case, why don't I go with you? I have an umbrella."

Her face falls. She trembles. "Oh no. I can't do that to you. It's too dangerous."

"Is rain dangerous?" I smile warmly, trying to mask my concern. I can sense that something's wrong. She's been off all day. There's no way I'm letting her walk home alone. "Come on. Let me just say bye to Ms. Phoebe and Laura."

I duck into the offices and explain to Ms. Phoebe where we're going. Right now, all I have is a strong hunch that Maggie is in trouble, so I choose not to share any details.

"See you guys tomorrow." I wave to them.

"Good work today," Ms. Phoebe beams at me. "You're doing great, Clarissa."

I smile and return to Maggie. "Let's go."

We step outside and Maggie's breath hitches. She's trying hard not to look scared in front of me, but the fear seeps through her pores.

"Maggie," I ask carefully, "when was the last time you heard from your ex?"

"Not recently," she mumbles.

"I see." I tighten my grip on the umbrella. "Have you been dating anyone else?"

Her eyes widen as if the thought makes her sick. "I haven't been with anyone else since I got out of the shelter. I'd rather

be alone for the rest of my life.”

We turn a corner.

“Maggie,” a male voice says.

We both freeze.

I notice a tall, brawny man with hair that desperately needs a cut, blood-shot eyes, and stained clothes.

“Maggie, can we talk?” The man reaches out.

Maggie clamps her mouth shut and shakes her head.

“Maggie, please.”

“She said she doesn’t want to talk,” I snap, stepping in front of the frightened girl.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m not someone you want to mess with, you jerk,” I hiss. “Now get out of here before I call the cops.”

“Maggie, are you going to let her talk to me like that?”

Maggie looks to the side, still as a pillar. Silent tears roll down her face.

I reach for my phone but, before I can call anyone, the man shoves me aside like a rag doll. I fling into a dumpster, my jaw snapping against the lid before I bounce off and slam against the ground. My head hits the base of a streetlamp.

Stars explode behind my eyes.

Maggie screams. “Clarissa!”

The boyfriend lunges at her.

“You hurt her!” Maggie shrieks. “You hurt my friend.”

Pushing myself to my feet, I ignore the pain that makes my head swim and slam my umbrella against the back of her ex-boyfriend’s head.

The umbrella snaps.

Pieces rain to the ground.

The monster stumbles to the left, his eyes enraged.

“Maggie, run!” I scream.

I grab her hand and we both sprint into the darkness of the night.

FAKE IT

CODY

I REMEMBER what it was like being a teenaged boy, but I can't recall being this obnoxious.

Joel is in the backseat of my town car, a smirk on his lips that's practically begging for a fist to the face.

"What do you want?" I ask my pain-in-the-butt foster son.

"A date with Clarissa."

"Never going to happen." My words hold a dangerous chill.

"Why not?" He pouts. "You want me to go in there," he points to Clay's house, "and make nice with all my fake relatives? You need to pay up."

"The offer on the table is cash. Take it or leave it."

"It's Clarissa or bust."

I remind myself that Joel is sickly and frail and also underage. A duel to the death for Clarissa's heart is out of the picture.

"Why are you so obsessed with Clarissa? You barely know her."

"Do we really know anyone? Even couples who've been married for decades say they're still learning things about their spouses."

The kid's a philosopher now?

If I could tell my driver to take us away, I would. But Clay's already travelled all the way to my penthouse to scold me. And it won't take him long to find out the truth behind my fostering Joel if he decides to dig into it.

My brother's a stickler for the rules and, since I'm currently toeing past a ton of his rigid, moral lines, I don't want the headache.

“Besides,” Joel turns his head and studies the way the lampposts shed silver on the sidewalk, “I don’t need to know everything about her to like her. I just do. That’s how it works.” He eyes me. “Why do *you* like her?”

Me?

That’s easy.

Because my breath catches in my throat every time I see her.

Because she’s gorgeous even when she’s wearing a simple T-shirt and cut-off shorts.

Because the way she moans when she eats tacos sends my blood rushing south.

Because my biggest regret was not showing up to our wedding.

But I don’t feel like sharing any of that with my fake son.

“None of your business,” I growl.

Joel glares at me, but it falls flat. He looks a little too weak to make much of a threat.

According to Vargas, he’s been on an intense round of medication. The waning sunlight falls on the pucker marks all over the kid’s pale skin.

‘If you’ve agreed to take care of him, you should do it properly’. Clarissa’s scolding from earlier wiggles through my brain.

Damn. I can’t say no to her.

Even if the request is about the wheel-chair-bound bane of my existence.

Softening my tone from Siberian winter to freezer ice, I ask, “How are you feeling?”

Surprise flashes in Joel’s eyes. He hides it quickly. “Why do you care? I’m not going to croak before our contract expires.”

“How long *is* our contract?” I ask. I didn’t get those details from Vargas. I didn’t even want to know.

“One month.” He scratches at one of the pucker marks. “I’ll know if I qualify for a new heart by then. Whether or not I even need the money for heart surgery depends on that.”

I stare at the kid. “Being sick must suck.”

His eyes meet mine and then a slow smile spreads on his lips. “Yeah, man. It really does. What sucks even more is people telling me how sorry they are.”

“Must get old.”

“Imagine everyone who meets you looking at you like you’re a puppy in the rain.”

“Damn.”

Joel laughs and then he stops mid-chortle and seems to remember we’re mortal enemies. His eyes narrow. “I’m not going to change my price just because you pretend like you understand me. I want a date with Clarissa.”

“Yeah, yeah.” My teeth on edge, I wave him off. “Just get out of the car. We’ll discuss that later.”

My driver helps set up Joel’s wheelchair. Stubbornly independent as always, Joel climbs out of the car on his own and moves at a snail’s pace until he’s seated. By the time he accomplishes the task, there’s sweat on his brow and he’s breathing hard.

“You alive there, buddy?”

The color returns to his cheeks as he flushes with anger.

I keep prodding him, preferring to see those eyes glinting with fury than lifeless and disappointed. “Your heart’s not going to kick the bucket before we cross the threshold, right?”

He slants me a dark look. “Har, har.”

I push him up the grassy knoll.

“So what’s the play here?” Joel asks. “Am I supposed to call you ‘dad’ or something. Are we the father-son combo that

goes camping and wins three-legged races? You want me to sing your praises?”

“They wouldn’t buy it for a second. Just be yourself.”

“I’m supposed to be your fake son.” Joel chews on his bottom lip.

He’s nervous.

If I step into his shoes, I can see why.

For me, I’m going to hang with my brother and his family.

But for Joel, he’s going to meet another round of strangers. He probably doesn’t know what to expect.

I kneel in front of him so he can see my face. Sternly, I say, “What you are at this point, Joel, is family. So you don’t have to fake anything.” I pause and then add, “Just don’t mention Clarissa.”

“No promises.”

I shoot him a glare.

He glares back.

Island opens the door. “Hey there!”

“Uncle Cody!” Regan flies like a rocket into my arms.

I heave her up and hug her, smiling at her tiny face. “I see you’ve got a fancy new hairdo.”

“It’s for ballet.” She touches the braided bun at the top of her head. Her sweet brown eyes land on Joel. “Is this my new cousin?”

“Sure is.”

Regan scrambles to be put down. She marches right up to Joel and grabs the handles of the wheelchair. “Whoa. You get to ride this? You’re so cool.”

Joel’s cheeks flush. “Uh, thanks.”

“Can I ride with you?”

“Uh...”

“Regan, Joel might not be comfortable with that,” Island says in a patient, motherly tone.

“It’s okay.” Joel glances at Island. “If you don’t mind.”

Island beams. “Of course not.”

“Come here, booger.” I lift Regan and set her on Joel’s knee.

“Hold on,” Joel says. He spins the wheels and they take off. Regan throws her arms up and squeals happily.

Island ushers me inside their brightly lit house and smiles. “He fits right in.”

“It’s more like Regan didn’t give him a choice but to feel welcome.” I give Island a kiss on the cheek. “Where’s Abe?”

“In his room practicing for a new commercial. After he got over the *horror*,” she accompanies the word with an eye roll, “of our watch party, he got back on the horse and went for another audition.”

“What’s with the rush to book gigs?”

“He knows who he wants to be and what he wants to do. That’s not a bad thing.”

“He’s only eleven.”

“That’s not too young to know what you want to do with your life. Clay and I support him.”

“Daddy! Look!” Regan squeals from the kitchen. “Joel and I are superheroes! I’m Giraffe Girl. He’s Wheels Boy.”

I smirk. *Original.*

My brother descends the stairs. “Great job saving the world, sweetheart.”

Joel gulps when he sees my brother. I’m not surprised by his reaction. Clay’s a giant and, with that scary face that never smiles, he makes an intimidating first impression.

“You must be Joel.” Clay musters a small, welcoming nod. “Nice to meet you, son.”

“Y-yes, sir.” Joel wipes his hands on his pants before shaking Clay’s hand.

I seethe in the corner. Where’s the smack-talking kid who’s always running his mouth?

“Abe! Your cousin’s here!” Island gives Clay a smack on the butt when she passes him and heads up the stairs.

My brother’s expression melts into a love-sick smirk but, when he walks over to me, his eyes turn dark.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” I nod when he thumps me on the back.

“Any more weird letters in the mail?” Clay asks.

“No. It was just the one.”

“I’ve been thinking. Do you want a detail on Joel?” Clay glances over his shoulder at where Regan is talking Joel’s ear off.

“Do you think he needs one?”

“At the very least, we can put a tracker on his phone.” He surveys me. “Give him a tail.”

“Do you have a tracker on Regan and Abe’s phones?” I ask.

Clay just gives me a blank stare.

“Talk about helicopter parenting.” I laugh. “Abe better not find out, bro.”

“He won’t.” Clay gives me a pointed look.

Just then, Abe and Island descend the stairs. My nephew is wearing his favorite black hoodie and a pair of jeans. He takes one look at Joel in the wheelchair and tips his chin up as if he’s a cool kid in the cafeteria recognizing another cool kid across the room.

“Hey.”

“Sup,” Joel answers, tilting his chin in the same way.

“It’s time to eat!” Island motions us to the kitchen table. It’s buckling from all the food.

Joel licks his lips. “This looks amazing.”

“Island, when did you have time to cook all this? I thought we were just doing pizza?”

“Who said she cooked this?” Clay mumbles.

Island elbows him in the side. “What matters is that we have good food and family to share it with. Right, Joel?”

The kid blushes hard.

I better tell Clay to watch out before Joel starts setting his sights on Island next.

The food is amazing and the conversation flows. I notice Island intentionally baiting Joel to talk about himself. I’m surprised by how much he shares. I guess that’s the power of a pretty woman with a teenaged boy.

I learn a lot about my foster son.

Apparently, I’m sharing a roof with a kid who likes anime (no surprise there) but who also listens to Latin music and regularly produces audio tracks from his iPad.

“There wasn’t much else to watch on the television. Since all the ladies in my hospital room were Spanish, I started getting into telenovelas,” Joel explains. He stuffs his mouth with more food. “Getting into the shows kind of got me into the music.”

“You taught yourself how to mix?” Abe asks, looking impressed.

“I like making beats from scratch.”

“There’s beauty in making something from nothing, isn’t there?” Island smiles kindly.

“That’s a good skill.” Clay scrubs his cheek. “There are plenty of opportunities in the music industry. Especially now that the world is so global. You can work with artists from anywhere.”

Joel's ears tinge pink. "I don't know if I'm good enough to produce music for a living."

"Why not?" I grunt. "You're self-taught. Determined. If you decide to do it, you have a good chance of blowing up."

His eyes shine in my direction.

I clarify myself before he gets too mushy. "When it comes to a career in the arts, you need talent and a good backstory to create a brand." I gesture to his wheelchair. "You have the second one so you only need a small percentage of the first."

"Wow. Thanks." Joel frowns.

There's an awkward lull until Regan starts talking about giraffes again. Joel politely tilts his head toward her and listens to every word. I'm sure he must be bored already, but his eyes never glaze over and he even asks questions.

The teen is good with kids.

Who would have thought?

After our meal, I help Island clear the dishes.

She pats my shoulder. "Joel's very sweet."

"Eh." I make a so-so gesture.

"He must get that from you." She bumps my shoulder. "He respects you so much, Cody. I can tell by the way he looks at you."

She's wrong. Joel wants me to suffocate in my sleep so he can move in and be with Clarissa.

Not that it'll ever happen.

"We're... adjusting to being around each other," I mumble.

"Oh come on."

"It's true. We're still working out a truce."

"You care about him."

I snort. "No I don't."

"Earlier, you noticed he was out of water, so you gave Abe a little nudge to refill his drink. You saw Regan getting hyper

and bouncing on his wheelchair, so you told her to be careful.”

“I did?” I arch a brow.

“Little things like that show you care more deeply than you let on.” Island huffs. “I wish people could see this side of you. Those vile articles circulating about you being heartless and evil are infuriating. They have no idea who the real Cody Bolton is.”

“As long as the people I love are safe, they can publish what they want about me.”

“Speaking of the people you love...” Island extends a long fingernail. “Clay told me a little about your history with Clarissa.”

“Of course he did.” I groan.

Clay enters the kitchen at that moment. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Cody’s love life. What else?”

Clay slips an arm around her. “What love life? As far as I can tell, Clarissa is doing the smart thing and staying the hell away from him.”

I flip my brother off.

Island laughs.

“I never told you about Clarissa.” I tilt my chin up. “Did you do a background check?”

“After the way you glared at me when I switched seats with her at the farmhouse, did you think I’d need a background check?”

I stare him down.

He cracks. “Fine. I did a tiny background check.” Clay lifts his fingers an inch apart.

“Bro!”

“I swear, Clay, you have no boundaries.” Island narrows her eyes at him. Swiveling to me, she shares, “Did you know

that when we first started dating, he *spied* on me through the security cameras in my salon?”

I shudder. “That’s some serial killer behavior.”

My brother reddens. “We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you.”

“I’m so curious.” Island leans forward, brown eyes twinkling. “What happened between you two? When Clarissa mentioned she was engaged to a jerk, I never thought it was you.”

“Yeah, well, these things happen.”

“Canceling a wedding just ‘happens’? With a snap of the fingers?”

“I was an idiot.” I pour myself another glass of scotch. “I’m not an idiot anymore.”

Clay snorts.

Island tilts her head thoughtfully. “I hope Clarissa’s okay.”

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

“I was supposed to have a meeting with her today, but she cancelled.”

“Did she say why?” I hold my breath.

“She said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“What’s wrong with her?” My voice is hard. I slam my cup on the counter, every bone in my body tense.

“Calm down, Superman. I’m sure it wasn’t anything serious. She promised we’d get in touch later. I was just checking if you knew anything.”

I don’t know anything.

But I sure as hell plan on finding out.



CLARISSA ISN’T PICKING up her phone.

So I do the next best non-stalkery thing.

I show up at her apartment with a contract.

If she screams at me, I'll just tell her I forgot to sign this and it needs to be done tonight.

Is it a flimsy excuse? Yes.

Do I care?

Hell no.

"Clarissa." I ring the doorbell again. When that doesn't work, I pound on the door.

"Who is it?" Her voice sounds feeble.

My shoulders tighten. "It's me."

The door opens a crack. I can only see a sliver of her eye behind the chain lock.

"Cody? What are you..." She winces as if talking hurts. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?" The one eye that I can see glances down.

Something's not right. I can *feel* it.

I lift the document. "I have something for you to sign. It's the official contract between me and the Do More Project."

"Why do we need a contract?"

"To make things more official. This way, you and Ms. Phoebe know I won't change my mind."

"And it needs to be signed right now? Right this minute?"

I nod.

"Cody, do you know what time it is?"

"You didn't answer your phone." I soften my voice. "Were you sleeping?"

"Trying to." The eyeball slides down again.

I remember that Clarissa's sensitive to bright lights, but when I arrived, the lights under her door were on. It strikes me as odd that she would leave the living room lights on while going to bed. Or was she trying to fall asleep in such a bright environment?

"Can we do this tomorrow?"

"It can't wait. It needs to be notarized the moment the courts open."

"Okay. Slide it through here." She wiggles her fingers in the crack.

"It needs a witness." I'm lying through my teeth, but something about her voice and the way she's hiding from me screams that my methods are necessary.

Clarissa isn't the type to be shy. Especially if she's annoyed.

My sudden appearance at her apartment is the perfect opportunity for her to rake me through the coals.

Normally, she'd scold me for overstepping.

Or scowl at me with her face on full display.

She wouldn't offer me an eyeball and immediately give into my demands. She wouldn't speak in such a soft, pained voice. And she wouldn't agree so easily. She's not even questioning the validity of this contract.

I set my hand on the door in case she closes it. The move is ridiculously forward, but I can't help myself.

I don't know what it is about Ris that drives me crazy. I honestly don't. Normally, I'm a completely rational man who respects boundaries and doesn't show up at a woman's apartment demanding entrance.

But I can't be rational with this woman.

Never could.

"I heard you weren't feeling well," I fish.

"Where did you hear that? I'm fine."

Something clicks into place in my mind. She either lied to Island or she's lying to me now.

"Open the door, Ris," I growl.

"Go home, Cody."

My jaw tightens.

Under normal circumstances I would respect the boundary, but I can't afford to walk away tonight without assuring myself that she's okay.

"Fine." I turn away from her and type into my phone.

Her voice warbles. "Who are you calling?"

"Your mother." I tilt my head. "She never really liked me, did she? Does she know we're working together? I should probably say hi. Be respectful."

"Don't." The plea is punctuated by a hard sigh. "Just... give me a minute to clean up."

"I don't care if your house is messy, Ris."

"Well, I do." The door slams shut again.

Clarissa takes a long time to come back to me, and I'm about to beat on the door again when I hear a metallic whisk. It's the snap of the chain lock falling loose.

I pocket the phone and face her.

The door swings wide.

My smile disappears.

She's wearing a silky pink pajama top and tiny matching shorts that tease every curve.

Her face is naturally stunning but, tonight, she's wearing a ton of makeup and bright red lipstick. Her eyes are darker too, ringed with thick lashes that beckon me with every sweep.

"Come in," she says, setting a hand on her hip and easing back.

I move into her apartment, my body painfully aware of hers as she closes the door behind me.

“Since when do you wear fancy pajamas to bed?” I ask tightly.

“What else am I supposed to wear to bed, Cody?” Annoyance flashes in her eyes, but that doesn’t stop my brain from skipping right into dangerous territory.

All I’m thinking about now is her *out* of those pajamas.

What would her bare skin look like against my white Egyptian sheets—

“Give it to me,” she says.

The blood in my veins thrums.

Baby, I can give it to you all night long...

She holds out her hand. “The contract.”

I’m barely able to keep my thoughts in a straight line and I’m sure she knows it.

“Here.” I offer her the file and my gaze falls on the long, ugly scrape down the back of her hand.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I’ve always had a scar there.” She flips the document open.

I grab her hand, my fingers tightening around her slender arm.

Bull.

I took Clarissa to my favorite food truck knowing she’d appreciate it. What I didn’t expect were her blissful moans while enjoying the meal.

It took everything in me not to drag her back to my car, order my driver out, and throw her in the backseat.

My eyes shift to the deep scrape again.

I watched every delectable flick of Clarissa’s tongue against her skin as she sopped up the taco juices. There was no

mark on her wrist.

Or I sure as hell would have noticed.

“What happened?”

She blinks like an angry cat, stiffening at my tone. “I fell.”

“You fell?” My voice is tight.

“Yes.” Her fingers drum against her knee.

“Doing what?” I’m barely controlling myself. Barely staying sane.

“Working.” The tapping gets faster, more frantic.

I’m quiet. Still.

She notices. Turning away, Clarissa walks to the kitchen. “It’s only a couple weeks before the grand opening. We’re running around doing everything ourselves.” Her voice trembles when she adds, “I made a stupid mistake using a makeshift desk as a ladder. Really boring story. How’s Joel?”

“At home with his personal nurse.”

“He has a personal nurse. She pretty?”

“He’s a guy.”

“The question stands.”

I hear water gurgling from a mug. She sets it on the counter.

Soon her voice calls, “Would you like something to drink?”

I join her in the kitchen.

“Cody?” Her tone is gently teasing now. Her smile has the correct posture. Both lips extending up. A slight flash of teeth. But her eyes are wary and guarded.

“Where’s your bathroom?” I snap.

Her eyebrows wrinkling, she points.

I march down the hallway. The mirror in the bathroom reveals a man with blond hair and a feral scowl marring his

face.

I look dangerous.

I *feel* dangerous.

It's because she's hurt.

I go crazy when Clarissa Maura's in pain.

It's why I left without talking to her the day after the wedding. It's why I kept my distance when every vein in my body strained to be close to her.

Turning to leave the bathroom, I freeze.

Something's... off.

I see the mess of makeup items scattered over the sink. Makeup powder dots the edge of the surface. A tube of lipstick is still open.

She was in a rush to hide something on her face.

My veins turn to ice.

When I return from the bathroom, Clarissa's still in the kitchen. She's leaning against the counter, one sexy, bare foot propped up behind her.

Eyes on the contract, she says, "Cody, this is a very simple document. You didn't have to drive all the way here just to..." The rest of her words turn into a squeal when I grab her by the waist and lift her on top of the counter. Mocha-colored eyes going wide, Clarissa croaks, "What are you doing?"

I don't answer.

Tensely, I take her face, noticing the swelling right beneath her eye.

She tries to pull back. "Cody, stop."

I remove my hand, but I don't pull back. "Is that a bruise?"

She drops her chin to hide the swelling from me. "No."

From the corner of my eye, I see the pain medication and remnants of a first aid kit on the table.

My mind snaps with blinding fury as I put all the pieces together.

Clarissa wraps her fingers around my wrist. "I'm okay. Really. It's no big deal."

Jaw clenching, I slide my arms over the counter, bending my head so it's almost resting in her lap.

This is not an injury from falling off a table or she wouldn't have tried to hide it.

Someone battered her beautiful skin.

Someone put their hands on her.

I'm almost trembling from the lashing, brutal rage.

"Who hurt you?" I growl.

She presses her thighs together. I'm close enough to hear her quick intake of breath. "No one."

My anger tightens to the point of explosion. I lift my head and spit through gritted teeth. "Who. Hurt. You?"

Her delicate throat bobs and she glances away from me, not saying anything.

My mind snaps.

I'm going to kill him. Whoever he is. I'm going to make sure he never walks, never talks, never breathes again.

Pushing away from the counter, I start to leave when Clarissa calls, "Cody."

I stop abruptly.

"Can you not," she blows out a breath and fights to get the words out, "can you not go yet?"

The rage is roaring, crackling in my veins.

But Clarissa comes first.

I nod because I don't trust myself to speak right now.

"We can watch a movie," she suggests tentatively.

I dip my chin again.

“I’ll, uh, I’ll pop some popcorn.”

“I’ll do it.”

“No.” She opens the cupboard. Her fingers clench around the handle. Her smile falters for a second. “I need to do it.”

Is she trying to stay busy so she doesn’t think about whoever bruised her face?

Another flash of anger churns in me, tearing through my patience.

I force it back. “You have wine?”

“In the fridge.”

I open her refrigerator and see a bunch of expired cartons, moldy vegetables, and a half-finished bottle of cheap merlot. Pursing my lips, I remove the wine and pour it into two glasses.

The microwave beeps.

“Popcorn’s ready,” she announces.

We settle into the couch with our popcorn and wine. Clarissa takes the seat on the opposite end of the couch.

The movie starts.

She keeps fidgeting and changing her posture as if trying to find the perfect position.

“Just come over here,” I growl.

Her eyes meet mine and a flash of sheepishness passes through them. “I’m good.”

“All your moving around is distracting me from the movie.”

“Sorry. I’ll try to stay still.”

She does... for a second.

My self-restraint is shot, and I need to hold her or I don’t think I can keep my temper in check. Getting up, I walk over to her side of the couch.

Clarissa curls back.

Ignoring that ‘don’t you dare’ look, I scoop her into my arms, reclaim my side of the couch and drag her against my chest.

“Cody!”

“Woman, you’re going to be the death of me.” I choke down a lump of frustration in my throat. “Now stop squirming before I change my mind and put you where I really want you.”

“And where is that?” she asks sassily.

I lean down, so close to her that I can smell a hint of her natural hair products. “In my lap.”

Anticipation whips through her gaze for a moment, as if she wouldn’t mind. And then she blinks and seems to get in control of herself.

Her head turns away from me. “We’re missing the movie.”

I face the television screen, but I don’t see a single thing.

Clarissa’s in my arms.

For ten years, I’ve been imagining a moment like this. Clarissa beside me. Her head on my chest. Her hand on my leg. Her curly hair pressing against the underside of my chin.

But I can’t sink into this moment. Can’t appreciate the fact that she asked me to stay, that she’s letting herself be close to me.

Because someone hurt her.

And that’s the reason she’s letting me in.

Not because she trusts me again.

Not because she truly forgives me.

Because the bastard who put those bruises on her beautiful body makes me look like the lesser evil in comparison.

On the television screen, two action stars are punching each other in the face. I hear light snoring and glance down.

Clarissa’s knocked out like a light.

It takes me a minute to catch my breath. She's the prettiest woman I've ever seen. Even without all the makeup, she's a natural stunner. It's the kind of beauty that turns heads. That affects you even when she's gone.

The look on her face is equal parts sensual and innocent.

The sweet flutter of her long lashes.

Those lush, kissable lips.

Her head nuzzles against my chest and stirs a deep ache there. What's she dreaming about? Is she reliving the moment someone put those bruises on her face?

Fury edges against my mind.

I press a kiss to her forehead and disentangle myself from her. Carefully, I take her to bed.

This isn't the kind of scenario I imagined when I saw myself in her bedroom. Hopefully, after I take care of this little problem, I can fix that.

"I'll see you tomorrow, princess." I run my fingers over her forehead. The makeup is beginning to wear off and the bruises are showing. The discoloration around her jaw is intense. Deep purple against light brown.

It looks painful.

Gritting my teeth, I walk out of Clarissa's bedroom and call my brother.

He answers immediately, his voice alert. "What's wrong?"

"Someone hurt Clarissa."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"I'll put my guys on it."

I've never been more grateful for his military background than I am now.

"Let me know when you have a hit," I growl, stalking to my car.

I'm going to find the bastard who put his hands on my woman.

I'm going to make him pay.

And then I'm going to come back to my princess and hold her through the night.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

CLARISSA

FEATHER LIGHT TOUCHES graze my cheek, gently leading me out of slumber. I crack my eyes open, astonished when I see Cody hovering over me. Green eyes sparkle. Blond hair falls messily over a strong forehead and hewn cheekbones. A jaw that could cut glass distracts my eyes from his wicked smile.

“What are you—”

“Sh.” He places a finger to my lips, sending streaks of heat down my spine. “Don’t talk too much. Those bruises still look pretty painful.”

What bruises? I don’t feel anything but soft butterflies as he strokes my chin.

He balances up with one elbow staked in the pillow, head tilted curiously toward me. “You ready to tell me what really happened?”

“How about no.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer, Ris.”

“I don’t care what you take.”

“How about if I take you?” He rolls on top of me and pins my wrists against the pillows. “Hard and fast. Since you don’t care.”

Every inch of my skin burns at the delicious threat.

There’s a part of me that warns I should push him off.

Another part wants to be destroyed by him again.

“You think I’m scared?” I lift my chin.

“You should be.” He brushes his lips against my cheek and down the column of my throat. His scruff is delightfully rough against my skin.

Hands still captured above my head, I arch my neck to give him more access. He rewards me by flicking his tongue against my ear.

“The princess should always be scared of the villain, Ris.”
Villain.

The term fits a cruel man like Cody.

The man who left me at the altar.

The man who never showed up or called again.

The man who took ten years to apologize.

“C-Cody, we can’t.” I sit up.

“We can.” His voice curls over me like forbidden fruit. “I know you feel this too, Ris.” He circles my wrist with his slender fingers and drags me forward. I gasp when I land on top of his sweatpants, knees digging into either side of his hips. He guides me up and down his lap and I whimper.

“See?” He runs his nose down my neck again. “You’re so ready for me.”

I let out a guttural sigh as he undulates his hips in a dirty promise for more.

“Give in, princess.”

“I can’t.”

“You want to,” he says, his lips hovering over my collarbone.

“No, I don’t.” This time, when he rocks into me, I meet him there. My hair flings forward. Curls stick to the sweat on my cheek.

“That’s right, Ris. Come to the dark side.”

I moan, totally undone. “You’re going to ruin me.”

“And it’s going to feel so,” he slides my body up to his chest, “so”—past his neck now—“good.”

I grip the headboards, eyes closed, ready to be ravaged when...

An alarm goes off.

My eyes scream open and I realize I’m gripping my pillows in two fists. The other side of the bed is empty.

It was all a dream?

Disappointment roars through me, but it's no match for the throbbing between my legs. I glance around guiltily as if mom's going to jump out of the closet and yell, 'you know better than that, Clarissa. Stay away from him'.

As my breath slows, I sit up gingerly.

Sunshine oozes through my window, shouldering rudely past the thin, dinky curtains that I kept telling myself I would throw out.

They're too thin. Too flimsy.

Just like the stupid excuses I made to Cody last night.

Because, thankfully, that's the only time he was here.

Let's pretend that dream never happened, shall we?

I groan, touching my face. It feels like I went sleep-walking and, somehow, got myself into a WWE fight. Who knew that bruises hurt like a beast the day after?

I don't want to get up.

Or face a new day.

Or be in my own skin.

I want to sink straight through the bed and disappear from the world. Just fade into obscure matter. Maybe turn into a tree or something.

Yes, a tree is nice.

Trees don't invite their gorgeous ex-fiancé into their apartment after swearing to keep their distance.

Trees don't get excited when their ex-fiance shoves them on top of counters.

Trees don't cuddle with their ex-fiances to watch a movie.

And they certainly don't have X-rated dreams starring said ex-fiancé.

I groan louder this time and roll over. Unfortunately, when I press my face into the pillow, it agitates the bruise along my

jaw.

“Ow. Ow.” I hiss and sit up.

What time is it?

According to the sunshine, it’s get-your-butt-out-of-bed o’clock. I have work to do, but my body’s so weighed down it literally hurts to *think* about moving.

Laziness isn’t going to pay your light bills, Clarissa.

Thoughts of moving around in darkness and not being able to afford popcorn and Netflix motivates me. Warily, I swing my legs off the bed.

That’s when I notice a strange bottle on my nightstand. A note is stuck to it in Cody’s harried scrawl. I’d recognize that crab-like handwriting anywhere. There’s a slant to the letters. A kind of rushed, smushed-together cadence that tells of the type of man he is.

Intelligent. Stubborn. Always busy.

The note says simply ‘*use this on your bruises*’.

I cringe when I remember my failed plan to keep Cody from noticing the damage. I thought if I dressed in something sexy and wore dark glam makeup, he’d be too occupied to do anything but stare.

No such luck.

His eyes flickered to my body for about a second and a half. But after one peek at my injuries, the man was like a hound dog with a bone.

Or a German Shephard on a drug bust.

He found every illegal substance I had hidden away and then went in to dig up more.

Annoying, over-protective jerk-hole.

I snap the note off the bottle and inspect the label.

It’s pain relief cream.

Pinching my eyes shut, I fall back on the bed and flail in embarrassment. This was *not* supposed to happen. I was

supposed to keep this a secret for Maggie's sake. Now Cody's aware of our little raging lunatic problem.

And who knows what that crazy, overbearing billionaire will do next?

I shudder when I remember the icy heat in his voice when he asked me 'who hurt you'.

Was it sexy at the time?

No.

Not even a little bit...

Okay.

Yes.

It was a little sexy. Which is probably why I ended up having a dream involving his tongue and my neck.

What red-blooded woman wouldn't feel a slight flutter in a situation like that? And heaven only knows Cody Bolton makes my heart flutter with one glance from those electric green eyes.

I should never have let him into my apartment.

I'm not supposed to be caving to him. I'm supposed to be holding my ground and doing the opposite of whatever the heck it is I'm doing right now.

I blame Maggie's disgusting bastard of a boyfriend. If he hadn't chased us into the night screaming obscenities and threats, I wouldn't have been so rattled when I got home. And thus, I wouldn't have invited my ex to stay with me in a moment of utter vulnerability.

I head to the bathroom. The lights blare on and reveal a woman who looks like she had a low-down, dirty fight with a racoon.

"Ah, crap. I didn't wash my face last night." Reaching for my cleanser, I pump the foam into my hand.

When I towel dry and check the mirror again, I wince harder.

Falling asleep with a full face of makeup is terrible for my skin...

But not as terrible as slamming my head into the edge of a dumpster.

The bruises on my jaw and cheek are even worse today. Looks like I'll need extra-strength foundation.

As I apply the pain cream Cody left me, I try to figure out my next move.

Should I go to the police even though Maggie begged me not to?

'Please don't do anything.'

Agitated, I brush my teeth.

'Please, Clarissa.'

Maggie's desperate pleas came right after we jumped into a taxi last night. Her ex-boyfriend had been huffing and puffing, trying to keep up. If we were in the Flintstone era, maybe he had a chance of catching up to us. Thankfully, modern cars are faster than humans on foot.

'What do you mean don't do anything? We need to go to the police! He assaulted me and stalked and threatened you.'

'I know. And I'm so sorry you're caught in the middle of this. But I can't afford to go to the cops yet.'

'Maggie, whatever he has over you, it's not worth it.'

'It's worth everything!'

'We have to tell someone. What if he tries to hurt you again? There won't be any evidence that he's dangerous.'

'That's a risk I have to take.'

'Maggie, why—'

'He has my daughter.'

'What?'

'I left him, but I couldn't take Sara with me. He made it clear that I won't get to see her if I'm not with him. Unless I

have a real job and a sensible place to live, they'll take her from me.'

'Maggie, he's an abuser. No court in their right mind would leave him with the kid'.

'I already talked to the social worker and a public lawyer. Clarissa, I've been in and out of women's shelters for months. This co-op is my one real shot at making a business to support myself, but it hasn't even started yet. He's the one with the job and the house. He's the one paying for my daughter's food and care. I can't afford to piss him off until I have my life in order'.

The last thing I wanted to do was give in, but I couldn't ignore the tears in her eyes or the desperation in her voice. I told her I'd take a few days to think about it, but I'm still wondering if that was the right call.

I know how these abusers work. They're manipulative and dangerous. They're skilled at convincing a woman that she's the one in the wrong.

Or that she has the most to lose.

Maggie needs to take her power back and I want to help her in any way I can. Keeping quiet feels wrong but, for the moment, it's the only thing I can do.

Moodily, I take a quick bath, brush my teeth and shuffle into the kitchen.

To my surprise, I find another note. It's pinned on top of a stack of bananas—bananas that were *not* in my fruit basket last night.

I didn't even *have* a fruit basket last night.

Stunned, I pick up the missive.

'I bought fruit and yogurt. Eat something light before taking medication'.

A puzzled crease mars my forehead. I open the fridge and see that all my old, expired food have been thrown out. Colorful fruits and vegetables nestle together in see-through containers. All color-coded. Reds. Greens. Oranges. Blacks. There are fresh eggs in the side panel. The bottle of merlot that

I got from one of the galas I attended last year has been replaced with a new bottle of wine. Or an old one according to the date. The label has gold foil lettering. I don't recognize the brand, but it seems expensive. Like it belongs in a wine cooler and not in my rusty, old fridge.

Jaw dropping, I open the freezer and notice fresh meat. Whoever organized my fridge probably has mild OCD. Why is everything so perfectly placed?

My phone buzzes.

Still confused, I answer it.

"Ms. Phoebe." Her name on my lips is a distracted murmur. And then I realize I'm talking to my boss and my back snaps into a straight line. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I'm heading to work now."

Frantically, I grab my house keys.

"Clarissa, how fast can you get here?"

"About twenty minutes tops. Why? Is something wrong?" My breath hitches as the worst-case scenarios pop through my mind. What if Maggie's ex came back with a weapon this time? What if he's holding Maggie hostage?

"There are delivery trucks lining the block."

I almost stumble. "Did you say *delivery trucks*?"

"Yes. They all claim they're here for you."



MONEY AS A CONCEPT has always been so foreign to me. Growing up, I was stunned that people could just... *decide* to buy things.

Didn't they need to count their pennies? Didn't they need to give up one thing to afford another?

Cody didn't come from my world.

Back then, he wasn't rich. Not as much as he is now. But he never had to struggle for money the way I did. He didn't seem to appreciate the little things the way I did.

Coupons. Giveaways. Student discounts.

It all seemed... so beneath him.

Looking at the long line of trucks that flank the co-op, I'm starting to realize that the cluelessly affluent college boy turned into a cluelessly affluent billionaire.

Same Cody.

More zeroes behind his name.

"You're saying," I swallow hard, "that all of this is for me?"

"It's under care of Clarissa Maura, yes. I've said this three times." The driver at the front of the line has been arguing with me for the past ten minutes. He's understandably testy now. "Look, lady. There are a bunch of men back there who need to get to their next delivery." He gestures behind him. "So just sign here so my guys and I can install the computers."

"But we didn't order any computers," I snap. "I'm telling you there's been a mistake."

He rolls his eyes to the blue sky as if he wants nothing more than to throw me off a cliff. "Like I said, lady, it's been paid for. Can you step aside so we can install it?"

I slam my hand on my hips and remain in place.

The pain cream.

The re-stocked fridge.

The notes.

They've got Cody's sticky fingerprints all over it, but they were still small gestures. This? A parade of semis out to deliver thousand-dollar goods like we're kids on Christmas morning?

This is too much.

Ms. Phoebe's footsteps pound toward me.

I whirl on her. “Did you get him?”

“Mr. Bolton’s not answering.”

Laura nudges my side with her elbow. “Why don’t you just accept it?”

“Laura.”

“When will we ever get another opportunity like this?”

“We don’t just accept donations,” I say stiffly. “There are proper channels—”

“Come on, Clarissa. Think of how excited everyone will be when they see this stuff? I heard they’re bringing sewing machines, office supplies, new furniture. One of the delivery guys said they have an industrial oven. Did you hear that? An *industrial oven*. Think of how excited Erica will be.”

My heart wobbles, but I hold firm. “It’s too much.”

Ms. Phoebe watches me silently.

“Besides, Cody can’t just drop off expensive gifts at our doorstep. We have to file paperwork. We have to get approval from accounting...” Turning, I meet Ms. Phoebe’s eyes. “Am I wrong?”

“We can write up the papers later.”

“Really?” I squeak. “You’re taking his side?”

“Come on, Clarissa. The trucks are blocking traffic.” Laura swings my hand back and forth. She pushes out her bottom lip. “Please, can we accept it? Please?”

With a dark frown, I grab the pen and scribble.

The driver looks relieved.

He’s soon replaced by another delivery man.

I sign clipboard after clipboard.

The noisy thump of boots and workmen chatting back and forth rises like a cloud. Soon, our building is overtaken by men on a mission.

I watch it all with a sense of shock. Cody got this done overnight.

I'm not sure if I should feel flattered or overwhelmed.

Drumming my fingers against a table, I contemplate his motivations. In my kitchen last night, he looked like a hunter on the prowl. Even when he held me, his body had been wound tight. I thought I'd wake up to the headline 'Billionaire Arrested For Assault On Trailer Park Abuser'.

Instead, he's unloading thousands of dollars on our co-op.

Something isn't adding up.

"Isn't this so exciting?" Laura sings, joining me to watch the workmen install our new furniture. The place looks fancier already.

"It's... something."

"Well, aren't you just a ball of sunshine," she teases.

I give her my back. "I'll try calling Cody again."

His phone goes to voicemail.

"Please leave your message after the beep."

"Cody," I hiss, "answer your phone. You can't just drop all this expensive furniture on us without an explanation. What are you doing? What do you really want? At least answer my freaking calls."

The line beeps.

The recording cuts off.

I grunt and rub my temples in frustration.

Ms. Phoebe wanders over. Her gentle hand lands on my back. "Are you okay?"

"No." I grind out. "Cody's being obnoxious and it enrages me."

"The fact that he's looking out for the co-op enrages you?"

"He does everything on his own time with no thought to how it inconveniences us."

Ms. Phoebe folds her arms over her chest. “Have you thought that he’s doing it this way because he knows you’ll reject it if he offers to help outright?”

I slant her a dark look. “I am *not* the problem here.”

“Of course not.”

“I have dedicated my *life* to helping others. I sacrificed. I served. I dragged myself out of bed even when I didn’t feel like it. He does not get to swoop in, show off his money and just...”

“And just steal your limelight?”

My eyebrows hike. I stare at her. “That’s not what this is.”

“Clarissa,” Ms. Phoebe smiles tenderly, “why do you think that money is so evil?”

“I don’t.”

“Then,” she rubs her chin, “why do you think that spending money on you and the things you care about is evil?”

My nostrils flare. I narrow my eyes in her direction. “I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re trying to insinuate that what I’m feeling is wrong.”

“Of course not. What you’re feeling is totally valid.” She steps closer to me and tilts her head. “I’d like to examine *why* you’re feeling this way.”

I pretend to karate chop in her direction. “Keep that Master’s Degree of Psychology away from me.”

She chuckles.

“Fine.” I face her and lift my chin. “What do you think my problem is?”

“You’re the one who’s supposed to tell me.”

“You’re the shrink,” I point out.

“My job is to gently prod you there on your own. Revelations you experience yourself are worth more than the revelations you’re given.”

“Come on, Ms. Phoebe. You want to tell me or you wouldn’t have brought it up in the first place.”

Her chuckles are light and breezy. “Am I that obvious?”

“We’ve been working together for a long time.” My lips curl up. “We practically share the same brain.”

Her eyes twinkle with soft affection. “Fine. I’ll tell you what I think and you can tell me if I’m wrong.”

“Deal.”

“I think,” she runs a veiny hand over her bottom lip, “you hold some deep-seated resentment toward money.”

I stiffen.

“No, not money.” She waves away the sentiment. “The people who wield a lot of it. You feel inferior to them. You tell yourself it doesn’t matter and that you’re okay with having a little, having nothing. But it’s still a problem. You resent them and want to be like them at the same time. It tears you up inside. That dichotomy. That want. That rejection. That shame for wanting to be like them anyway.”

Feeling at a loss for words, I mumble, “Hm.”

“Or,” her grin turns teasing, “this is bothering you so much because you’re starting to develop feelings for Cody again and it’s better to lash out at him when he does something sweet than to admit you’re falling for him.”

Straightening my shoulders, I blurt, “It’s definitely the deep-seated resentment for money. How soon can I book a therapy session with you?”

She laughs.

Laura approaches us. She leans against the table. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

She gives me a disbelieving look but drops the topic. “The computer guys are almost done. The guys installing the stove said they’re about finished too.”

“Good.” I let out a breath of relief. “I want things to go back to normal as soon as possible.”

Ms. Phoebe’s eyes catch on something outside the door and widen. “Unfortunately, I don’t think your wish will be granted any time soon.”

Laura and I both turn.

“Oh boy,” I mumble.

The empty parking lot is being taken over by a fleet of sleek black SUVs. It’s either the FBI, the CIA or...

Cody.

What’s going on now?

The three of us stalk to the door and peer outside. I recognize Cody’s town car as well as the vehicle for his security team.

He climbs out of the car and buttons his suit jacket like he’s filming the next James Bond movie. He sweeps his sunshades off and his eyes meet mine. An electric shock snaps down my spine.

That’s right, Ris. Come to the dark side. I remember his line from my dream and my entire body bursts into flames.

Oh great.

I want to be mad at him.

I *am* mad.

But if there’s anything more tempting in this world than Cody Bolton’s sea-green eyes, I sure haven’t heard about it.

“What’s the play here?” Laura asks urgently. “Are we laying out the red carpet? Ripping him a new one? What? Because I need time to prepare myself. It’s hard for me to *not* giggle around that guy.”

I frown.

Ms. Phoebe pats my hand. “Let’s see what he has to say first.”

Scary-looking men in suits start pouring out of the SUVs behind Cody. Shocked, my brows fly up. Either his security team tripled overnight or he’s about to do something even more annoying.

I recognize Clay Bolton in the throng of security guys.

My heart lightens a bit.

Clay is involved in this. I’m hoping that’s a good sign. He wouldn’t voluntarily join in his brother’s nonsense, right?

Cody steps inside and I lift my chin, trying not to show how frazzled I am.

“Mr. Bolton, always a pleasure.” My voice is crisp and formal. I can’t have him thinking that staying over last night means anything’s changed between us.

“Do you mean that, Miss Maura?” Cody tilts his head. His gaze moves over the bruises I painstakingly concealed. “Your mouth is saying one thing, but your eyes say another.”

Prick.

I force my lips into a neutral smile.

“That was an entrance.” I gesture to the tall guys in suits. “Are you filming a mafia movie?”

The corners of his lips turn up in a ghost of a smile.

Oh-ho.

Nope.

I will not be swayed.

“Do you want to explain what’s going on?”

Cody moves forward and stands so close to me, his spicy cologne wafts around, overpowering my annoyance and taking over my senses.

“Did you have breakfast?” he says in my ear. “Should I have done what I really wanted and brought in a chef?”

“Is breakfast really what you want to discuss right now?”

His eyes caress my face.

I stiffen, my heart pounding in my ribs.

Even when he’s being an absolute menace, he’s still too charming, too good at undressing my anger like an eager virgin on her honeymoon.

Think angry thoughts, Clarissa.

“We’ll talk later,” he whispers.

I step away from him. Keeping my voice cool and low, I say, “Why are you here?”

“To protect what belongs to me.”

I bristle.

Cody gestures to his assistant. “The collaboration between my company and the Do More Project has been unofficial up until this point.” Vargas slips a document into his hand. “Now, I want to make it a little less unofficial.”

“We haven’t made any agreements with you.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Did you not accept my deliveries?”

My lips mash together and I shoot daggers at him with my eyes. *I knew those gifts came with strings.*

“I’ll donate that and more on one condition.” He lifts a finger. “We’ll be installing security to keep the new assets safe.”

“Absolutely not!” I blurt.

Ms. Phoebe gives Cody a worried look. “We work with vulnerable women. Some of whom aren’t comfortable around men.” Her eyes shoot to the scariest guy with a scar down his eye. “I’m afraid that’s not a good idea.”

Clay steps up. “That’s where I come in.” He introduces himself, shakes Ms. Phoebe’s hand and nods at me. “Clarissa.”

“Clay,” I mumble flatly.

“The team has been personally vetted for this task. They’re a mixture of both men *and* women.” Clay gestures and I see the women, who’d been dwarfed by the guys, standing stiffly with their heads straight forward and their hands behind their back. “I’m confident this strategy will be effective in offering protection and easing the clients’ peace of mind.”

I frown.

Clay’s intense eyes— so much like his brother’s—meet mine. “If there’s any problem, we can discuss it further.”

“This discussion should have occurred *before* you made all these decisions unilaterally.” I glare Cody’s way.

“Opening the market to the public means all kinds of characters will be moving in and out.” He gives me a pointed look in return. “With all the new assets that have been installed, you guys may be even more of a target.”

“Even more of a target?” Ms. Phoebe chews on her bottom lip. “What do you mean? When were we targeted?”

“I don’t know.” Cody glances my way. “When were you targeted, Clarissa?”

“Did something happen?” Ms. Phoebe’s voice rises in alarm.

Nostrils flaring, I slant Cody a scathing look. “Of course not.”

He doesn’t look pleased. A flare of anger bursts in his eyes before he quickly tamps it down.

“We’d like to prevent any unfortunate incidents. Prevention is better than cure.”

Ms. Phoebe steps forward. “What are you proposing?”

Clay makes a sweeping motion. “We post security outside. Our team here,” he nods to the burly men at the back, “will install a few things to keep you safe.”

“What kind of things?” Laura asks, just finding her voice.

“A door buzz system. Alarms. Cameras.”

“It’s too much,” I interrupt.

Cody shakes his head. “It’s the bare minimum.”

“Cody,” I snap.

“How will you feel if someone breaks in and wipes this place clean?”

“I’m sure it won’t break the piggy bank,” I say through gritted teeth.

His eyes narrow. “I’m not in the habit of wasting time or money, Miss Maura. This may look like a donation, but I’m still running a business. I’m looking after my investments.”

I’m starting to understand why Cody travels around with a security team. If not for the scary-looking guard with the scar down his eye, I’d probably smack Cody in the face twice by now.

Almost choking from frustration, I whirl around and stomp to the hallway.

Cody’s answering footsteps makes my anger swell like a porcupine shooting out its quills.

“Clarissa?”

“What?” I spin around. “What do you want now, Cody? Or should I call you, *sir*. Since you’ve shown that you practically own us and our co-op now.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“No, what you said was ‘I’m giving a donation’ and what you did was strong-arm us into doing exactly what you wanted because you have money and we don’t.”

I’m about to walk away when he captures my arm. His fingers are gentle on my wrist.

My whole body tingles.

I stand in place and suck in a huge breath, hoping he doesn’t realize that I fight my own silent battle every time he touches me. My eyes swing to his face, all hard angles and a

short beard, which makes him even more delectable than normal.

“You expect me to do nothing after seeing you bruised and hurting yesterday?” His voice is like low, teasing thunder.

“Don’t pretend this is about me, Cody. This is a power move.” I force my hand away from him before I try to re-enact any part of this morning’s unfortunately sexy dream.

“I can’t help you if you don’t give me a name.” His voice is coaxing.

“It’s my battle. I’ll handle it on my own. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

I storm into my tiny office and slam the door shut. My heart pounds as I hurry to my purse.

Even when I was pissed at him, Cody’s touch had the same effect as it did during the dream this morning.

Good thing I brought an extra set of underwear.



LATER THAT DAY, our clients arrive to put the finishing touches on their booth and attend a class from a local business owner. We’re learning about sales tax and refunds. It’s not the most exciting stuff and everyone is, understandably, yawning by the time it’s over.

“I’m going to check out my new stove again before I leave for the day,” Erica chirps, disappearing into the kitchen.

“Maggie, can I see you a moment?” I ask.

The frail girl goes tense. “Sure.”

I move her to the side, away from the others. “Did *that person* show up or try to call you this morning?”

“He called my phone a few times. I told him to stop or I was calling the cops no matter what.” She shuffles her feet. “I don’t think he’s going to bother me again. Or you, Miss Clarissa.” Maggie gives the security team a scared look. “You

didn't have to do all this. Rick isn't that dangerous. He just gets that way when he's drunk."

"This has nothing to do with Rick," I tell her. At least, not directly.

If Cody knew who Rick was already, he wouldn't have bothered to jump through all these hoops just to provide us with security. The grand show of guards and alarms is confirmation that he doesn't have a name or a person to vent his anger on.

"I don't feel right about not telling the police," I squeeze Maggie's hand, "but I understand and respect your decision. However, as soon as you have your child in custody, I'm reporting what Rick did."

"Understood."

"I know your business can be a sweeping success. I want you to be happy and safe with your daughter."

"Thank you." Her eyes fill with tears. "I, uh, I've got plans and everything. Once I prove that I can make money, I'm going to get a loan from the bank and fix up my grandma's old place. It's unliveable right now, but at least it's in my name. There's a nice school nearby. And a park."

"It sounds lovely."

"It feels so impossible."

"All your dreams will come true, Maggie. I believe it."

She sniffs and rubs at her eyes. "Thank you."

Erica and the others join us.

"What's she crying for?" Erica asks pointedly.

"She's feeling a little nervous about opening day," I say, trying to throw off suspicion.

Laura hands over a package of tissues. "Here you go."

"We're all nervous," Erica mumbles. "But at least we got the equipment we need to make this work. Plus, I feel safer with those hunky bodyguards keeping watch." Erica wiggles

her eyebrow at the guard by the door. “At the very least, they make great eye candy.”

I chuckle and note the way Maggie brightens under everyone’s encouragement.

“How about going for a team dinner? My treat.” I flash some cash around.

Erica grabs it and frowns. “What dinner are we supposed to get with ten bucks?”

“Ice cream counts as a meal.”

Erica rolls her eyes.

I hold her back as the others move to the door. “Erica, can you make sure the group walks Maggie home together?”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you the details, but it’s important or I wouldn’t ask.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

I smile. “I’m counting on you.”

She salutes.

I watch the women walk out and then I help Ms. Phoebe lock up the shop.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “You’ve seemed a little preoccupied all afternoon.”

I want to tell her about Maggie and her ex so badly, but I know Ms. Phoebe will insist on calling the police. I promised Maggie I wouldn’t tell anyone.

Maybe some promises are meant to be broken.

“Clarissa?” Ms. Phoebe touches my arm.

“I’m fine. Just a little overwhelmed. There’s so much to do before opening day.” I check my watch. “I’ll be late to catch my bus.”

“Do you want a ride?”

“Your house is on the other side of the city.” I shake my head. “It’s fine. I have a podcast I want to listen to on the way.”

“Get home safely.”

“I will.” I give her a wave and hurry along the path.

The sun is setting and stars twinkle in the darkening sky.

I’m halfway to the bus stop when I hear footsteps crunching behind me.

My fingers tighten around my purse and I quicken my step.

Whoever’s behind me moves faster too.

Heart in my throat, I pull my phone out. Before I can dial 911, a heavy hand lands on my shoulder and hauls me around.

I stare up into the bloodshot eyes of Rick, Maggie’s boyfriend.

“It’s because of you,” he slurs. The alcohol on his breath slams me in the face. He lumbers over me. “Maggie left because of you. She says she’s taking our kid.” He shakes his head. “It’s your fault. You filled her head with lies.”

“Let go of me!” I struggle.

He grabs my upper arms and shakes me like a rag doll. “It’s your fault!”

“Rick, you don’t want to go any further than this or there’s no escape for you. I *will* call the police.”

“I don’t care anymore!” He wraps his hands around my throat. “I just want Maggie back.”

I try to shove him off, but it’s like pushing against a wall.

“Help!” I scream. Panic coats me like a second skin. “Someone help!”

But there’s no one around.

The darkness presses in.

I scratch at his fingers, fighting for my life.

Suddenly, the pressure on my throat loosens and Rick goes flying back. He hits the ground hard.

I peer through hazy eyes and see a head of blond hair and a jaw clenched in anger.

Cody?

BLOODY CUFFS

CODY

MY FIST FLIES into Rick Hatchen's face like a bullet, sinking into skin and meeting bone. I hear a crack, but it's not enough. I punch again. Again. Again.

"Cody!" Clay's voice rings somewhere in the background, somewhere I can't hear. Somewhere rules and reality mean nothing.

My knuckles slam into the bastard's jaw again.

"Cody, stop!"

This time, the yell is matched with two hands hooking under my pits. I'm being peeled off Rick Hatchen. His upper body, that I'd been holding upright with a fist in his collar, crumples into a bloody heap.

I try to wrestle free of my brother.

My eyes are red with blood-lust.

He hurt her.

He put his hands around my woman's throat.

Death isn't enough.

Torture isn't enough.

"Calm down, Cody. Or you'll be thrown in jail along with him." Clay's voice is calm in my ear. No sense of panic. No urgency. Just a dry, pointed observation. "Stop."

"Would you stop if it were Island?" I huff, glaring into my brother's face.

His eyes narrow at the mere thought.

Freaking hypocrite.

"You'll rot in jail for this," Rick Hatchen murmurs, sitting up again and cringing in pain.

I guess I didn't hit him enough if he can still move his arms and legs.

“You better pray we don’t share a jail cell then,” I growl. “Or I’ll finish the job.”

He’s got a busted lip, an eye that’s so bruised it can’t even open and blood all over his mouth. It’s not enough. I want to drag this abusive clod into the shadows and break his nose. Break his hand. Break his neck.

I don’t care if it costs me my career. My future.

He hurt her.

Clay stares at me with a hint of curiosity. “Since when do you lose it like this?”

I meet my brother’s eyes, struggling to breathe through the cluster-crap of emotions swirling in my chest.

Clay sighs and shakes his head. “You want to beat him some more or you want to comfort Clarissa?”

At the mention of her name, I snap out of my red-filled haze.

Wrenching my arms free, I whirl around. “Where is she?”

“In the car.” He gestures behind him. “We shielded her from most of... the bloodbath.” He surveys me. “But I’m sure she heard the sounds. In fact, hearing it might have been more gruesome than seeing it.”

I narrow my eyes. “I’m not sorry.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

“I’m going over there.”

“Might want to clean up first.” He hands me a napkin.

I walk while wiping Hatcher’s blood off my arms and knuckles, but there’s nothing I can do about the stains on my crisp white shirt.

Clarissa’s sitting in the backseat of a security car. The door is open and her legs are on the sidewalk. She’s looking to the ground, body bent over and elbows resting on her thighs.

I stop abruptly.

The memory of her cries for help shafts through my mind. I can hear it now. The fear, the pain, the uncertainty.

A surge of intense emotions knife at my gut.

I hate it. Hate every second of that memory, but I can scrub it away as much as I can scrub the bloodstains on my clothes.

Clarissa glances up and her eyes land on me.

She's terrified. I can tell from the way she curls her fingers into her jeans. Her shoulders are trembling too. I want to offer her my jacket, but the smell of blood is strong on the fabric.

Maybe I should have cleaned up better.

Steps heavy and hesitant, I kneel in front of her.

Silence steps the air between us.

Clarissa turns her face away. "Is he... dead?"

"No."

She nods and stares at her sneakers.

"Are you okay?"

She doesn't respond.

At least she's not lying to me and saying 'she's fine'. I slide my gaze over her sensible grey dress and the sexy red heels she paired them with. Given the color and style of the stilettos, they must be one of Mimi's.

Apart from her shaken expression, there doesn't seem to be any more injuries. That's the only reason Hachen is still alive.

Clay's voice sounds behind me. "The cops are on their way."

I stand and face him. "Do I need to make a statement?"

"No."

I don't ask him how or why or what strings he's pulling to arrange that. I just nod.

"We'll need Vargas though." He arches a brow.

I nod again.

My assistant arrives with a group of bodyguards. In the distance, Doberman is restraining Hatchesen.

Vargas opens his mouth.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I snap, and then I run a hand through my hair. “I’ll face the consequences.”

“Cody Bolton. Bachelor of the Year. Arrested for aggravated assault.” Vargas slants me a cutting look. “We went to all that trouble with Joel just for you to ‘face the consequences’ on a rage bender?”

“It’s my fault,” Clarissa says. She turns to me slowly with a pained look. “I’m the one—”

“Don’t,” I growl.

“I’ll take responsibility for this.” She rises to her feet, but it’s too soon for her to be moving. She puts a hand to her head as if woozy.

“Whoa.” I slip an arm around her waist to steady her. The smell of her natural hair products fills my nose and overpowers the scent of Hatchesen’s blood.

She swallows hard. “I’m okay. I just need a second.”

“Vargas, bring my car around. I’m taking Clarissa home.”

“Sure.”

“Cody,” she murmurs. Her eyelashes make a slow sweep up and down. “It’s okay. I’ll take care of this.”

“How?”

She snaps her mouth shut and thinks about it. “I’ll talk to the police.”

“Clay and Vargas will handle the authorities.”

Her shoulders slump forward.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I add.

“What if something happens to you?”

I meet her eyes, smirking. “You’re worried about me?”

“Of course not. I just... don't want this to reflect badly on our foundation.”

“Whatever you say, princess.”

“Bolton,” Vargas returns to us, “one of the guys will bring your car around, but I have a small problem.”

“What?”

“It's Joel. I was supposed to pick him up from the hospital an hour ago.”

I groan. “I forgot about the kid.”

“How can you forget a human being?” Clarissa's eyes spark with disapproval.

“I was a little busy,” I grunt. “And Joel's a big boy.”

“He's still a minor.”

“He's sixteen,” I point out. “Old enough to have a job and drive a car. Back in the day, he could have been drafted—”

“We'll pick him up,” Clarissa says, shifting to Vargas as if she's tired of arguing with me. “Tell him we're on our way.”

Vargas agrees easily, as if *she's* the one signing his checks.

“Hey, hey, no.” I lift a finger. “I'm taking you home first.”

“I can wait.”

“No you can't.”

She holds a hand up to my chest. I try not to register how good her hand feels.

“Have you ever been the kid sitting outside of school waiting for your parent to pick you up?”

I scrunch my nose.

“I'm guessing no. And it shows.” Her eyes trail my body slowly. “We're going for Joel. Do you have a problem with that?”

Clarissa's pointed look shifts something inside me. How do I say no to her after what she's been through?

“I guess we’re going for Joel,” I mutter.

Vargas smirks.

I lift a finger in his direction as my car drives into sight.
“Not a word.”

“Yes, sir.”

Clarissa climbs stiffly into the car before I can get her door.

“You’re angry,” I say once I start driving.

“No, I’m not.”

I look at her, noting her tense jawline.

Clarissa is the type that needs to vent. There’s no way she can keep that much annoyance inside.

I give it one...

Two...

Three...

“Are you still treating Joel like an afterthought?” she blurts.

Bingo.

“How long has he been staying with you? You can’t even treat him like he matters? Like he’s an important part of your life?”

“It’s been less than a week.”

“Plenty of time.”

“He’s not my real son.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be a real father.” She hits me with a blistering stare. There are more flames in it than I expected.

I lift a hand, ignoring the blood spatters on my cuff. “Let me get this straight. You had no problem with me busting Hatchesen’s face open, but ignoring Joel really gets your gears?”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not.” My lips twitch.

Damn. She’s adorable.

Clarissa sinks deeper into the chair. I notice her trembling again. “Is your air conditioner on?”

“No.” I turn up the seat warmers and hold the wheel with one arm while I shrug out of my jacket. “Take this.”

She accepts it and pulls it up to her chin.

My smile fades as I watch her squeeze her eyes shut and breathe deliberately. It’s clear her attempt to focus on Joel isn’t keeping her mind occupied.

“Do you want me to pull over?”

“No.” Her voice is quiet. That’s more frightening to me than if she’d yelled. “Can I ask you something?”

I wait.

“How did you know where I was?”

“Lucky guess.”

Her eyebrows cinch together. “No one’s that lucky.”

“You create enough opportunities and luck will find you eventually,” I counter.

She doesn’t buy it. “Did you have someone following me?”

I run a hand through my hair. “No.”

She slants me a disbelieving look.

“I’m telling the truth.”

As she studies me, I keep my eyes on the road. The lights from skyscrapers pepper the windshield with dots of orange and silver. Almost like stars falling to the ground.

“How long have you known what really happened?” Ris asks quietly.

“Since I left your apartment last night.”

Her eyes widen. “That long?”

“Clay’s good at his job.” I pause at a red light. Pulling the jacket up around her chin and tucking it into her sides, I tell her, “He got a name and an address in a couple minutes.”

“Why didn’t you confront Hatches immediately?”

I pause, trying to discern if that’s a genuine question or an accusation. *Would Clarissa have been safe if I’d insisted on that address?*

My eyes slide away from hers. “I said Clay got the information. I didn’t say he gave it to me.”

Her lips curl up.

“What?” I raise an eyebrow.

“No wonder your brother’s so successful.”

Jealousy pricks my chest. “Clay’s good at running his security business. I’m the one handling his money.”

“So what?”

“Your admiration should be tapered based on your definition of ‘successful’.”

“Arrogance isn’t a good look on you.”

“Giving credit where credit is due isn’t arrogance. It’s just being polite.”

Her lips twitch. She nuzzles her nose into my jacket, not appearing to be bothered by the smell of blood. “Clay’s a good big brother.”

“He’s a smooth-talker. He convinced me to stay put against my better judgement.”

“I’d say blindly beating someone to within an inch of their life unprovoked would be poor judgement.”

“While it was the original plan, we came up with another.”

“Which was?”

I glance over, admiring the way the lights play against her supple brown skin. “You saw the first part.”

“Bringing the security team to the foundation,” she muses.

“We wanted to make sure Hatches didn’t cause trouble at your place of business. It was a good call too. He came all the way to the front door at three p.m. this afternoon, but he turned back when he saw security.”

She pins those chocolate silk eyes on me. “How did you know what he was doing at three p.m.?”

I grip the steering wheel tighter.

She pieces it together on her own. “You didn’t have someone tailing me. You put a tail on *him*.”

I pause. “Why didn’t you tell me what he did to you?”

She faces the window.

“Why did you hide it from me, Ris?” I press.

The hospital’s lights come into view.

“We’re here,” she says with a hint of relief.

“Clarissa.”

“Where are we supposed to pick up Joel?”

I narrow my eyes. “We?”

“Yes, we. You’re covered in blood and have bruised knuckles. Unless you plan to get photographed, I’m the one who needs to go in for him. Besides, you’re still treating him like a stranger. He can’t run to you after a hard day. *Someone* needs to show him a friendly face.”

I don’t like the thought of Clarissa showing a friendly *anything* to Joel. The kid has a big mouth and a crush on her a mile wide.

She pops out of the car before I can find a parking spot. “I’ll get him while you park.”

“Clarissa, wait,” I say.

But she hurries off, disappearing inside the hospital.



BY THE TIME I find a parking spot and climb out, she and Joel are already wheeling toward me.

The teenager is staring up at her with a besotted look. He's wearing a grey T-shirt over a threadbare pair of jeans. His hair is so long that it's flapping in his face. The mullet is a... brave choice.

I climb out of the car.

Joel's only got eyes for Ris and doesn't notice me until I clear my throat. Even then, he doesn't glance my way.

"Bolton," he says absently.

"You know, in public, you should probably call me something other than Bolton," I mutter.

"Papa bear."

"Yeah, let's go with Bolton." I hold Joel's wheelchair for him so he can climb inside the car. The kid almost slams his head against the roof because he's gazing so hard at Ris.

"Keep your eyes in your head and try not to get a concussion," I grunt.

"Yeah, yeah." He waves me off. And then he doubles back with an excited grin. "Is today the day you're keeping your end of the deal?"

"What deal?"

"Come on, man. My date with Clarissa."

"That's enough out of you." I not-so-gently palm his forehead and shove him through the door.

Slamming it shut for good measure, I walk around to Clarissa's side. She's still standing on the sidewalk, her phone in her hands. Her beautiful face is creased in worry.

"Did someone call?" I jut my chin at the phone.

"No." She nibbles on her bottom lip. "I'm just nervous about... everything. I don't know how Clay plans to clean this up. What if Hachen makes a big stink and gets everyone in trouble? It'll all be my fault."

“It would *not* be your fault. It would be that dirtbag’s fault for hurting you.”

She rocks back, still looking unsettled.

“Clay knows what he’s doing.”

“There’s always room for error,” she says.

Ris needs a distraction. Badly.

I lean in. “You know,” I drop my voice to a husky whisper, “I’m technically the one who was supposed to go inside for Joel. He’s *my* fake son.”

Clarissa raises her chin. “Tough.”

“You’re not reciprocating his feelings, are you?”

“Do I look like I want to go to jail?” She scoffs.

“Just making sure.”

“The great Cody Bolton jealous of a teenager?” Her breath whispers over my face.

Adrenaline spikes through my veins, but I can’t blame my run-in with Hachen for the rush. This beautiful, innocent, kind-hearted woman is the one making my blood roar.

Joel winds the window down. “You two! Enough staring into each other’s eyes!”

Ris breaks eye contact.

I’m going to throw that kid off a roof.

Scowling, I hold her door open, watching as she ducks inside.

Back in the car, Joel stares at me. “Is that... blood on your collar?”

“No,” I grind out. “And put on your seatbelt.”

Joel’s eyes drop to the bruises on my knuckles. “What happened to you?”

“I fell,” I say, driving out of the hospital parking lot.

Clarissa rolls her chocolate brown eyes at me.

“Whatever.” Joel moves gingerly back in his seat.

“Wear your seatbelt,” I demand.

“*Wear your seatbelt,*” he mocks.

If I could throw flames from my eyes, the little twit would be the first one I barbecued.

“Joel,” Ris cuts in like a foreign diplomat trying to prevent a nuclear war, “how were your treatments today?”

“Fine,” he mutters.

“Do you have any friends at the hospital?”

“Nope.”

“What about favorite doctors?”

“Mm-mm.”

I don’t know why she’s trying so hard. Joel clams up whenever the conversation turns in the direction of the hospital or his family.

Ris clears her throat. “I see.”

“My turn,” I say.

“Your turn for what?”

“Questions.” I flick the indicator and turn left. “Why didn’t you tell me what happened yesterday?”

“Do you really want to discuss this now?” Her eyes flick intentionally to the backseat.

“I do.”

She drums her fingers against her purse. “Fine. I didn’t tell you because I was afraid you’d do something like this.”

“Something like what?”

Her eyes move to the backseat again. She sighs. “Make a big deal.”

“What part of this *isn’t* a big deal?” I hiss.

“I know it is. I’m not saying what happened wasn’t... it’s complicated.”

“Un-complicate it. Fast.”

Her eyes turn stern, flames shooting out to give Hades a run for his money.

I realize I might have sounded too harsh and soften my tone. “Please.”

“Maggie didn’t want to get the attention of cops and social workers. Which, I guess, is inevitable now.” Her voice is pure frostbite. “I’d *just* promised her that we were going to make this work. Now her ex is going to use her daughter as a weapon against her just as she feared.”

“Who says? The scumbag will be thrown behind bars where he belongs.”

“Do you really believe he’ll go to jail?”

“Of course.”

“Vargas wants to keep this ‘incident’ under wraps. And Clay told you to leave the scene. I may not be a fancy executive assistant or have a team of security guards, but I know how the system works. Your people don’t want you there because they’re not going to arrest Hatches. If they put this on an official record, you’ll have to explain yourself too.”

Dammit. She’s right. Grabbing for my phone, I set it in the docket and call Clay.

My brother answers abruptly. “What?”

“You’re letting Hatches go?” I growl.

He’s quiet for a second. Finally, he says, “It’s for the best.”

“He’s an abusive jerk who assaulted Clarissa.”

In the backseat, I feel Joel go stiff.

“And you assaulted him back. In a much more damaging fashion. You’re lucky anyone could walk out of this alley without wearing handcuffs.”

Damn.

I hang up on my brother and grit my teeth. Anger surges inside me again. Flicking the indicator, I make a U-turn.

“Where are you going?”

“To that punk’s house.” I press my foot on the gas. “I’m going to finish what I started.”

Ris puts a hand on my bruised knuckles. It’s just one touch. One little touch. But there’s no stopping the giant bonfire in my veins, the way my eyes narrow, the hunger I feel to grab her hand, her waist, her leg and hook it around me.

“Cody, forget him. What matters right now isn’t Hatches. It’s what Hatches can do to Maggie.”

I force myself to focus. “You think he’s going to hurt her too?”

“No, not after the beating you put on him.” Her lips curl up. I’m not sure if she believes that or if she’s just trying to placate me. “Besides, Maggie is staying at a shelter currently. He won’t get in there easily. Which means he’s going to exact his revenge in a way that hurts even more.”

“You said he had custody of their daughter?”

“It’s not custody as much as it is a kind of blackmail.”

“Explain.”

“Maggie didn’t want to go to the cops because she was afraid Hatches would make a case to take her child away. She doesn’t have a place to live or a steady job right now. Hatches, with all his disgusting ways, has both.”

I rub my chin, thinking through the solutions.

“I have an idea.” Joel pipes up from the backseat.

His voice makes me jump slightly. I’d forgotten he was even in the car.

Clarissa whirls around.

“If someone needs a house, why don’t you just give them one?” Joel smirks.

“Give them?” Clarissa seems intrigued.

“What do you think, my love?”

“Call her ‘my love’ one more time and you’re pushing yourself home in that wheelchair,” I growl.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Joel fires back.

“Try me.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Clarissa muses.

“Him wheeling home?”

She scowls at me. “No, getting Maggie a new place to stay. And stop teasing Joel like that. He doesn’t understand that you’re joking.”

“Who says I’m joking?”

“You see how he treats me?” Joel whines.

“Back to the point, boys,” she folds her arms over her chest, “how do we get Maggie a place to live before Hatchesen can make a move?”

“You want me to buy her a house?” I ask casually.

Her eyes widen. “Would you?”

If she asked, I’d do anything.

But she can’t know that she has so much power over me.

“It’s possible, but it’s a risk. Suddenly elevating someone’s lifestyle doesn’t change the way that person thinks. It just changes their environment.”

“I appreciate the offer, Cody, but I wasn’t thinking of buying her a house.” Her eyes spark with inspiration. Her smile rivals the sunshine, just as intense as the warm glowy orb that’s currently striking my chest and making everything hot. “Maggie mentioned her grandmother left her a property. She said it was unliveable, but what if we make it liveable?”

“Depending on the state of the structure, it could take months to renovate a decrepit house. Who knows what Hatchesen could do in that time?”

The spark leaves her eyes and I instantly regret dragging her back to reality.

“You’re right.” Ris sighs harder.

“Don’t you have tons of money?” Joel’s tone is slightly accusatory. “You can offer to buy a house, but you can’t make one liveable overnight?”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, kid, but I’m not a genie. A task like this is more than one person can do on their own.”

“Who said we have to do it on our own?” Clarissa sits straight up, back a rigid line. She rummages in her purse. Her curly hair falls over one shoulder as she searches. “I know I have it in here somewhere.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Aha!” Ris lifts a glossy black and gold business card to the light.

“What’s that?” Joel asks.

“A solution.”

“Nova Harrison?” I read the name on the card. “Adam Harrison’s wife?”

“Isn’t Adam Harrison that famous inventor guy?” Joel points out. “You know him?”

“His wife. We’re friends,” Clarissa chatters nervously. “Or acquaintances. Friend-quaintances? I think we’re more than professionally distant at this point. She did say to call anytime if I needed help.”

I pull the car over to the side. “Go ahead and call. We can plan our next move then.”

“We?”

“Don’t even think of doing this on your own, princess.”

Her lips curl up. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

I wait for her to call.

Instead, she stares at the phone, frozen.

“What are you waiting for?” Joel groans. “It’s almost seven o’clock. If we have to renovate a house overnight, we kind of need to get a move on.”

“Just... give me a second,” Clarissa’s voice is shaky. She’s blowing out sharp breaths through her delectable mouth.

“You’re nervous,” I say.

“I’m thinking of how to phrase this.”

“Just be honest. And be yourself.” I take her hand. “Successful businessowners don’t like it when their money is idle. They want it moving, working, but they’ll only invest in a vision they believe in.”

“I really hate asking for help.”

“You hate it more than you want to help Maggie?”

Her eyes flit to mine. There’s a stroke of frustration.

I’m goading her.

It’s probably not the best path to winning her heart, but it’s what she needs right now.

“You believe in this? You really want to help Maggie?”

“I do,” she whispers.

“Then you have everything you need to make Nova believe in it too.”

She flutters her eyelashes and puts the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Nova. Sorry to bother you so late, but I have an opportunity here I don’t think you’ll want to pass up.” Her eyes, like mesmerizing honey, swing around and meet mine. “Would you like to change someone’s life with me?”



I DRIVE Clarissa home so she can change into more comfortable clothes. Joel and I wait in the car for her.

The kid wanted to go upstairs and was willing to limp all the way up there. Thankfully, Clarissa stopped him in a more polite way than I would have.

Trapped in the car, I contact Vargas. He informs me that Clay left a tail on Hachen and added extra surveillance to the

women's shelter where Maggie is staying.

"We tapped his phone too," Vargas says calmly. "The first call Hatchen made was to a friend."

"A criminal one? Let me guess. He wants revenge on me?"

"He actually wants to talk to a social worker." Vargas sounds perplexed. "Know anything about that?"

I grit my teeth. The slimy worm couldn't even wait, could he?

Looks like Ris was right. We need to turn this house into a liveable home overnight or there's a real possibility that Hatchen will attack his ex-girlfriend where it really matters.

I tell Vargas the plan but, as I'm explaining, I see Joel staring daggers at me through the rear-view mirror.

The kid isn't blinking.

Realizing that he probably wants to speak, I cut the call with Vargas short. "I'll need eyes on the blueprint for that house as well as a giant construction crew. Think north of a hundred people."

"Where can I find that many people this late in the day, Bolton?"

"Just do it." I end the call and meet Joel's spear-like gaze. "What?"

"What's the deal with you and Clarissa?"

"Why is that any of your business?"

Joel lifts his chin. "I'm interested in her."

I almost snort out loud.

"I'm not giving up."

"Want my advice?"

"Not really..."

"Focus on producing music, kid. Don't make Ris your second hobby."

"You scared?"

I let out a disbelieving laugh. “No, I’m not. You and Clarissa wouldn’t be together even if you *were* the right age.”

“Why not? Unlike you, I’m a real man who isn’t afraid to talk about his feelings.”

“Unlike me?”

“I can’t compete with you when it comes to money. And from what Vargas said about you two, you’ve got history.”

I grit my teeth. *Vargas has been running his big mouth.*

“But the one thing I have over you is that I’ve got good intentions. I don’t want to add her to my shelf like a trophy. I don’t have anything, so she’d be everything to me.”

“You don’t have anything. You’re right. So why do you think you deserve her?”

“Why do you think money means you deserve her more?”

I’m stumped.

Dammit.

“Clarissa doesn’t seem like the type of woman who’d be swayed by money or she would have already jumped into your arms by now. That tells me that she values something you can’t give her.”

“You know nothing, kid.” I scowl. He’s starting to get on my nerves.

“I know you stare at her all the time,” Joel points out. “And you throw your cash around like it makes you bigger.” He scrunches his nose. “Anyone can see through that. You’re not impressing nobody.”

“Anybody.”

“What?”

“You’re not impressing ‘anybody’. Not nobody.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Why don’t you focus on getting better before you throw your hat in this ring, huh, kid?”

Clarissa bounds down the stairs wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Her hair is bound into a bun at the top of her head. She glides on moonlight like some kind of supernatural fairy.

My heart thumps in my chest.

Joel's voice thickens with resolve. "The game isn't over until it's over."

"That's where you're wrong, kid." I glance over my shoulder. "This isn't a game to me. This is my life. And whether or not *you* stay in it is up to you." He opens his mouth. I lift a hand. "But that woman," I jut my chin at Clarissa who's reaching for the door, "is a permanent part of me. There's no winning or losing. There's just me and her. You understand?"

He scowls.

Clarissa opens the door and slides in. She re-did her makeup because the bruising around her jaw is gone. So are the marks that were starting to show on her neck.

My fingers clamp into fists at the reminder of what happened tonight. It's going to take everything inside me to keep from finding Hatchesen and returning the favor.

"Sorry. I didn't take too long, did I?" She notices the stony silence between me and Joel. Her eyebrows rise in alarm. "What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing," Joel says.

"The weather," I say.

The kid takes a shot of his inhaler while I start the car and drive off.

OVERNIGHT MIRACLE

CLARISSA

NOVA ISN'T the only one standing on the overgrown lawn when Cody brings his car to a stop. I stumble out, my jaw dropping when I see all the farmhouse ladies, their husbands, and a swarm of construction workers in yellow 'crew' shirts.

“What is going on? Who are these people?”

“They were here when we arrived,” Nova says, gliding elegantly forward. She's wearing a hoodie and jeans, but she still manages to look like a sophisticated boss.

Vargas walks up to me. “The men are from a construction company we work with often. Cody told me to call them in.”

“Figured we'd need a lot of hands to get this done by morning,” Cody says. Joel is close on his heels. Back in the car, he insisted on helping. *‘Just because I'm sick doesn't mean I can't make a difference.’*

Who can argue with that?

“Clarissa,” Nova's voice drags my attention back to her, “I'm not sure if you remember Sunny.”

“Of course I do.” I smile.

The tall, beautiful woman has long straight hair to her back and soft brown eyes. She returns my grin. “I'm a professional interior decorator—”

“The *best* in the city,” Kenya Alistair adds.

“I wouldn't say that.”

“That architecture magazine did though,” Kenya says with a wink.

Nova butts in. “Vargas already provided a blueprint of the house. Sunny made a tentative first draft of her design plan.”

“It's a little rushed. I only had half-an-hour to sketch before you got here, but with the time constraints, I really want

to focus on a few key living areas. Kitchen, living room, master, kid's room, and bathroom.”

A woman with dark brown skin and delicate facial features laughs. “Sunny, that’s the entire house.”

“Dawn’s got a point,” Kenya says.

“Maybe you can drop the backyard?” Dawn says.

“No. There has to be a backyard. And a front lawn. It’s all about curb appeal,” Sunny argues.

“Don’t you think it’s too much for you though?” Kenya asks.

“I’m not the one in charge of the backyard. Vanya is.”

My eyes nearly pop out of my face when Vanya Mulliez joins the circle of ladies. She’s a supermodel. An *actual* celebrity. It blows my mind that she’s here to do grunt work for Maggie’s house.

Vanya sees my shocked look and explains, “I dabble in landscaping, but I’m really just here to boss Hadyn around.”

“She does that at home, so it’s nothing new,” Hadyn Mulliez jokes and gives his wife a besotted smile.

Nova touches my arm. “I’m the project manager.”

“Because she’s so good at managing projects,” says a man with a Southern drawl. He’s sitting on the stairs, staring at Nova like she hangs the stars and moon.

“Yes, Adam. It’s in the name.” Nova’s voice sounds put-out, but there’s a smile flirting with her lips. She motions to me. “Dejonae and Yaya aren’t here yet. They’re making giant pots of chai and coffee for everyone.”

“Chai?” Vanya pipes up. “Did you say chai?”

“Only *after* you work,” Dawn teases.

“Someone hand me a power tool!” Vanya yells.

I smile.

Sunny shows me her drawings. It’s incredible. “You did this in thirty minutes?”

“It’s a *really* rough draft.”

“Sunny, it’s amazing.” My eyes glitter.

“While everyone is de-cluttering, I’ll order the furniture,” Sunny says.

I check my watch. “Will you have enough time? Most of the stores will close soon.”

“They’ll keep the doors open for me. Trust me.” She winks. “Would you like to pick out furniture with me or would you rather stay here?”

“Oh, I trust your judgement way more than I do mine.”

Sunny takes out a clip and shoves her hair into a ponytail. “Sounds like a plan. Darrel baby?”

“I’m here,” Darrel says. He’s a man with giant shoulders and the upright bearing of a soldier. He and Alistair don’t look as eager to be here as Hadyn and Adam.

“Can you take me to the furniture store? Kenya, can you come with?”

“Sure.” Kenya loops her hand through her husband’s. At once, Alistair’s stony facade cracks and he leaks a small smile for her.

Another fancy car joins the line of expensive, limited-edition vehicles parked on the grass.

“It’ll take a lot of elbow grease to turn this dump into a good home,” someone says.

I recognize that voice.

Two car doors thump and Island walks into view. She has in long pink braids and an oversized military-themed sweatshirt that definitely belongs to Clay.

Cody stiffens when he sees his brother.

The two share a tense nod.

Seeing Clay reminds me of what happened earlier tonight. My mind flashes back to that horrific moment when Hatches’s

hands were around my throat. Fingers digging into flesh. The putrid stench of alcohol. The fear that it was the end for me.

I shake my head and step forward, eager to run away from those thoughts. “Has anyone been inside? We should probably start by de-cluttering. We can’t paint or bring in furniture until we clean this place.”

“Good idea,” Dawn says.

I lead the way, my heart still accelerating.

Don’t think about it, Ris. Just work. Forget about it all and focus on helping Maggie.

Halfway to the rickety stairs, I’m yanked back by a hand on my arm. I turn and look up into Cody’s sizzling green eyes.

“What are you doing?” I ask, noticing the workers giving us weird looks as they pass by.

“What are *you* doing?” Cody barks.

I wrench my hand free. “I’m cleaning.”

“Why do you think I hired those guys?” Cody juts his chin at the crew.

“To *help*.” My eyebrows cinch together. “You don’t expect me to sit on my hands while everyone else does the labor, do you?”

The angry green moonlight in his eyes turns simmering. He steps closer to me, bringing the fragrance of his cologne mixed with Hatcher’s blood.

I see it again. Hatcher’s mouth open in a roar. His hands closing around my throat. His fingers on my neck.

My eyes drop to the ground and I shudder.

Cody notices and his tone turns even more gravelly. “I’m taking you home.”

I resist it when he tries to pull me. “I can’t...” My hands are slick with sweat. “I can’t do *nothing* right now, Cody.” Lifting my head, I beg him, “I need to stay busy.”

“You’ve been through a traumatic experience, Ris.” His voice is hard, but his touch on me is gentle. “Nobody’s going to blame you for stepping back and taking care of yourself before you take care of others.”

“Maggie is *my* responsibility.” My heart thumps. “I’m not leaving. Not unless you throw me over your shoulder and force me to.”

He steps even closer, his voice a low threat. “You think I wouldn’t?”

I swallow hard, struck immobile by his freakishly perfect looks and muscular shoulders in that blood-spattered white shirt.

Cody takes my hand.

I come back to myself. “Cody, I said I’m not leaving.”

“I’m not taking you home.” He leads me to his car. “Debrief me so I know what we’re working with.”

“Nova’s the project manager. If you want to know anything, you should talk to her.”

He pops his trunk open, takes out an old gift bag and shuts the trunk again. Turning to me, he says, “You do know the project manager isn’t the client, right?”

“I don’t understand.” My eyebrows scrunch.

He smiles at me like I’m a cute puppy fumbling up a steep flight of stairs.

I bristle. “Don’t look at me like I’m clueless.”

“You’re not clueless, Ris. You’re just...”

“What?”

“So used to serving others that you’re a stranger to being served.” He unbuttons the top of his shirt.

My eyes widen. I grab his hand to stop him. “What are you doing?”

“Changing. The guys already spotted the blood on my shirt, but they’re too polite to ask. I need to wear something

else.”

“Do you have to change in front of me?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time you’ve seen me naked.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?” he teases, leaning over me as he undoes another button.

The hot rush of his breath against my skin sends electricity skittering through my blood.

Cody Bolton is a fiend.

Utterly ridiculous.

Colossally overbearing.

A pain in my rear end.

But he doesn’t stop unbuttoning and I can’t stop looking at the hints of rock-solid abs being slowly unveiled.

“Ris?” He calls me in a deep voice.

“Huh. What?” I drag my gaze back to his raging green eyes ringed with mischief.

“Do you know what Party A and Party B means?”

“No.” I shake my head, trying hard to swallow and finding it impossible. Cody’s shirt flaps apart and I see stars.

The man has the most gorgeous torso stacked by two massive shoulders. It’s the sexiest set of abs I’ve ever seen, hands down.

Not that I go around staring at men’s abs.

“It’s a pretty outdated term now, but it used to define the role of two entities entering a contract.” Cody shrugs out of the shirt and his back muscles roll like well-oiled cogs in a machine.

Tingles spread from the top of my head and travel down swiftly.

“Two entities entering...” I bite my lip as my mind tilts into unsafe territory.

“In this case,” Cody grabs the shirt from the gift bag and his corded biceps flex, “you’re Party A and everyone here is Party B.”

I’m trying to keep up.

I swear I am.

But he’s a walking, talking Ice King sculpture with abs so shredded, each nick must have taken the artist days to perfect.

My fingers twitch and the throbbing between my legs gets painful.

“We’re here to make your vision come to life. You’re the client. You’re Party A. So I need you to tell me what you want me to do.”

Stay right there and let me touch you. Let me run my fingertips down your abs. Let me feel something other than scared and fragile.

“Ris?” His eyes flicker to mine.

“Why are you taking so long to put on your shirt?” I spit out, turning and giving him my back.

Just then, Joel wheels into our line of sight. He has a big grin on his face. “These people are cool. No one asked me *once* why I’m in a wheelchair.” Joel sees my flustered expression and the way Cody is standing close behind me. He comes to an abrupt halt. “What’s going on back here?”

“Nothing.”

“None of your business,” Cody says at the same time.

Joel scowls.

“I better get out there before Nova starts looking for me.” I take a few steps and then I turn back. “Cody?”

He slips a hand into his trouser pocket and tilts his chin up.

“Thank you.” *For those abs.* I shake my head. “For the Party A lesson. And for getting that construction crew.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Miss Maura.” He lumbers over to me. “There’s no guarantee this project will be done in time.”

“It will.”

His eyes glow softly in my direction.

I start moving before he weaves an even bigger spell over me.

“Come on, boys. Let’s get to work.”



GETTING a house completely renovated in twelve hours is... chaos.

Near impossible.

Before tonight, I’d say it couldn’t be done.

But these farmhouse ladies thrive on the challenge. Anyone who tells them something can’t be done... well, I wish them luck.

Nova has the project blocked out to the minute, assigning construction workers and a team leader to every room that needs to be painted, decorated and repaired.

At first, it feels like an uphill battle. There is *so* much to be moved out of the rooms, the floorboards are completely rotten and Sunny’s vision to add an attachment to the master bedroom requires way more construction than we initially thought.

We hit a snag with the plumbing and all hope seems lost.

But somehow, Cody gets a plumber to show up at midnight. The expert takes one look at the problem and shrugs. ‘I can fix that’.

Once that snag is smoothed over, the work continues.

“Ris.” Cody finds me outside where I’m shoving large stones into the dirt. “Come and drink something.”

“I’m fine,” I say, wiping my face with the back of my hand. It’s the least dirty part of me right now.

Cody glowers and gently swipes his thumb over my cheek, revealing a black streak on the pad of his finger. “Don’t be stubborn. You need to take a break.”

“Go on,” Vanya says. She’s kneeling beside me, getting her hands dirty too. Her husband Hadyn brings more rocks over in his wheelbarrow. “I took a break earlier. Hadyn can help me finish this up.”

Cody slips his hand around mine.

Maybe it’s because I’m tired or maybe it’s because I’m grateful, but I don’t pull away.

Inside, some of the others have the same idea. Kenya, Sunny, Dejonae and Yaya are gathered around the freshly installed counter. How Sunny managed to pull off a marble counter delivery at this time of night, I do not want to know.

“Here, Clarissa. Have some of Dejonae’s crack chai,” Kenya offers.

“Crack chai?” I accept the cup.

Dejonae looks barely older than Laura. She has dark skin and big voluminous curls.

“Because it’s so addictive that they think it might be drugs,” Dejonae jokes. I notice her signing when she talks. “But it’s not. I swear.”

“Thanks.” I take a sip and sigh in delight.

“See?” Sunny wiggles her eyebrows. “Told you it’s good.”

“Let me taste it,” Cody says beside me.

I hand over the cup.

He takes a sip right where I put my lips. His eyes flutter closed and he inhales deeply.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Even as he speaks, his head lolls forward as if he’s falling asleep right there.

He’s bone-tired.

But it's no shock.

He's been up since he left my apartment last night, coordinating with Clay to find Hatcher and coming up with the plan to tail him. Not long ago, he was exchanging blows with my attacker. Now he's working his butt off trying to install new windows.

When I was passing through the kitchen earlier, I saw Cody with his sleeves rolled up, gloves on and goggles perched on his nose as he did manual labor. He looked just as earnest as the construction crew with sweat rolling down his face and his eyes intense.

My heart melted at the sight.

This project is personal now. I could see it all over his face.

Cody's head snaps up as if he realizes he's falling asleep while standing. He lifts the chai and guzzles it.

"Save some for me," I tease, reaching for the cup.

Cody holds it above his head. "Say no to drugs, Ris."

I mock-frown. "You're funny."

"And you're worried about me." He lowers his voice. "But you don't have to be. I can go all day like this."

"Show off. You can have the rest." I brush the dirt off his collar. "I'll just kidnap Dejonae and force her to make more for me."

"Don't drag me into your little flirt-fest," Dejonae says, still signing.

Yaya gestures, her eyes on me.

"How long have you two been dating?" Dejonae translates.

I sputter, "We're not."

"I'm working on it," Cody says.

I smack him with the back of my hand.

He gives me a smile that makes my heart twitch. Finally, he drains the rest of my chai and squeezes my shoulder. "I

need to get back. Nova had the window install for a one hour block, but we're already running over."

I nod and watch him walk away. His steps are determined and his shoulders broad, but I heard the exhaustion in his voice and I saw the dark shadows around his eyes. This is all starting to take its toll. I don't know how much longer he can hold out.

"If you're trying to keep your relationship under wraps, you're doing a terrible job," Kenya says.

I shake my head, dragging my eyes away from the Ice King. "We're not dating."

Yaya gestures.

Dejonae translates. "Of course you're not."

"It's true!" I say laughingly. "I promise. He and I... we can never happen."

Yaya pats my shoulder. I don't understand sign language, but I understand that look. *'Keep telling yourself that'*.

It's weird. The questions don't bug me at all. I feel like I've known these ladies all my life. Gone are my insecurities. My awkwardness. The second-guessing that always happens when I'm around rich, successful people. In this moment, we're united in the same goal and it makes me fearless. Makes me comfortable.

"It's a long story that I don't want to get into right now." I wave to get Kenya's attention. "Where are the kids? I'm not keeping you from Belle, am I?"

"Are you kidding? Belle went nuts when she heard everyone was coming over for a surprise sleepover."

Yaya motions with her hands while Dejonae speaks. "Anyone else notice how much Rowan seems to like hanging around Niko?"

"Are we seeing a little love line?" Kenya teases, signing one of the words.

Sunny rolls her eyes. "Oh my gosh—they're kids. Don't try to matchmake minors."

“She’s just saying that because Belle’s at least ten years away from her dating stage,” I tease.

There’s a pause in which I wonder if I should have commented.

Then everyone bursts out laughing.

Sunny points to me. “You hit the nail on the head, Rissa.”

Kenya raises both hands in surrender. “Guilty.”

I smile, feeling like my place with these ladies was just cemented.

Nova enters the room then. Her eyes narrow on us. She doesn’t say a word, but we all straighten like naughty kids in front of the principal.

“I’m not talking! I’m working!” Kenya yells.

The others scatter too.

I hurry back outside.



THE MOON IS COVERED by the clouds and darkness thickens like a blanket over the neighborhood. My clock reads 2 AM. Thankfully, it’s bright in the yard. The men installed large lights that blaze over our heads.

Construction sounds roar through the air and I feel slightly bad for the residents who are losing their sleep.

Sorry. It’s just for one night.

The hours tick past.

Vanya’s idea for the backyard comes together, and I can tell that her exquisite taste in fashion translates to outdoor decorations. There’s a small swing, a sand box, and a play set for Maggie’s daughter.

Just looking at it gets me excited.

Soon, the others join us outside. The interior is mostly finished and it’s just the landscaping left.

I spot Cody across the lawn, dragging trees into place. His muscles bulge in the light and he effortlessly secures the plant into a freshly-dug hole. Sweat glistens on his forehead and his hair is disheveled. He runs his hands through it, proving exactly why it's in that state.

He glances over at me and my breath stalls.

Quickly I look away.

From here, I see Joel and Yaya working together to set flower pots along the front porch.

Painting the exterior was one of the first things the crew did. The striking dark-grey looks amazing against the white shingles. The red door is a burst of character.

I think Maggie will love it.

The sun is just cresting the horizon when we finish with the last of the details.

Kenya checks her watch. She's standing beside Alistair. He's got his hand on her waist and his chin is on top of her head, putting a dent in her afro puff. His eyes are closed as if he can barely keep them open.

"It's almost six o'clock," Kenya croaks. "But we did it."

"We did it," Sunny says with a satisfied smile.

Nova nods. "It looks good."

Yaya gestures with her hands.

Dejonae translates, "I hope Maggie likes it."

"She'll love it." I turn to the women, my movements sluggish. I'm starting to feel the effects of all that yard work. I used muscles I didn't even know I had. "Thank you so much. Your effort will make a huge difference in a young mother's life."

"No need to thank us," Dawn says, squeezing her husband's hand. "We were happy to help."

"Anytime," Vanya says.

"You guys are heroes," I mutter, trying not to cry.

Island drops her arms around me. “You’re the hero here, Clarissa. You’re the one who brought us together and made this possible.”

Tears sting my eyes. “Do you guys want to be there when I show Maggie?”

“Nah.” Vanya shakes her head. “My satisfaction is knowing we got it done quickly and well.”

I clasp my hands together, forcing back my emotions. “I’ll tell you everything after I present the place to Maggie tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I think you mean ‘in a few hours’,” Joel says, wheeling toward me.

“Right.” I place a gentle hand on his head. In a quiet voice, I say, “Thank you for all your hard work.”

He blushes.

I don’t intend to encourage his crush, but I do want to acknowledge his persistence. Tonight, I saw Joel looking a little lost. It didn’t help that one of the workmen almost tripped on his wheelchair. An explosion of Spanish erupted from the guy’s mouth. Joel probably didn’t understand a word of it, but the tone was heated enough to make the gist clear.

Stay out of the way.

His dejected expression showed that he was feeling useless. I was about to walk up to him when I saw Cody make a beeline his way.

Curious, I hid out of sight to watch.

Cody didn’t say anything, but he did hand Joel a power tool. Soon, he and the teenager were unfastening window screws—Cody dealing with the higher screws, while Joel handled the bottom.

It was a tiny moment and one I don’t think Cody sees as a big deal. But it meant a lot to Joel.

And it means something to me too.

No matter how cold and heartless Cody *wants* to appear, he's a softie when he allows himself to be.

I meet Cody's eyes over Joel's head. "Thank you. For everything."

He nods.

Everyone applauds and returns to their own cars so they can pick up their kids and drive home.

Cody helps Joel into the vehicle, packs his wheelchair and then moves to get in the driver's seat.

I stop him with a hand to his chest. "Ah-ah."

"What are you doing?" He frowns.

"I'm driving."

"No, you're not." He moves forward.

I push him back. "Cody, you can barely keep your eyes open. I'm not trusting my life and Joel's to you when you're dead on your feet."

"Let me call Vargas then. He can take us home," Cody grumbles.

"No. Vargas was working just as hard as you." I saw him zipping furniture together like he'd spent his entire life constructing bedframes and vanity dressers. "Let me drive," I insist.

Cody hesitates.

I hold my hand out, waiting for the keys.

Grumbling under his breath, he fishes in his pocket and plunks the keys in my palm.

"Thank you." I smirk in victory, shake them in front of his nose and climb in.

Joel conks out the moment I start driving. His loud snores make me laugh.

"Are you happy?" Cody asks. His head is tilted toward me and his eyes are at half-mast. He's fighting to remain conscious.

“I’m happy.”

“Good,” Cody says.

“Good?”

He nods.

“Why do you care if I’m happy? This is about Maggie, not me.”

“It is about Maggie.” He mumbles. “But if you’re not happy, it means nothing.”

My breath catches in my throat.

I look over at Cody, but his eyes slant closed.

He’s sleeping.

Or passed out.

My lips tighten and my heart shifts again. I feel *something* for Cody, the royal jerk who didn’t show up to our wedding. The cocky CEO who manipulated us out of our corporate grants. The sweetheart who made all this possible tonight.

Emotions stir in me and I’m not doing a good job of shoving them into a corner. It doesn’t help that I keep sneaking peeks at the angled planes of his face.

I park in front of Cody’s building and stare up at the intimidating tower of glass, cement and blaring lights. He owns that entire structure. And several others around the city.

Can I do this? Can I enter his world again and just... hope it doesn’t chew me up and spit me out this time?

Cody stirs and his eyes crack open. His voice has a husky tinge when he says, “We’re here?”

“We are.”

He sits up and stretches. “Wait for me. Don’t catch a cab. I’ll drive you home.”

He can’t be serious. “You’re exhausted, Cody.”

“And you’re not?” He gives me a stern look. Despite his hard expression, he still looks like someone running on zero

sleep. “You were nice enough to drop Joel home. I’ll get him upstairs and then come back down to take you.”

“No way. I’ll just call an Uber.”

“This late?” His eyebrows form an angry V.

“Cody, it’s six thirty in the morning.”

He gives me a perplexed look, peers up at the sunshine blasting through the sky, and then frowns. “Oh.”

“I’ll give you a hand with Joel.”

When I start to climb into the backseat, Cody tugs on my arm. “You get the wheelchair.”

I laugh at his ridiculousness and set up the wheelchair.

Joel is half-asleep but, when he sees me, he smiles sloppily. “Clarissa’s here. This must be a dream.”

“Watch it.” Cody growls.

“Ugh. Bolton’s here. I guess this is a nightmare.”

I flutter a hand to my mouth to hold back my laughter.

Cody gives me a ‘*you see what I have to deal with*’ look.

“We’re moving upstairs, tough guy.” I grab the handles of Joel’s wheelchair and steer him up the ramp.

The layout of Cody’s house is perfect to maneuver a wheelchair. It’s easy to settle Joel in the elevator and wheel him into the penthouse suite.

“Where’s his room?” I ask.

Cody points down the hallway. Once we get there, he helps a half-awake Joel into bed while I take off his shoes.

“Let him sleep with them on,” Cody grumbles.

“It’s uncomfortable,” I counter. “Does he sleep with a blanket?”

“How should I know?”

Slanting the grumpy man a dark look, I pull the sheet up to Joel’s chin. The teenager looks a lot less flirty and a lot more

frail when he's asleep. His machine beeps steadily next to his bed.

Cody pulls down the shades so the sun doesn't disturb Joel in his sleep.

Together, we tiptoe outside.

"You want something to drink?" he asks.

"I should probably go."

"Or," Cody says, closing the distance between us, "you could stay over?"

"Stay over?"

Bad, bad idea.

It's difficult to keep my hands away from his rock-solid abs now that I know they're under that soft green T-shirt. We're both delirious with exhaustion. If something happens now, I won't be able to resist him.

"Clay shot me a text. Hatchesen is meeting the social worker at ten. That means we have," he checks his watch, "about two hours to take a nap before we have to get ready. It'll be faster for everyone if you sleep over here and then head out."

"But..."

"If you leave now, that'll be at least an hour going and coming."

I frown. "You've thought this whole thing through, haven't you?"

Cody slides his hands around my waist, closes his arms over my back and pulls me into his chest. The sudden hug surprises me and I stiffen in his arms.

"You want the truth?" he whispers.

I nod when all my good senses are telling me to push away.

"There was a moment in that alley, when I was running to you, that I thought I wouldn't make it in time."

My heart slams against my chest.

Cody kisses my temple. “I don’t want to let you out of my sight. Not tonight. I won’t be able to rest if I can’t hold you. Make sure you’re okay.”

His honesty makes me bold. “My turn.”

“Mm.” He nuzzles his nose in my hair.

“I don’t really want to be alone tonight either.”

His shoulders perk up and he opens his eyes.

“But this doesn’t mean anything,” I tack on. “We’re just... finding comfort together after a traumatic experience.”

“Understood.” He bounces his head.

“It’s a very common coping mechanism. Like... holding a teddy bear.”

“A teddy bear?” He looks amused.

“Yes. You can be my teddy bear for a few hours.” I see the glint in his eyes and add, “I won’t do anything more than sleep. And you’re in no shape to do more than sleep either.”

His lips descend on my throat, right where Hachen left his mark. “Don’t tempt me, Ris.”

He’s the one tempting me.

I wiggle out of his embrace and point a finger. “Cody.”

“Fine. I’ll behave.” He captures my hand and slides our fingers together. I’m dead-tired too, but I still feel the sizzle between us.

“Where are you taking me?” I whisper.

He glances back with a possessive glimmer in his eyes. “To bed.”

THE PAST

CODY

IT'S TONIGHT. I have to kiss her tonight.

We've been taking it slow. Mostly because I can't tell if she likes me or not. It took following her around the quad, a bouquet of flowers, and a whole freaking singing quartet to convince her to go on one date with me.

One.

And I'm pretty sure she just said yes to spare me the embarrassment of a rejection.

Since it was definitely a pity date, I didn't want to mess it up by kissing her after dinner. It took all my courage just to ask if I could see her again. It took liquid courage to officially ask for her number.

Did I *already* have her number?

Maybe.

It was in the file I snuck out of the student council.

Along with her mother's phone number, her birthday, and other personal crap that I had no business knowing.

So yes, I had to *officially* get her number so she didn't look at me like a creep when I texted her.

I'm already starting at a disadvantage by being the more desperate one in this relationship.

Is it a relationship?

Hell if I know.

I know what I *want*.

I want her to be my girlfriend. Clarissa's sweet, pretty and I'm obsessed with her. Do I need another reason than those three? Mom would say I do.

'Never give up control, Cody. Always be the one in control.'

Right now, that advice means jack squat.

Clarissa's holding all the cards here and I'm playing poker blind. I can't tell if she's feeling me too. She's still holding me at arm's length, like she doesn't trust me or... I don't know.

Maybe I'm coming on too strong.

Maybe she knows how much I think about her.

Maybe she knows I've been dreaming about her at night. Those gorgeous lips on mine. Those sweet curves trembling under my touch.

Focus, Cody.

We start at kissing.

Just kissing.

Two lips touching.

It's fine. I can do this.

"We're here," Clarissa says, turning to me with an upturned face that's just begging for a peck. Or a sloppy make-out session with my hand down her blouse. Somewhere in between?

When I *do* kiss her, how intense should it be? I never thought about it.

In my defense, my plan was kind of sparse.

Step one: kiss Clarissa.

Didn't leave much room for detail or hand-mouth-tongue coordination.

"I had a great time," Clarissa says.

She's standing right under the lamppost. Silver shines on her thick hair and in her cinnamon silk eyes.

Damn, she's stunning in that flowered dress. It's pretty. Light. Simple.

Everything is simple with her.

Not just her appearance—although that's a big part of it. Clarissa isn't like other girls. She doesn't fuss about her

lipstick or powder her nose every three minutes. She eats food like someone's going to take it from her. Whatever the opposite of high maintenance is, Clarissa is *that*.

But it's more than just what she is.

It's simple *being* with her.

Like that moment when you're floating in the pool, the sun is on your face and—for a second—you're not scared that someone's going to splash you or pull you under.

It's that three seconds of relief.

I can be myself and kind of...

Not coast.

What's the word?

Breathe.

Yeah, I can breathe with her.

I have so many goals. My future is so crisp. Clear. It propels me. Makes me work harder and harder. Makes every second that I'm *not* working a waste.

But with her, the noise cancels out in my head.

Clarissa shifts her keys back and forth between her hands. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." I step forward.

Her eyes widen.

Is that a good sign? A bad one?

I lean in a little closer and she holds herself perfectly still.

Good sign.

Her eyes flutter closed.

Even better sign.

My heart starts pounding.

Yes! I'm doing it.

Almost there...

I slide an arm around her waist and draw her up to me. She lets out a little squeak of surprise that makes my blood roar. How can one woman be so innocent? So sweet? Clarissa is like a wrapped candy drop and I want to shed all her layers.

Moving slowly, I close the distance between us when...

“Oh, damn. Sorry. Excuse me.” One of her neighbors shuffles past us. He gives me a thumbs-up. “Right on, brother.”

I scowl.

Clarissa steps back and I know the moment is over.

I slip my hands into my pockets, half to keep them from swinging at the guy and half to keep her from seeing how excited I was.

“I’ll uh,” my voice cracks, “you... um... goodnight.”

Really?

I wince as I turn away and run a hand through my hair in frustration.

Uh... um... goodnight?

What am I? A freaking five year old with a stutter?

This is my fault. I should have kissed her after that first dinner. Just gotten it over with. By dragging it out so long, I missed my window.

Regret eats me alive. She’s going to think I’m an idiot.

Of course she does.

I think I’m an idiot.

Maybe this is the end.

Maybe she’ll dump me when she realizes I’m not as cool as I pretend to be.

Regret spasms through my chest. I wish I could have gotten a kiss from Clarissa before it all went to crap.

PRINCESS HOURS

CODY

MY HANDS SINK into delicious curves. I knead my fingers over a trim waist. Flared hips. Pinch the curve of her thigh—

“Cody.” A familiar voice grunts.

I smell Clarissa’s flowery scent and a smile curls my lips. I burrow into her, finding a warmth that sends a shockwave through my body.

This is a dream. This has to be a dream.

“Cody, what are you doing?” she protests sleepily.

Nope. Not a dream. In my dream, she wouldn’t push me away.

Or would she?

I like it when Clarissa gets feisty. It’s how I know we’re still close. Still connected. The moment she gets too polite and formal, it shows distance. She’s not afraid to snap at the people in her inner circle.

“Cody, you’re... I think you... you’re a little excited.”

“Crap. Sorry,” I mumble, my words an exhausted slur soup. I ease my hips back, not sure what to do about that problem. My body doesn’t understand that Clarissa’s just here in my bed to sleep.

It’s like a caveman.

Clarissa here. Must have babies.

Yeah, buddy. Just give it a rest for now.

I think she’ll go back to sleep, but she rolls over, her eyes parted slightly. “You do that often?”

My eyebrows hike. Is she asking how often I—

“Bring girls into your bed?”

“What?”

“I mean,” her eyelashes slide down, “I don’t expect someone like you to have an empty bed for ten years.”

“I didn’t.”

She goes quiet again.

“But they were all just pale imitations of you. Eventually, I stopped trying and focused on the company.”

“You really expect me to believe that?” she mumbles, her voice husky from sleep.

“It’s the truth.” I stare at her in the darkness. Her curls fan out behind her, thick and frizzy. “I left you, but my heart didn’t.”

Pure brown eyes meet mine. Her smile hits the center of my chest like a gunshot. “That’s weird. You being sweet.”

“I can be sweet. Just not with everyone.”

“Do I count as ‘everyone’?”

I see the soft invitation in her gaze. The point is made clear when she drops her finger on my mouth and traces my lips.

Am I dreaming?

I can’t tell.

She’s acting a little drunk. The way her words are slower. The way her eyes can’t move beyond half-mast. The way she’s touching me. I heard somewhere that being exhausted does the same thing to the brain as being intoxicated.

Is that happening right now?

“Do I?” Clarissa presses.

“No. You’re not just everyone.” I pause. “You’re the only one for me.”

Clarissa gives me a sloppy smile and rolls on top of me. Shocked, my hands sprawl out at my sides like I’m showing the coach I didn’t touch the ball.

She comes up on her knees and straddles me. Through her jeans and my sweatpants, throbbing heat blazes.

Hot, thick air hits my lungs.

I accept her weight with a stunned exhale. “Ris, do you know what you’re doing?”

Taste her. The caveman in my pants urges. *Lick her. Take her.*

“Ris?”

She rolls her shirt over her head and tosses it aside. “We should celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“Having someone in your bed after so long,” she whispers slyly. “I missed you, Cody.” She winds her arms around my neck and pushes her body close to mine, teasing every inch of my skin.

Screw it.

Whether this is a dream or not doesn’t matter.

I kiss the side of her neck where her throat meets her jaw bone. She trembles. Presses her soft warmth into me. Calls my name in a voice that riles me up.

I’m about to tear her jeans off. It’ll take a lightning bolt from heaven to keep me from tasting her body and pounding her to oblivion...

An alarm beeps.

I see a flash of light.

No, no, no.

The beeping gets louder.

I crack my eyes apart and groan. The light is coming from my window. Beside me, Clarissa is sleeping with her back turned. Forget straddling my waist and taking her shirt off. There’s a whole freaking continent between her and me on the bed.

I quickly squeeze my eyes shut, willing the dream to come back.

But it doesn’t.

I glance at Clarissa again, my body raging in protest. The hills and valleys of her silhouette remind me of the mountains in my hometown. Regal. Dangerous. Full of curves.

I reach my hand out.

She's so close. You could still take her.

Yeah, buddy. There's such a thing called consent.

I roll out of bed and run a hand down my face. There's still a bit of time before we have to be up. Dropping to the ground, I do some push-ups and shake out my arms.

As the adrenaline fades, the sleep my body craves takes over.

Perfect.

I quickly drop the shades over the windows, roll back into bed and fall asleep.



I'M up before my next alarm clock. Sadly, I didn't have another dream.

The room is dark. The sun is trying its best to creep through the windows, but it's failing. Heavy velvet curtains block most of the light.

I'm sore. Exhausted. My body is crying out for more sleep since I barely logged any sensible hours.

There's a woman beside me.

Not just any woman.

The woman.

The one who got away.

The one who never left my heart, my mind.

The one who swore she'd never forgive me.

The one who did.

But forgiveness doesn't mean she's mine again, even if she accepted the invitation into my bed.

On the bright side, she's crossed the continent between her side and mine.

Clarissa's sprawled out, her head on my chest, her leg a high kick on my thighs, curly black hair contained in a bun. I want to reach out and squeeze those tight curls.

I also want to kiss my way down her forehead to her lips.

But I think the curls are the less creepy option.

I sink my fingers into her hair. It's so satisfying.

"Mm." She swats at my hand, protective of her curls even in her sleep.

The fact that she didn't grumble about needing a bonnet when she fell on top of my pillows shows how crazy exhausted she was last night.

Or this morning.

I prop my head up on my hand and look down at her. Soft brown skin. Thick eyelashes. Plump lips.

A deer in the bed of a hunter.

Does she know how badly I want her? Does she know how obsessed I am with her? Does she know I'm not the same, fumbling, uncertain boy who followed her around in college?

Back then, everything felt complicated.

Except her.

She was so simple, so innocent that I was the one who over-thought, over-analyzed, stumbled around in the dark like a blind man.

I tangle my fingers in hers and bring it up to my lips for a kiss. "You shouldn't have reminded me of how good it is to sleep beside you, princess," I whisper. "Because now, there's no hope of me sleeping without you again."

She doesn't move. Doesn't hear me or the threat I just made.

Because to her, it would be a threat.

I smirk and disentangle myself from her. Grabbing my phone, I shoot Mimi a text and then I notice that there's an update from Clay. Must be that military training that allows him to withstand high-adrenaline scenarios on no sleep.

I need to call my brother, find a new toothbrush for Clarissa, and rearrange my schedule so I can join her at Maggie's house. She hasn't asked—to be fair the woman doesn't ask me for anything—but I know her well. She'll want *someone* from the renovation team there.

And I just so happen to be someone from the team.

I start to leave when Clarissa latches onto me. Her face tightens in fear and sweat beads on her forehead. She pulls me closer, squeezing so tight I almost choke.

Teddy bear.

I thought she was being coy when she mentioned needing one. I didn't realize she meant that.

I twist around. "It's okay, princess." I slide my fingers over her forehead and into her hair. "It's okay. You're okay."

My voice seems to calm her. Her face smooths out and she settles down again. I wait until I hear her breathing deeply before I move my hand away.

I want to rip Hatcher apart, limb by limb, for instilling that kind of fear in her. Making her live through that terror. He shouldn't be walking the streets. He shouldn't be planning to keep his daughter, planning to ruin Maggie's life. He shouldn't be doing anything but bleeding into the ground.

I launch out of the room, my phone to my ear.

Clay answers as brusquely as usual. "Don't, Cody."

"Clarissa had a nightmare. She's *terrified*. Who freaking knows how deep those scars will go? You still want me to do nothing?"

"I'm sorry about Clarissa. I really am. But you're not getting to him."

“Why not?”

“I have men stationed around Hatchesen’s place.”

“I wondered where Doberman disappeared to.” I freeze.
“They’re not there to protect us from him, are they?”

“I didn’t expect you to call me first. I’m grateful for that. It means I can talk you out of it.”

Frustration grabs my head like a vice. I run my fingers through my hair. “You’re protecting a monster.”

“I’m protecting my brother. You think Clarissa will thank you for killing someone? You think she’ll look at you the same way? You think those scars are easy to live with?” His voice dips at the last line.

I curse under my breath.

“This isn’t you, Cody. You don’t let your base instincts control you. You’re smart. You’d have found another way to ruin him. To make him pay. You wouldn’t jump to violence. You wouldn’t fly off the deep-end.”

“So now you’re calling me insane?”

“Right now? Yes.”

I scoff.

“Why do you go nuts when it’s about her?”

“Because I love her, dammit.” The words burn my lips. It’s my first time admitting them out loud. My first time letting them spring free since the wedding that never was.

“Love? Cody, if you love someone, then you find a way to make *them* happy. Not yourself. Brutally confronting Hatchesen will make you happy. It’ll satisfy that rage in you. But what will it do for Clarissa?”

His words shake me to my core.

Never be controlled, Cody. You always be the one in control.

Mom’s voice clashes with my brother’s advice.

I blow out a breath. “This is the farthest you go to protect that creep. Don’t get in my way again, Clay.”

I hang up.

The restlessness inside begs to be pointed in a direction and shot. Or maybe explode like a beam of light from my chest.

I keep pacing until the sound of Joel’s wheelchair reaches my ears. We barely talk at home, moving past each other like ghost ships, but I’ve gotten used to hearing those big wheels tracking on the tiles.

The teenager wheels into view, jaw cracking on a giant yawn. I’m concerned by those dark shadows under his eyes and the pale set to his skin.

I saw him hanging back during the renovation yesterday and I had no plans of including him. His doctor was very clear about not putting any strain on his heart.

Emotionally. Physically. The kid is fragile.

If it wasn’t for that jerk who cursed him out, I wouldn’t have intervened. Maybe giving him those power tools and dragging him into the fray was irresponsible.

The sound of his wheelchair gets louder. Although he sees me, he doesn’t say anything and just heads to the fridge.

I can’t blame the kid for ignoring me. I practically told him to by ignoring him first.

Rubbing my forehead, I motion to Joel. “Morning.”

He comes to an abrupt halt and stares at me like I’m an alien. Maybe I am for breaking our unspoken ‘rules of *no* engagement’ pact.

“About last night, let’s keep all that manual labor you did a secret from your nurse.”

“I’ll think about it.”

I resist the urge to flip him off.

Choosing to be an adult, I grumble, “If you want something other than cereal, I was about to make breakfast.”

It’s better to keep my hands busy. That way I won’t be as tempted to go after Hatchen.

“Sure. Whatever.” Joel turns back.

“Where are you going?”

He stops and looks at me.

I toss him an apron. “You’re on food prep.”

The kid doesn’t argue. In fact, his lips curl up.

That’s weird, right? A kid being excited about having to work?

I squeeze past his wheelchair to open the fridge. Grabbing the bacon, I set it on the counter.

Joel stares up at me with narrowed eyes, a knife clutched in his fist.

Oh boy.

“You’re not going to stab me with that are you?” I say casually. “Because if you want to murder me, you’re going to have to get in line. I’ve got a ton of ex-employees who already claimed the privilege.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Joel mumbles.

My eyebrows hike.

He keeps staring at me like I’m going to bust out a pair of handcuffs and take him to jail. “Did Clarissa tell you to do that?”

She did. But I had no plans of listening to *that* instruction.

I narrow my eyes at him. “What part of putting you to work counts as ‘being nice’? We all need to eat. We all need to work.”

His shoulders lift in a shrug and I see beyond the cocky teenager act to the uncertain boy beneath.

“People don’t really ask me to do things.” He looks unsettled after admitting that. His chin hoists up. “So why do you?”

“Because you’re more than capable,” I mutter.

His eyes widen. “Really?”

“Kid, you have two working arms and a working brain.” I wash onions under the sink and set them in front of his cutting board. “You can do anything anyone else can do. It’ll just take a little extra maneuvering.”

“A little? Nah. It’s a lot of maneuvering. I just get in the way.” His gaze casts to the floor and his shoulders slump.

I flick the stove on. “So what?”

Joel’s head whips up again.

“What people see as a disadvantage is also your advantage.”

“What part of this,” he gestures to the wheelchair and heart machine, “is an advantage?”

I crack an egg and it sizzles when it hits the frying pan. “Human beings have tunnel vision. We only see our tiny corner of the world. We live in our comfort zones and we don’t like to leave it. That’s why there’s so much hate in the world.” I glance up at him. “People who are different force us to leave our comfort zones and find a new perspective.”

“So what’s my advantage?”

“You’re not normal.” I scramble the eggs.

“Gee, thanks.” He chops the onions more aggressively.

“It means you offer a fresh perspective.” I take the chopped onions from him and sauté them with the eggs. “Can you make some toast?” As Joel wheels away to the toaster, I continue, “You instinctively see the world from a different angle. You can solve problems from a place no one’s even thought of.”

“That doesn’t sound exciting.”

“What do you find exciting?”

“I dunno.” He shrugs again and gestures to my penthouse.
“Being rich.”

“Money is easy.”

“Of course *you’d* say that.”

“You’ve still got an advantage.”

“Come on.” He groans. “I’d have to work a bajillion years to earn this much. And I don’t even know if I’ll survive to next year.”

I slip the scrambled egg into a plate. “You’re not going to die, Joel.”

“Why do you care? Don’t you want me dead?”

“Why would I want you dead when you’re family?” I answer gruffly.

Joel doesn’t move.

I glance around. “The bread isn’t going to toast itself, kid.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course I mean that. Unless you want to make pancakes ___”

“Do you really think of me as family?”

My spoon slows and I face the teenager. He’s watching me like he’s trying to see inside my head.

“Kid, you’re under my roof, in my care and my responsibility. What else do you call that?”

“An employee.”

“Who eats breakfast with me?”

“A live-in employee.”

I sigh, noting his serious expression. Before answering, I consider things from his point of view. The kid’s had a hard life. Living with a heart condition isn’t fun. His mom’s dead. His father left him. Even so, he pushed through and isn’t constantly whining about how hard he has it. Joel’s a good kid

and, although he gets on my nerves sometimes, I don't mind having him around.

“We're family, Joel.”

There's a flash of vulnerability before a cocky smirk crosses his face. “Does that mean I'll get some of your money when you die?”

I turn back to my slightly scorched scrambled eggs. “Make your own money.”

“How? And *don't* say by working hard.” He puts the bread in the toaster.

“You're thinking about it all wrong. Money doesn't follow hard work. Money follows the person who solves a problem. The more problems you solve, the more people who pay you for those solutions, the more money loves you.” I bring three plates to the table. “I don't feel sorry for you, Joel. So don't feel sorry for yourself either. On top of a different perspective, you've got the power of being underestimated.” I meet his eyes. “Use it.”

He chews on his bottom lip thoughtfully.

The toast pops.

“Hey,” Joel mumbles, “why are there three plates? Isn't it just the two of us?”

“Morning.” Clarissa patters into the kitchen like a beam of sunshine.

My grip on the toast loosens. Thankfully, it drops on the counter rather than the floor.

Sweet mercy. I'd pay a billion dollars for the privilege of hearing Clarissa Maura wish me good morning in my kitchen every day.

Joel's eyes narrow when he sees that Clarissa arrived from my bedroom. His gaze tracks over her jeans and T-shirt. It's the same outfit she was wearing earlier.

I ignore his pointed look. “Morning. Did the alarm wake you?”

“No, it didn’t.” She smiles at Joel. “The delicious smells coming from the kitchen did.” Her eyes sweep to mine. There’s a hint of accusation there. “My alarm didn’t sound at all.”

“I was going to wake you. I just wanted you to get some extra sleep.”

“Hm.” She frowns at me.

“Sit.” I set sizzling bacon into a plate and offer it to her. “You still like bacon?”

“No.” She pushes the plate down.

“Me either,” Joel protests. The kid’s a liar. He was drooling over that bacon while I cooked it.

I tilt my head, studying her. She’s cute with her frizzy hair and her face puffy from sleep. Forget eggs and bacon. I’m full just watching her.

Clarissa clears her throat and nibbles on a piece of toast, ignoring my inspection.

The doorbell rings.

“Who’s that?” Clarissa asks.

“Mimi.”

“Why did you call Mimi?”

I wink.

“Cody...” Her voice has a scolding edge.

“She’s dropping off a suit for an event tonight.” I walk backward while explaining.

“And what else?” Clarissa knows me too well.

I smirk.

“Cody!”

I chuckle as I open the door to Mimi.

Clarissa Maura is the woman of my dreams, and my favorite thing in the world is spoiling her—whether she likes it or not.



“I DON’T LIKE IT.” Ris folds her arms over her chest and pouts.

Seeing those ruby-red lips puckering like an invitation to sin is *not* helping me or the beast in my pants.

“What’s not to like?” I subtly adjust myself.

Clarissa mocks my tone. “*Here’s a new house. Don’t get pregnant for another douchebag screw up.*” It sounds both rude and condescending.”

“Two of my best traits.” I nod at the security guard who waves my car forward.

“It’s not her fault she fell blindly in love and missed all the signs.”

“No man should ever put his hands on a woman. He’s the blight of the earth for mistreating someone he claims to love. But falling blindly and missing all the signs? That part *is* her fault.” I back into my private parking spot. “She’s the one who chose him.”

“And he probably wasn’t flinging her around and yelling at her when they were dating. Men are the liars. Women are the ones who buy it, sure, but at least we have pure hearts.”

“If someone screws you over once, shame on them.” I think of the embarrassing loss I took my first year of business. “But if they screw you over twice?”

The angry expression on her face lights me up as she twists a little and narrows her eyes in my direction. “We all make mistakes.”

“If you make the same crappy decision over and over again, it’s not a mistake anymore. It’s a choice.”

“Love messes with the brain.”

“And laziness messes with money. Do we blame love and laziness or do we blame the person who indulges in it?”

Ris folds her arms over her chest, bringing my attention to the cleavage peeking out of her fancy white blouse. The top is paired with long, flowing pants that show off her sexy hips and trim waist. Her hair is pasted down in a sleek ponytail that falls down her back.

Clarissa looks good enough to feast on and the fact that she gave in and wore the clothes I bought her is a miracle.

No, not a miracle. It's Mimi.

I've already decided. Mimi is going to be the godmother of our future children.

"What about you?" Clarissa arches a brow.

Oh, I already don't like this. "Don't compare me with that abusive bastard. I have never and *will* never put my hands on a woman."

"I know that, Cody." She leans forward. "I'm saying, according to your own logic, I shouldn't make the same mistake twice. It would be foolish of me to jump back into bed with you after you didn't show up to our wedding."

My eyebrow furrows. "You *did* jump back into bed with me."

"Not like *that*."

"We shared a bed, princess. I'm your teddy bear."

"Ugh." She cringes. "Don't."

I smirk.

"But... I guess that proves my point," she muses.

A beat passes.

My blood pulses so hard I almost pass out from the adrenaline.

"And what exactly is your point?"

"That *hormones* mess with the brain."

"Ah-ah." I take her hand and slide my thumb over the back of it. "You didn't say hormones earlier. You said love."

“Did I?”

“You did.”

“I don’t remember that.” Her eyes flash with mischief and her sexy lips curl higher.

Screw it.

Somehow, this argument about responsibility in dating turned into... something else. I don’t care what she’s thinking or what kind of game she’s playing with me. The way she’s looking at me, the soft scent of her hair, the pretty brown eyes—I’m going to explode if I can’t kiss her.

“You can’t remember or you don’t want to?” I growl, easing over to her side of the car.

Desire thrums through me like a wolf on the prowl.

I grip her chin. One finger traces her lips, teasing at the parted middle. My body hardens, firmer than granite with the skitter of her breath on my pointer. The hunger boiling inside me explodes.

“How about I jog your memory?”

“How do you plan on doing that?” she asks.

I grip her beautiful face firmly, my lips hovering just over hers.

She’s ready for this.

I can see it in her eyes.

They’ve gone pitch-black with anticipation, with tension, with desire.

My focus is on Clarissa, and I miss the sight of a speedy missile hammering our way until it’s too late. When I see the shadow behind her head, all I can do is bellow, “Get down!”

Clarissa releases a confused shriek as I push her head into my lap and cover her body with my own. Glass explodes. Shards rain over our heads, coating my back and biting into my skin.

A small rock lands on my dashboard. It clatters, rolling forward until it comes to a dead stop.

“Ris, are you okay?” I bark, easing off her and lifting her head.

She looks shaken, but her eyes are clear. “Y-yes. What was that?”

I glance up and notice someone rushing away on foot. A security guard is tailing him, but the perp jumps on a motorcycle and zooms off.

Vargas drives up at that moment. He parks beside me, sees the hole in my window and pops out.

His eyes are wide and frantic. “Bolton! What the hell?”

“Ris,” I keep my eyes on her face, “are you sure you’re okay?” I push her hair back and inspect her neck. “Do you have any injuries?”

She brushes glass fragments from my hair. Her hands are trembling. “I’m the one who should be asking you that.”

“Tell me you’re okay,” I growl. “I need to *hear* it.”

“I’m okay.”

My chest heaves and my fingers curl into fists on either side of her. I can feel my temper slipping out of the cage I keep it in. The cage that always stays locked, *always*, unless it’s about her. Unless someone puts her life in danger.

You’re the reason she’s in danger.

The truth knocks me cold.

I’m the one who put her in the crosshairs. My life, my choices, my enemies... I’m more dangerous to her than Hatcher.

“Cody?” she whispers.

“Go with Vargas,” I grind out.

“Cody, you’re bleeding.” Her fingers swipe against the side of my neck and come back bloody.

Damn this woman.

“I said *go*,” I hiss.

Vargas opens her door, which he could have easily done from the inside since all the glass is freaking crumbs at my feet.

Clarissa’s fancy stilettos crunch against the shards as Vargas half-pulls her out. I can feel her worried eyes on me, beautiful brown pools locked in my direction.

I take a breath, fixing my expression into a cold, hard line. There’s no use getting pissed off about this. Emotions serve no purpose in business. They only cloud the mind. Scramble objectives. Make it hard to root out festering problems.

My gift, *my* superpower, is the ability to shut those emotions off and weed out anything that would keep a well-oiled machine from functioning.

This time, the machine happens to be mine.

I climb out of the car, pulling darkness all around me. In the distance, I see that the security guard in pursuit has been joined by several others. They’re trying to chase down the motorcycle on foot.

Ridiculous.

I pull out my phone.

Clay answers curtly. “I don’t work for you, Cody. You’re family. There’s a difference. So if this is about Hatchesen—”

“Someone just threw a rock through my car window.”

He goes silent.

I stick a hand into my jacket pocket and take out the rock. “It looks like a spark plug porcelain.”

“The perp did some research.”

“He’s unoriginal.”

“You have anyone in mind?”

The list is too long. “The weapon of choice is specific. Could be someone from an engineering firm.”

“Doesn’t have to be. Spark plug porcelain is easy to get your hands on. One google search will tell you it’s strong enough to break a windshield.” There’s a thoughtful lull before he says, “Was anyone hurt?”

“No, but it could have been worse. Clarissa was in the car.”

Clay goes silent again.

I step into the lobby. There’s a crowd in front of the elevator, but one look at my face and they part like the Red Sea.

“Why are you talking to me and not your security team?” Clay asks from the phone.

I step inside the elevator, slam the button and tilt my head up. “Because I’m going to need a new security team.”

“Cody...”

I hang up.

When I get upstairs, my receptionist shoots to her feet.

“Call in *every* guard on duty,” I growl, moving past her.

She rushes to pick up the phone.

I stride into the conference room and fold myself into the chair at the head of the table. My cold expression doesn’t break when the security guys knock on the door.

“Come in.”

They don’t.

They all bottle-neck the entrance, prodding each other to walk in first.

I remain quiet, staring straight ahead.

Ice King. I’ve heard the whispers. It’s no secret that my employees have a healthy dose of fear for me.

It’s deserved.

Especially in this case.

“You won’t like what happens if you waste any more of my time,” I growl.

The guards file in, each of them taking a chair.

I press my palms against the table and rise. “Are you aware of what just occurred in my parking lot?”

“S-sir.” The head of the team lifts a hand. “We alerted the police. Zalbany got a good look at the guy’s face. We’ll make sure he doesn’t get away with this.”

I chuckle low in my throat and watch grown men try not to piss their pants.

Leveling the team leader with my lifeless stare, I say, “Who’ll make sure he doesn’t get away. You?” I motion to the guard who first took chase. “Or you?”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

I slam my fist against the table.

Everyone jumps.

“Do you know what I hate the most?” I hiss.

Crippling silence fills the room.

“It’s people telling me how sorry they are *after* the damage has been done. Does ‘sorry’ make anything better? Does sorry bring people back to life?”

The guard shakes his head.

I give them my back because I can’t stand the sight of incompetence. “Report to HR and hand in your badges.”

Disgruntled whispers fill the room.

I turn back around, quieting them all with a seething stare. “After today, you’re all f—”

“Excuse me.” The door flings open and Vargas waves at me from outside.

Stunned, I stare at him. He leans his body forward. His upper half is in the room while his feet are technically in the hallway.

“What are you still doing here?” I grunt.

Vargas licks his lips nervously. “Sorry to interrupt, but there’s someone important in the next room. They’re asking to see you right away.”

I scowl so darkly the plant next to the window withers. “It can wait.”

“I don’t think it can.”

I stiffen at his insistence and then I start to pay attention. Under ordinary circumstances, my assistant would never interrupt me.

Not unless it’s about Clarissa.

Vargas gives me a loaded look and nods. “It’s *her*.”

I don’t need to hear anything else. Nostrils flaring, I button my jacket and stalk out of the room so fast a chair spins.

“What the hell do you mean she’s ‘in the next room’?” I mutter, stomping in front of Vargas. “I told you to get her out of here.”

“You try getting that woman to do something she doesn’t want to do,” Vargas hisses. “She’s as stubborn as you are.”

I give him a dirty look for that comment. “I hope you didn’t set this up.”

He opens the door for me. “Do I look like I enjoy getting my head chewed off?”

I glare at him and swing my gaze forward.

Clarissa is inside my office, sitting in the chair behind my desk. Sunlight pours from the floor to ceiling windows behind her. Her milk chocolate skin glows, drinking in the light. She looks like a woman made of fire.

I take a cautious step inside, wondering what was so important that she interrupted my meeting. Ris has me wrapped around her pinky finger, but she needs to learn that there’s a time and a place to tug on my chain.

“You’re supposed to be at Maggie’s place,” I grunt, moving toward her.

“I need to talk to you.”

Vargas closes the door quietly.

“You could have come in yourself.”

“I couldn’t stop you in front of them.” Her voice is soft, alluring. “You never interrupt a king in his own kingdom.”

My mind knows this is some kind of set-up, but my body doesn’t care. It’s chomping at the bit to have more of whatever Clarissa wants to dish out.

“King?”

She stands and tilts her head coquettishly. I’m not used to this teasing side of her. The Clarissa I know is quiet, innocent, entranced in her own mission to make the world a better place.

But right now, she’s focused on me and it’s incredibly sexy. As sexy as everything she does.

Ris glides over to me, presses her pretty hands on my shoulders and drives me down into the sofa. I let her guide me, ignoring the fact that—at this very moment—my entire security department is waiting, dangling over the proverbial cliff of termination.

None of that matters.

A burning desire sweeps the core of my stomach. I’m interested in seeing where she’s going to take this. My hope? It ends with her bent over the table in front of me.

“I told you you were bleeding,” Clarissa says, brandishing a band-aid.

My eyes narrow in suspicion because I have a feeling she didn’t jerk me out of the boardroom just to tend to this little cut.

“It could get infected,” she explains, as if she can read my thoughts. “You can’t let things like this fester. No matter how small.”

She sets the band-aid on my thigh and brings out a tube of antiseptic cream. I lick my lips when she leans over to apply the ointment. Her long, curly ponytail drapes over my shoulder, her generous chest presses into my arm.

My breathing gets a little heavier. I can smell her perfume mixed with the sweet, flowery scent of her hair. She's everything a man could dream of... in a package no man can resist.

"Does it sting?" Clarissa whispers. Her mouth is right up against my neck.

"No." I groan. But my pants are tighter than they've ever been.

She slides her hand up my thigh to grab the band-aid and a million images burn through my mind. Most of them involve her hand somewhere much more enjoyable.

"Ris." The words choke my throat when the woman starts *blowing* on my cut. It's a tiny, inconsequential scrape, but that puff of breath is so damn soft on my neck that I wish it were a gaping shark bite.

I turn toward her, our noses almost brushing. "What are you doing?"

"Sh." She grips my chin and turns my head away. Squinting, she firmly rolls the band-aid over the cut on my neck. "I'm concentrating."

I can't tell if she's being serious or if she's intentionally stirring me up. All I know is, Clarissa Maura has a way of making me burn for carnality. I shouldn't let myself be swayed this easily, but it seems impossible not to lose my mind.

I want her so freaking bad.

"There." She springs back as if she can sense that I'm about to grab her and fill every opening of her body with my seed. "Let me throw this away." Dark fingers rolling the band-aid wrapper, she darts to my table and discards the waste in the trash.

I walk around to the desk, advancing on her until she backs up.

“Spit it out,” I say, pressing my hands on either side of her and caging her in.

“Spit what out?”

“The thing you want from me.” *Even if it’s half of my soul, you can have it, Ris.*

She tries to back up a step, but she’s trapped between my body and the desk. Her wide eyes tell me she has no idea how dangerously close she is to unlocking the beast inside me.

Don’t worry, princess.

She commands that beast too.

Her chin stretches up bravely. The flirty smile flits across her face again, wobbly but sincere. “What will it take to calm you down?”

I watch as she smooths her hand down my tie, leaving a trail of sparks everywhere she touches. My body burns with the need to sink deep inside her.

I lean forward. Crowd even more of her space.

She doesn’t shift back, but she doesn’t lean forward either. This is not an invitation to kiss her. She’s making a play for a conversation—albeit, one where she wants my brain as cloudy as possible.

“Are you making an offer?” I brush my fingers against her ear and move it down her neck, stopping right at her quickening pulse.

Her breath ragged, she tightens her hold on my tie. “I know what you’re going to do to those men. And I know it’s because of me.”

I stiffen.

She blinks, her eyes too pure and innocent compared to the animalistic hunger I feel.

“Don’t fire them.”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“This is business. They failed at their job.”

“How were they supposed to predict that someone was going to throw a rock at your window? They’re not mind readers. And even if they did know, you should only be firing the ones who did wrong.”

My lips curl up like a hunter in the dark. “You’re telling me how to run my company?”

“I’m... asking.”

“For mercy.”

“Yes.”

I reach for her throat. She gasps audibly when my hand dips over her jaw, thumb aligning with the bruises that I know are still there beneath the makeup. “I don’t offer mercy, princess.”

“Even for me?” The words are a sultry whisper. Her nose brushes mine.

I tilt my head back and release a breath to hide the way she melts me.

“You haven’t made me an offer yet,” I say darkly. My eyes return to her lips. She wants to play with fire? She should know it comes with a cost—the risk of being burned.

“What do you want then?”

How about we start with those pants at your ankles and your mouth groaning my name as I take you on my desk?

She lifts a finger between my lips and hers. “And nothing you can’t say in front of company.”

“You seriously underestimate how much I could do to you in public,” I growl.

“Nothing you can’t say in front of Abe and Regan then.”

I inch my lips upward, my breath leaving quick, hot stamps on her throat. “Come to the gala with me tonight.”

Her eyes widen. She looks... frightened.

The expression lasts only for a moment and then she smiles. "Deal."

I lean down to kiss her, but she ducks her head and slides across my desk, wiggling away until she can spring free.

Clarissa gestures to the door. "Go on then. We have to meet Maggie in twenty minutes. I'm sure you can rant and growl and do your 'angry boss' act in under five."

I narrow my eyes.

She played me.

I'm aching, throbbing from head to toe, and she's wearing that mischievous grin.

"Do you have a problem, Mr. Bolton?"

The problem is that you still have your clothes on.

"No." I straighten my tie, walk toward her and stretch an arm out. "This way."

"Me? Why do I need to come with you?"

"Every king needs a queen by his side."

Her eyes spark with a challenge. "We'd have to be married for me to be called your queen."

"Princess, then." I whisper the word in her ear and watch her shiver with a feral grin on my face. "After you."

THE PAST

CLARISSA

IF CODY BOLTON, the hottest guy on campus, is dating me because of a prank... then this is the longest prank in college history.

We've gone on several dates.

All of them have been wonderful.

Which makes me even more uneasy.

I've been thinking that this has to be a joke. Even my roommate, who sulked for weeks after she saw me and Cody out to dinner together, swore that was the only thing it could be.

But if it's a joke, I'm still waiting for the punch line.

Cody walks me up the path to my dorm. He has his hands behind his back and seems lost in thought.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Me? Yeah." He flashes that perfect Disney prince grin. "You?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

"Good. And thank you. For the food."

"Sure."

Tonight, Cody took me to a nice restaurant. I saw the prices on the menu and asked if he wanted to go somewhere else—somewhere the food wasn't half my savings.

'I'll take you to nicer restaurants than this when I start my own business', he said.

Tonight was the first time he talked about a future with me in it. And sure, he turned red in the face and ducked behind his menu to hide it.

Maybe it was to laugh.

Or maybe it was out of shyness.

I don't know. Cody confuses me.

Does he really like me? *Me?*

The girl from the soup kitchen?

The girl from the women's shelter?

The girl who's here on scholarship and hanging on by a thread?

I want to believe in him. I want to believe the fairy tale. The prince who swoops in to save you. The one who sees through your rags, through the dirt and grime and calls you worthy.

Even if that's not the healthiest thing in the world...

Even if I know I shouldn't let some guy determine my worth...

I want it. Why can't a girl like me have it even if it's an illusion?

Cody's silent when I stop in front of the door. Hasn't he noticed that I haven't gone inside yet? Isn't he going to kiss me?

Doubts attack me so swiftly, it's like they were lying in wait the entire time. What if he doesn't like me at all? If he did, he would have tried *something*. We're in college. My roommate hooked up with that greasy guy at the sushi restaurant yesterday because he gave her free dumplings. And she didn't even know him.

Everyone is doing a lot more than kissing on the steps with a guy they went on several wonderful dates with. If Cody's not making a move... doesn't that mean he isn't interested in me?

My eyelashes flutter down. I've been preparing myself to accept the fact that Cody doesn't really like me, but the way my heart pangs in my chest says that I *did* expect something from him.

And maybe I like him more than I originally allowed myself to.

Who wouldn't?

Cody's handsome, smart and ambitious. He treats me like I'm the only girl in the room.

That means something.

I've seen the way girls watch him whenever he passes by. He's tall. Charismatic. Good looking. He could have anyone and he chose me.

Which is insane.

Even more insane is that he really is a nice guy. I thought a hotshot who attracted all that attention would be arrogant and self-absorbed, but Cody is humble and earnest. The way he talks about his future business, his dreams and goals, it's so attractive.

Maybe that's it? Maybe he doesn't find *me* attractive? Maybe that's why we're awkwardly standing on the steps. His lips nowhere near mine.

"Goodnight," I say, fumbling around with my keys.

"Goodnight," Cody answers in a husky voice.

His eyes dip to my lips and that beautiful slash of a mouth eases toward mine. My heart pounding like a drum, I close my eyes and tilt my head up in anticipation.

Finally.

Finally...

"Oh, damn. Sorry. Excuse me." Joey, the annoying guy in the room down the hall, shuffles past us. He gives Cody a thumbs-up. "Right on, brother."

Pervert.

I step back, annoyed by the interruption.

Cody looks frustrated too. His jaw clenches and he stares at the door as if he's contemplating following Joey in and swinging at him.

Instead, he shakes his head. "I'll uh... you... um... goodnight."

That's it?

My eyes widen as Cody gives me his back and shuffles down the path. He runs a hand through his hair and seems to be muttering to himself.

I roll my lips together, contemplating my next move. The smart thing would be to go inside, build more defenses around my heart, and not get any closer to the prince on campus.

But my feet won't move.

I stare at Cody's back as he gets further away.

Screw it.

Grabbing the tattered edges of my courage, I bound down the stairs. "Cody!"

He stops and turns, his eyes widening in surprise. I don't allow myself to overthink this. If I do, I won't be able to move.

So I just run.

And then I throw my arms around his neck and stand on my tiptoes.

"You forgot something," I whisper right before brushing my lips against his.

TEAR CRUMBS

CLARISSA

VARGAS and I shuffle behind Cody as he leaves the meeting with his security guards. Both of us struggle to keep up with his power-walk.

Cody Bolton exudes confidence, like he owns the entire universe. My stilettos sink into plush carpets, not-quite matching his relentless, long-legged stride.

Vargas hangs back and slants me a sly grin. “You owe me fifty bucks.”

I dip my fingers into my purse and hand it over, my heart burning. Vargas grabs the other end of the bill and tugs.

My fingers, of their own accord, clip the bill so he can’t take it.

We have a mini game of tug-and-war right in the middle of the hallway.

“Hand it over,” Vargas whispers, trying to yank it from me. “I told you he wouldn’t fire them if you asked. I won that bet fair and square.”

“Can I pay you in ten dollar installments?”

Vargas’s eyebrows hike.

Cody glances at us and Vargas immediately straightens, looking like a corrected kid in class. I use that opportunity to tuck the fifty back in my purse.

It was a bad idea to bet so much money on Cody changing his mind. All I wanted to do was help the security guards who have families and bills to pay. When Vargas suggested I use my ‘feminine wiles’—whatever that means—to spare the team from a mass firing, I told him that would never work on Cody.

He bet me that it would.

And now I’m out my bill money.

Cody sees that I'm unable to keep up and he slows his pace. "What did you tell Maggie? Does she have any hint about what's to come?"

"As long as the neighbors didn't call her to complain about all the noise we were making yesterday, she has no clue."

Vargas slants me a dirty look as he stops in front of the elevator and pushes the button for us. "People only expect something when a *promise* is given."

"Promises are such sacred things." I touch the side of my purse that holds the fifty. "You know what else is sacred? Kindness. Understanding. Paying in installments."

"What about interest on those installments?" Vargas shoots back.

"It saddens me that you think in such barbaric ways."

Cody grunts. "What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing." I pipe up.

Vargas chuckles nervously. "After you."

Cody gives me a suspicious look, but he doesn't say anything when he steps into the elevator.

I follow.

Vargas moves in last.

The moment the doors close, Cody twists toward me. His big body curls over mine, hands on either side of my head and eyes on my lips.

"What are you doing?" Alarmed, my gaze darts to Vargas who's going red and staring at the numbers on the screen as if willing the elevator to move faster. "Cody."

His green eyes collide with mine. It's a long, studying sort of look and I feel this tingling sensation take over me. Like that time when I was teaching the kids in the shelter how to do a handstand and all the blood rushed to my head.

"Were you pleased with my performance, princess?"

“What performance?” I mutter, trying hard not to think about the way his body feels against mine. “You did the right thing.”

“The right thing would be to—”

“Fire everyone because you’re angry?” I cut him off. “Very humanitarian. They’ll build statues in your honor.”

Cody surveys me with an appreciative gleam in his eye. “How much did Vargas bet you?”

I choke. “V-Vargas? Who’s that? I don’t know a Vargas.”

“You’re cute when you lie.” Cody runs his tongue across his bottom lip. Not tearing his eyes off me, he barks, “How much, Vargas?”

“Fifty dollars, sir.”

“A pittance.”

I shudder.

No wonder everyone’s so scared of Cody. There’s some kind of twisted power in his smooth, dark words. His frigid stare drains all the blood from my body.

“Are you... angry?” I wince.

One corner of Cody’s lips inches higher than the other and, suddenly, I understand what a bunny must feel like in the claws of a hawk.

He takes out his phone and starts tapping. I hold my breath, staring up at him. What is he going to do now? A man with so much power... he could utterly destroy me.

I’ve been an idiot.

Today was the first time I saw Cody in his element. He was the picture of royalty in the boardroom with his blond hair, green eyes and designer suit. His muscles were covered under three layers—jacket, shirt, tie—but there was no hiding the power rolling in his shoulders. He most definitely looked like the CEO of a billion-dollar company.

I’d forgotten who he is.

What he is.

He's been so attentive to me, so accommodating, that I grew too bold. I didn't realize I was playing games with a war general in a suit. He's a man who commands thousands. A man who can leave grown men quivering in fear, hanging on his every word, turning in any direction he points them.

With me, he's just a man.

With them, he's... more.

I can't believe I had him installing glass windows, calling plumbers and planting trees at two in the morning.

Vargas's phone pings.

"Bolton," the assistant chokes, "do you know how many zeroes are in this number?"

I push my head around Cody's bulk so I can see Vargas. "How many zeroes?"

"Let's just say, you don't owe me that fifty anymore."

I let out a little squeak.

Cody smirks and puts his mouth up against mine, hovering across it until his lips are at my ear. "Next time you want to bet on whether I'll give you what you ask for, princess," he slides his finger down my throat and my muscles tense, "bet on me."

I slash him angry eyes even as my legs go weak.

The elevator stops.

Straightening his jacket as if he didn't just blow everyone's minds, Cody stalks out. I swallow hard, fighting the heat blooming inside my body.

He's ridiculously aggravating.

Even if he is hotter than a five-alarm taco at that food truck I like.

Vargas smirks and bows to me, ushering me off the elevator first. "Nice doing business with you, princess."

I snarl at him.

He laughs and trails us as we walk through the foyer.

The lobby goes silent when Cody shows up. I'm pretty sure the entire room is staring, but no one bothers to greet us.

Neither does Cody.

He's putting out harsh 'don't approach me' signals.

Everyone complies. They shuffle back to put as much room between him and them as possible.

How disconcerting.

Aren't they people too? Don't they work for him? *With* him? Make him all those billions in his bank account? The least he can do is acknowledge them.

I smile at a woman who's trembling and holding onto her coffee for dear life.

"Good morning."

The woman's jaw drops and she looks at me like I grew a tail.

"Good morning." I greet a man who's holding a briefcase up to his chest.

"Morning." I call out a little louder.

Cody realizes he's stalking ahead of me and slows his pace again. We walk side-by-side, but I don't stop being polite.

"Morning." I beam a smile in the direction of a security guard.

Cody narrows his eyes like he doesn't understand why I'm talking to anyone.

I nudge him in the side.

He purses his lips.

I nudge him again.

He sighs so hard the tiny curls hanging around my ears dance. Gruffly, he says, "Morning."

When we get to the door, we pause to let someone in.

“Morning,” I say.

“Morning,” Cody says.

The guy drops his files. Color flushes his cheeks and he fumbles to pick up the papers while mumbling, “M-morning, Mr. Bolton, sir.”

I drop to my knees to help him.

“Oh you don’t have to.” The guy reaches out to me.

Cody makes a low growl in the back of his throat.

The man retracts his hand like it got bitten by a snake.

I squint up at the Ice King and then look down pointedly at a document by his foot. Cody frowns, weighs my silent request for a second and drops to his knees to help.

Behind me, I hear a camera click.

I’m sure this moment will be on rotation in many group chats tonight.

“Here you go,” I say with a smile, handing over the documents we gathered.

“T-thanks.” The man hurries off, his footsteps loud in the stunned silence.

We continue outside.

Vargas clears his throat. “I’ll, uh, follow you in my car, Bolton.”

Cody nods and gestures for me to slide into his town car first. This one looks brand-spanking-new. Does he have a spare car just lying around? What happened to the one with the broken window?

He gets in after me and the driver shuts the door.

“Look at you, being a nice boss for once. Didn’t that feel good?”

He scowls like the Alaskan winter that he is. “Debatable.” Sliding across the seat, he whispers, “But I could think of a few things that feel better.”

“Like seatbelts?” I smirk, gesturing to the one across the car.

“Hm.” He does a little nose scrunch of disapproval.

I watch as he reluctantly pulls away and fastens the seatbelt. His fingers are long and slender. He grips the harness and plunges it into the receptor, his eyes on me.

I lick my lips and squeeze my legs together.

The tension between us is hot and thick, desperate to be snapped.

But at least he’s not pushing.

If he did, I’d jump into his lap and suck his lips like my favorite candy.

Let me keep what little defense I have left.

Let me surround my heart with barbed wire.

I’m not ready yet. I can’t forget the past. Or the fact that our worlds are even further apart in the present.

The moment I give in to him is the moment I lose my mind, my heart, everything.

And I don’t trust him enough to lose myself... yet.



CODY’S TOWN car arrives at Maggie’s new house before anyone else. Vargas’ car pulls up next to us and I’m shocked to see Ms. Phoebe and Laura climbing out of the backseat.

I gasp in excitement. “Did you tell them?”

“I figured you’d want them here for this too,” he says.

My heart wobbles even more in his direction.

“Wow!” Laura squeals. “If the outside is this gorgeous, I can’t wait to see the inside.”

Ms. Phoebe waddles up to me. “Why didn’t you tell me what was going on?”

“It all happened so fast,” I murmur. “I was going to tell you when it was all over.”

Her eyes narrow, causing the wrinkles there to multiply. “The next time someone harms you or one of my girls again, you tell *me*. Alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her severe expression fades and she leaks out a smile. “This house really does look nice.”

“Do you want to see the before pictures?” I offer.

Ms. Phoebe and Laura crowd around my head as I share the photos. Their oohs and ahs reach my ears and make me ten times more excited for Maggie’s reaction.

In the midst of their chatter, I feel someone’s stare. When I look up, I meet Cody’s sharp green eyes. He makes a slight motion with his chin.

“When is Maggie getting here?” Laura asks.

“Any minute now. I called her an Uber. You can check her location if you want.” I leave my phone in their hands and walk over to Cody.

His jaw is clenched tight. “My guys reported that Hatchen already met with the social worker.”

Invisible fingers tighten around my throat.

It’s suddenly hard to breathe.

He touches my shoulder. “Ris, you okay?”

“I am.” My smile is pained. I’d been so busy with work and then waking up in Cody’s bed this morning... so many things happened that I didn’t have time to stop and think about Hatchen. “What’s the plan?”

“There’s no plan.”

“You expect me to believe you don’t have a plan?” I arch a brow. Our eyes lock, a hot polarity of opposites just begging to collide.

“All you have to do is focus on Maggie.”

“That’s it?” My fingers curl into fists. “Just sit my pretty little self down and let a man handle it?”

His eyes remain steady on me, but there’s a glint of amusement. “At least you know you’re pretty.”

“I’m not joking, Cody.” My chest is heaving and I meet his stare head on. “Maggie and I are the victims. We’re the ones he harassed, harmed and threatened.” My voice cracks, but I push my shoulders back bravely. “I want to file a restraining order against him. I’ll see if Maggie wants to do the same.”

His eyebrows tighten. “If you do it by the law, I can’t deal with it my way.”

“What do you mean your way?”

He remains tight-lipped.

I frown. “Cody, where is Hachen right now?”

He turns away.

I follow him. “Does Doberman have him?”

“Look. Maggie’s here!” Laura announces.

The sound of a car rolling to a stop and two car doors slamming erupts behind me. The urge to turn around and join the others, leaving the unpleasant discussion of Hachen in the rear-view mirror is strong. But my conscience won’t let me drop it.

I grab his hand. “Cody, that’s not how I do things. I refuse to accept anyone in my life who takes the law into their own hands.”

“He hurt you.”

“And you hurt him back.” I trace my thumb over his skinned knuckles. “But if you take it any further, then you’re no different from him.”

Behind me, I hear Laura and Ms. Phoebe screaming along with Maggie.

“Let’s finish this later. You’re missing the celebration.” Cody juts his chin tightly behind me.

“This is more important.” Urgency flows from my eyes and coats my words. “Whatever your guys are doing, call it off.”

He gives me a challenging stare.

I give it right back.

Cody scowls as he lifts the phone to his ear. “Doberman, abort mission.”

“Why?” I hear the crackle of Doberman’s deep voice. “We were just getting ready to beat the crap out of him.”

My eyes widen.

Cody glances away from me. His voice is sharp enough to cut. “I said abort.”

“What do you want me to do? Take him back home? This isn’t a taxi service,” Doberman mutters.

“Clarissa?” Ms. Phoebe calls my name.

Cody shuts the phone off. “It’s done.”

“Thank you,” I mouth. And then I spin around, a big grin on my face. Hopefully, my expression doesn’t scream ‘I cut short a totally illegal kidnapping and potential torture session’. “Maggie, hi.”

Before I can get another word out, Maggie flings herself into my arms. She’s still holding her young daughter and the baby gets crushed between us. Moisture dots my shirt and I realize it’s from Maggie’s tears.

“Thank you, Clarissa. Thank you so much. I was shocked when I heard I could go pick up Sara without a problem. But this? I never expected this. The house looks amazing. This is better than my wildest dreams.”

“I didn’t do it alone.” I ease back and gesture to Cody.

“Mr. Bolton,” Maggie says shyly. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. We hope you and Sara,” he gives the child a sweet grin that would fool anyone into

believing he wasn't just plotting to kidnap and do who knows what else to her daddy, "have a long and fruitful life here."

Maggie's eyes swell with tears and she starts bawling again.

I start crying too when I see how much this means to her.

Sara, the little cutie, bawls louder because mommy's crying and she needs no other reason.

"I don't mean to cut this snot fest short," Laura pipes up, "but I'm dying to see the inside."

"Laura," Ms. Phoebe scolds.

"Sorry. Was that insensitive?"

"Very," I mutter with a smile. "But we still love you."

"Love you too." Laura grins. "Now can we go in?"

I laugh and lead the way up the cobblestoned path that me and Vanya painstakingly put together. Sara points at all the trees and Maggie goes nuts when she sees the little balcony area off the front porch.

Inside, Maggie's tears flow again.

"I don't deserve this," she keeps muttering. "I'm nobody special."

"Yes, you are. And yes you do. Soak it in, Maggie," I say, leading her into the kitchen. "It all belongs to you."

Her knees buckle when she sees the brand new stainless-steel appliances, marble counter tops and stunning backsplash.

Sunny did all the rooms beautifully, but she *fought* to have every one of her design concepts realized in this kitchen. Based on the way Maggie's eyes are almost rolling back in her head, I can say she delivered.

"I can't... I need to sit down," Maggie says.

"Sit down, mommy." Sara plunks on the floor.

"Yeah, sit down." I sit beside Maggie's daughter.

Laura and Ms. Phoebe join us, although it takes the older woman a little more time to ease herself down.

Cody leans against the wall and watches.

I catch his eye, appreciating the fact that he's here and not on his phone. Vargas is outside, pacing up and down with his phone in one hand and his tablet in the other. Given his frazzled state, this unexpected addition to Cody's schedule is probably screwing everything up.

But Cody wears no sign of impatience on his face.

His lips curl up and he winks at me.

Shyly, I glance away.

Maggie tilts her head back against the dishwasher. "I must look so terrible. I can't stop crying."

"Go ahead and let the tears out," Ms. Phoebe says.

Maggie breathes a bit and we wait until she's collected enough to see the master bedroom with the miraculously attached bathroom.

After she nearly collapses in *that* room, we get a nice cheerful dance break in Sara's room. The little one hugs all the stuffed bears Kenya bought for her and then jumps on top of her princess-themed bed.

Maggie's tear ducts get a break...

Oh.

Spoke too soon.

Maggie cries when she sees her daughter so happy.

I'm starting to see a trail of tear drops behind her like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs.

"I don't think I can take anymore," Maggie croaks, her voice lost and her eyes swelling like a cartoon dolphin's. "Everything is just so beautiful. It feels like I'm in someone else's house. I can't... I can't take anymore."

"I'm afraid I have bad news. We've got one more place to go." I gesture down the hallway. "The backyard."

As soon as I open the door, Sara screams and rushes to the play area.

Maggie's jaw hits the ground.

Every inch of the cramped backyard has been organized and designed to perfection. The sunshine spotlights the gorgeous layout.

"Just imagine, in the evening, after a successful day at work," I lead the group, "you can watch Sara play on the swings while you relax in these chairs by the bonfire and sip a glass of wine."

"Oh wow." Maggie says, wiping her wet cheeks.

"What's that?" Sara points at the shed near the fence.

"That," I grin, "is your mommy's shed."

"Ooh," Sara coos.

"This way." I lead them into the large shed. On the walls are racks of colorful yarn, a state of the art sewing machine, and large windows to let in the sunshine. Shag rugs on the floor invite us to kick off our shoes and dive deep into creativity.

Sunny was most excited about the kitchen, but her second favorite project was this shed. And it shows.

Maggie sniffs. "This is amazing. Spectacular. Oh my goodness."

"You like it?"

"I love it!" She shrieks.

"I wasn't sure because you aren't crying," I joke.

"Trust me. I'd be crying if I had any more water left in my eyes." Maggie sniffs again. "Thank you. Thank you so much, Clarissa."

She hooks her arms around me. While we're hugging, my gaze connects with Cody's and he motions to the door. Vargas is right behind him, a tense look on his face.

I pull away from Maggie and smile tightly. “Go ahead and explore. It’s all for you. This is the key.” I slip it out of my pocket and put it in the palm of her hand.

“Mommy! Mommy, look!” Sara pulls Maggie away.

While she’s distracted, I follow behind Cody and Vargas.

“Where are you going?”

His fingers land on my hip. “I have a bunch of demanding lawyers waiting at the office.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

Cody keeps looking down at me. “I *really* don’t want to leave.”

“But you have to,” Vargas pipes up.

Cody gives him a sharp look.

Vargas pins his lips together. “I’ll, uh, head out first.”

“Thank you, Vargas.”

He lifts his hands in a backward wave as if he wasn’t the furniture genius last night. No wonder he and Cody get along. They both help people secretly and don’t really like to talk about or get acknowledgement for it.

Well tough.

I tilt my head up. “And thank you too. Without the crew you hired and all the money you invested, this never would have happened so fast.”

“I’m glad Maggie likes it.” He massages my hip with his hand, kneading into the smooth flesh beneath my shirt. “Are you happy?”

I smile because it’s the question he asked me when I drove him home this morning.

“I’m happy.”

“Good.” His stare is dangerous, volatile, explosive, like fireworks in the summer. A burst of color that goes on forever.

I pull back. “You should go. Don’t keep everyone waiting.”

He dips his chin.

I watch him walk away, sliding my gaze over his big shoulders and down the long, masculine lines of his legs in those tailored trousers.

He gets further and further away.

Restlessness builds in my heart.

Screw it.

Moving on impulse, I bound up the stairs. “Cody!”

He stops and turns, his eyes widening in surprise.

I grab his shoulder, haul him down and plant a slow, sensual kiss on his cheek. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He wraps a brawny arm around my waist, pulling me closer. The intensity of his gaze sends prickles of heat over my skin. I’m wound tight from just kissing his cheek. What’s going to happen when we finally kiss for the first time in ten years?

“Ehem.” Laura walks up the stairs. “You two mind filming that K-drama somewhere else? Have some mercy on us single folks.”

“Don’t mind her. I like it.” Ms. Phoebe grins.

I pull awkwardly away from Cody. Lifting my hand in a stiff wave, I mutter, “Bye.”

He chuckles and the sound rumbles through me like a river, caressing every part of my body and burrowing under my skin. Who knew that a laugh could be that pushy? It’s staking its claim on my body, my bones, my blood.

Cody leans down and whispers in my ear, “Kiss you later.”

I shudder at the promise.

With one last look at me, Cody walks away.

Laura squeezes my hand. “Can I be a bridesmaid at your wedding? Please, please, please.”

“There is no wedding.” I push her hand away. “We’re not together.”

“What are you talking about? He looks at you the way I look at cheesecake.”

“Laura, what is *that* supposed to mean?” Ms. Phoebe scolds.

“It’s like he wants to devour her. Inhale her. And when he’s done with that, he’ll lick the plate until every last scrap is gone.”

Forget burning like the sun.

I’m burning like a volcano *on* the sun.

“I need some water,” I mutter.

Behind me, I hear Laura whining. “*I want a billionaire boyfriend too!*”

I pour myself a cup of water and lift it to my face to hide my smile.



I’M NOT SHOCKED at all when Mimi swoops into my apartment later that evening.

She’s dressed to the nines as usual. Chunky white sunglasses. A bright red coat. Zebra-patterned leggings and a pair of designer stilettos.

“Mimi!” I greet her with a big grin. My voice is lightly teasing. “Are we close enough to do the air kiss thing or no?”

She looks at me like she couldn’t care less, but I do notice a little twinkle in her eye.

“That depends on the answer to this question. Were you planning on wearing *that*?” She points to my trusty little black dress. “Tonight?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

She breezes into my living room. Her mouth is a tight line of disappointment. “Ugh. No air kisses for you.”

I fall back when a man brushes past me, following Mimi into the room. He graces my couch with a disgusted look before daintily laying a garment bag down on it.

Two strangers—well, technically a stranger and a tyrant I’ve met once before—just blazed into my apartment.

And I don’t even blink.

It’s weird that none of this fazes me anymore.

“I’ll take it you don’t like my dress,” I mumble.

“You should burn it.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

Mimi’s assistant drags a chair from my dining room table and starts setting up a ring light.

“No trailer this time?” I poke at the lone garment bag. “Am I in trouble?”

Mimi raises her chin, red lips bold and bright. “I see someone’s in a good mood.”

“We did some good in the world today.” I smirk, thinking of Maggie’s reaction to her new house. “And we put away some bad guys.”

Earlier this afternoon, we contacted a lawyer and submitted documents for a restraining order against Hachen. It felt good to protect myself this time. And I know Maggie felt that way too.

“So yeah,” I finish, “I’m feeling good.”

Mimi studies me with her calculating eyes. Finally, she dips her chin. “Confidence looks good on you. Much better than that dress anyway.”

“Thanks?”

She crosses the room like a model. “There was no need for a trailer today because you already have the shoes that will match the perfect dress.”

“You’re so sure it’s the perfect dress?” I murmur while unzipping the bag.

She swats at my hand. “No peeking.” Gesturing to the man unlocking a makeup kit with at least ten tiers, she says, “Gelano is going to do your hair and makeup.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Yes,” she says in a flat tone.

I shift uneasily. “Mimi, I appreciate all the effort you’re—”

“If you’re going to say you don’t deserve it or it’s too much or you don’t want to accept Cody’s gift, I will hog tie you with this scarf.” She flails a tie-dye fabric in front of me.

I ease back. “I was going to say that I don’t let anyone touch my hair.” My fingers fluff my ponytail. “It took me a long time to grow my natural curls and,” I glance at Gelano who looks like he knows as much about black hair as I do about fashion, “my hair is thick and coarse. Those fancy hairdos you see on celebrities might not look the same on me. If you insist on a style, I can see what I can do with my own hair.”

“Gelano is quite experienced doing hair of *all* textures.” Mimi’s eyes narrow to slivers. “Do you think I’m an amateur?”

“O-of course not.”

“Go take a shower.”

I gawk. “You’re just going to hang around in here until I’m done?”

“We’ll wait. Yes.”

I give Gelano a distrustful look.

One of Mimi’s perfectly plucked eyebrows pops in disdain. “Do you think there’s anything in this pitiful hovel we’d like to steal?”

Why does everything that falls out of that woman’s mouth sound so abrasive?

I frown. "I'll be right back."

I take a shower, spending extra time with my lotion and opting out of using baby powder. I have a feeling the dress Mimi brought me is expensive and I don't want her to give me the stink eye if she sees white powder on it.

Once I'm out of the shower, I fall into a Gelano-tornado. He doesn't ask about my bruises. Neither does Mimi. I'm not sure what that says about them and their glamorous clientele. How often do they work with clients who have fading bruises?

Time flies and, when I finally get a good look at myself, I almost topple over.

The results are *amazing*.

My hair is in a braided crown with gold thread weaving in and out. The gold matches the shimmering color of the highlights on my cheeks. The dress Mimi chose for me is lemon yellow, but it's not garish at all. Instead, the color celebrates my brown complexion.

It hugs my waist in an alluring way before flaring out at the bottom. Despite the rounded shape, the fabric is light and delicate as it parts in the front to show off my legs and the glittering butterfly stilettos.

I look... angelic.

"Is that me?" I ask the alluring creature in the mirror.

"It's you."

Emotions choke my throat.

I've never felt so stunning in my life.

"You've evolved." Mimi adjusts the sleeves hanging off my shoulders. "You are not Clarissa the Charity Worker. You are Clarissa the Belle of the Ball. Do you understand?"

"I understand." *I just don't know if I can pull it off.*

My fingers dig into the dress and the unease must show on my face because Mimi asks, "What do you fear?"

Rejection.

Being outed as a fraud who doesn't belong.

Being laughed at.

"Nothing. I'm just nervous." I set a hand on my stomach.
"Clarissa the Belle of the Ball. I... I can do that."

Mimi's eyes shimmer with pride. "No one will question your place in the room tonight," she says. "Even if they do, you look like you belong there. Walk with pride. Keep your chin up. It's not what you wear. It's how you wear it that matters."

I blow out a shaky breath. Can I back out of this now or is it too late?

The doorbell rings.

"That must be Cody," Mimi says, walking to my front door like this is her place.

My head swims and I squeeze my eyes shut.

So far, Cody's descended into my world and I've had the upper hand. Tonight, I'm going into his world. The land of the wolves.

I only hope I don't get chewed up and spit back out like last time.

THE BALCONY

CODY

MY JAW nearly hits the floor and it stays there, picking up lint and carpet fibers as I escort Clarissa down the hallway.

She looks like Miss America. Or... what's the bigger one? Miss Universe. Miss Galaxy? Hell if I know.

My brain got scrambled the moment I saw her in that gold-toned creation. She's a gliding piece of art. A living, breathing temptation. The dress hugs all her curves. The fabric dips into her cleavage, drawing the eye to the supple outline of her assets. And what delectable assets they are.

I can't stop looking at her.

Which is a problem because I've chosen to drive tonight.

Bad, bad idea.

I should be in the backseat, drinking her in. Admiring a beauty so innate, she doesn't have to try too hard to shine.

But hot damn. Mimi did her thing.

Ris looks insanely beautiful.

The dress is the perfect shade to show off her complexion. The off-the-shoulders sleeves highlights her elegant collarbones. Her hair is in an elaborate braid that crowns her head like a halo, hinting at her true origins. An angel, a heavenly being, descended straight from the sunlight.

Breathe, Cody. Eyes on the road.

This might be a problem. If *I* have trouble keeping my eyes in my head, the sleazy lawyers at tonight's ceremony won't stand a chance.

The thought makes my gut twist.

Hatchen was one thing, but I can't go around flinging my fists at law firm CEOs.

"Does Joel know we're attending a gala tonight?" Ris asks.

“If you’re asking whether I told him I was attending with you, the answer is yes.”

She scrunches her nose.

I pretend not to notice. Joel needs to put his crush in a coffin, dig a hole and bury it where no one can find the bones. Clarissa is mine and I’m not giving her up or hiding how I feel for her because my loud-mouthed foster son might get his feelings hurt.

“I’ve been curious about this for a while but... where are Joel’s parents?”

“I don’t know.”

The delicate gold pendant around her neck glints from the swell of her chest. The placement calls to me, scratching at a hunger I’ve barely managed to tamp down.

“You don’t know?” Her voice is disbelieving.

Did she do her nails too? They’re black. Pitch black. Like the color of my heart before she came back into my orbit.

“Cody?”

“What?”

“How did you guys pick Joel for this gig?”

“Vargas said he saw Joel on a news report. The hospital did a feature on kids with ailments. They mentioned Joel’s family situation. Vargas knows the details better than I do. But I think his mom passed. His dad was around for a bit and then disappeared.”

“Poor thing.”

Right. I mean, yeah. Joel’s circumstances are tragic.

And if Clarissa didn’t send mating signals careening through my body with every sweep of her lashes, I could probably find some more sympathy.

“He didn’t look so well this morning,” Ris notes. “You shouldn’t have told him about tonight. He shouldn’t be getting agitated.”

“He’s a big boy. He’ll get over it.”

“Yes, doctor,” she teases.

My blood spikes. Even her innocent jabs make me bite my tongue in anticipation.

Come and kiss it better, doctor.

My eyes dart to her lips before surging back to the road.

The fact that we haven’t gotten there, that we haven’t even *kissed* yet, is frustrating. Every night, I fall asleep to dreams of her supple lips all over me. It’s so torturous that even her little cheek kiss felt as sensual as a make-out session in the back of my car.

Clarissa doesn’t trust me yet, and I don’t want to push too hard.

I left her alone at the altar.

I ruined us.

That’s not something any smart woman would forget. Based on our conversation this morning about making the same mistake twice, I get why she’s being cautious.

But I’m wearing her down.

I know what I want, and no matter how hard she fights me, I’m not giving up.

She’s worth it.

“Cody?”

“Mm?”

“When we get there, you don’t have to bring me around with you. I’ll just hang out with the ladies from the farmhouse.”

I hear her nervous tone and swivel my head. “This is the City Law Guild award ceremony. The ladies won’t be there.”

“What?”

Unease breaks through my lust-filled haze. My mind trips to the day after our cancelled wedding. The confession I heard

outside of Clarissa's dorm room. The tears. The heart-breaking sobs.

My shoulders stiffen. I didn't think this plan through.

"We don't have to go," I say, flicking my indicator.

"No." Her hand is soft on my arm. I can feel her touch through the fabric of my suit. "It's okay. I can do this."

She pulls away and it feels like she's ripping out an organ. I snatch her hand and slide my fingers through hers, settling our joined hands against my thigh.

"You'll be the most beautiful woman in the room tonight," I murmur.

Clarissa's lips curl up in a smile, but if she was going for convincing, she failed.

Badly.



THE GLITZY BALLROOM looks like a 1950's speakeasy with low lights, garish chandeliers, and tabletops draped in velvet.

Darrel Hastings' wife Sunny could have done a better job in thirty minutes.

There's a dance floor beyond the stage, but it'll take these stiff lawyers a few more rounds at the open bar before they have the courage to let loose and permanently embarrass themselves on the dance floor.

I feel Clarissa curling into herself with each step we take inside the ballroom. My fingers tighten on her. Maybe I should ignore her wishes and whisk her away. Does she really know what's best for herself?

Control, Cody. Don't be controlled.

I fight my mother's words and keep my gait steady.

Clarissa's a smart, capable woman. She said she wanted to attend. Knowing what happened ten years ago, the fact that

she's willing to be here is admirable. I'll respect her choice, but the moment I think she's had enough...

"Bolton." Stanford Willis, CEO of Willis, Rodrick and Paulson sticks a hand out to me. "I haven't been seeing you on the circuit."

"My invitations have been getting lost in the mail," I say with a straight face.

Willis bursts out laughing. "Playing coy. You're just dodging the harem of women who flock you at these things." His eyes land on Clarissa and glisten. "But I see you've brought a beautiful repellent."

I stiffen. *Repellent?* "Willis, this is Clarissa Maura. My *date* for tonight."

"Right. Right. Let me guess," he sticks a finger out and squeezes one eye shut, "lawyer? Bolton always struck me as the lawyer type."

"No, I work at a non-profit."

"You're not here to solicit, are you? I left my wallet at home!" Willis lets out a blast of bawdy laughter.

My jaw clenches and I step forward. What part of Clarissa looks like she's here to beg for anything?

A soft hand falls on my chest. Clarissa smiles calmly. "I'm attending as Cody's friend tonight." My eyes narrow when I hear the 'friend' term. "But if you're really interested in collaborating with us, here's my card." She hands it over. "You can contact me when you locate your wallet."

Willis' laughter has a tinge of respect in it. "Where did you find her, Bolton? I like her."

"What you like has nothing to do with me." I steer Ris away. Bending low to whisper in her ear, I growl, "Why did you do that? He was being obnoxious."

"Cody, he was harmless."

"Should I have Doberman teach him a lesson?"

Doberman and his team are somewhere around here, keeping an eye on things. Clay insisted I bring the team tonight. The perp from the windshield incident is suspected to be someone connected to Winifred. Since that chump is still in the wind, Clay refuses to let up on security.

Ris's eyes narrow as she whips her head up. "Doberman isn't your personal assassin."

"It was just a suggestion."

"Cody."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes." She slants me a weird look. "Why are you over-reacting? I'm not as experienced as you and your harem of women," she slams her finger in my chest, "but I've been to a handful of galas like this before."

"Is that jealousy I hear?"

She snorts. "Get over yourself."

Only if you get under me. Preferably naked.

Our eyes lock. Lightning simmers in the air between us. A crackling, snapping magnetism that refuses to be ignored.

I slide my fingers over her cheek, unable to stop myself from touching her. "Do you want to leave?"

"We just got here."

"Which means we've got time to sneak out before things get any worse," I counter.

"If you think I'm going to embarrass you—"

"That's *not* it."

She pins her lips together, clearly disliking my tone.

I soften my voice a touch. "I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"Why? Because I'm a poor charity worker who doesn't fit in?"

I stop abruptly and take her face between my hands. “You are so much more than that, Ris. You deserve to be in this room. It’s them who don’t deserve your light.”

“Thanks.” She gives me a wry smile and then pulls back. “But I’m not going to fall apart because some rich folks don’t like me.”

You did ten years ago and I didn’t see it. I never saw it until it was too late.

She pushes at me. “Go. Schmooze with whoever it is you came here to schmooze with.”

I narrow my eyes. “How do you know I came here for someone?”

“Because you’re Cody Bolton. Everything you do has to benefit the bottom line.” She smiles.

Her words are like a dagger to my heart for some reason. Is that how I am?

“Join me.”

“No thanks.” She shakes her head. “My eyes will just glaze over anyway. I’ll be happier over at the snack table trying to pronounce the fancy names for what are obviously just pigs in a blanket.”

This woman is so far under my skin that I can’t breathe for a second. “Come over anytime. And if anyone bothers you—”

“Sheesh, when did you start sounding like a concerned parent? I’m a grown woman who can hold her own. You don’t have to babysit me.” She tosses her head and glides away.

I force myself to walk in the other direction.

Clarissa was right about me using the gala as an excuse to make a new business contact, but any hope of concentration is dashed out the window. I can’t extricate my eyes from her.

It’s not professional that I keep losing my train of thought.

And when guys start approaching her, my mind snaps.

“Excuse me.” I tell the hotshot attorney I was hoping to woo over to our internal law team. My steps are brisk and my eyes are thick with storm clouds.

I draw near, slide an arm around Clarissa’s waist and kiss her cheek. “Princess, would you like to dance?”

Her eyes widen.

I whisk her away before she can get a word out. Her fingers are sticky when I slip my hand around them and lead her back and forth in a waltz.

“I wasn’t finished eating,” Clarissa hisses angrily.

“And I wasn’t finished schmoozing.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Yours.”

She snorts. “Wow.”

“You have a very unique talent for stealing my sanity.” I spin her around and bring her back to me. My lips tilted to her ear, I whisper, “What am I going to do with you, princess?”

She shudders and looks up at me with her divine brown eyes, rendering me speechless.

“Cody,” she inhales, “why are you acting like this?”

“Like what?”

She peers up at me and then shakes her head. “Nothing.”

I bring her close, tucking my hand more securely around her waist and inhaling her scent. In the distance, I see a man standing head and shoulders over the crowd. He’s dressed in all black and his presence sends a ring of alarm through the guests near him.

“Doberman?” I hiss.

Clarissa whips around. “Is it just me or does he look more serious than usual?”

“I’ll be right back.”

She nods.

I stalk over to Doberman and motion for him to follow me into the hallway.

“What’s wrong?”

“Winifred was spotted by the docks.” He plays the footage on his phone.

“When was that taken?”

“Tonight. We think he might have snuck in through the port.”

“Why would he come *back* to the city when the cops are looking for him?” My eyes narrow. “Do you know his location now?”

“He disappeared again, but the moment he resurfaces, we’ll find him.”

I nod. Winifred was mildly annoying before he sent someone to smash my windshield. Now, he’s a bug I want to crush. Because of him, Clarissa was almost hurt. I can’t let him walk away with a slap on the wrist this time.

“I suggest you cut this evening short,” Doberman says.

“Winifred isn’t going to stop me from living my life. Clarissa and I will leave when we’re ready.”

Doberman scowls, but he doesn’t argue.



WHEN I RETURN to the ballroom, Clarissa is gone. My eyes skate desperately through the crowd.

Lifting my phone, I call Doberman.

“Where is she?” I ask in a panic. “Who has eyes on her?”

Another team member speaks out. “I do, sir. She ran outside. On the left balcony, sir.”

My stomach sinks. “What happened?”

He pauses. “A group of women approached her. It didn’t seem to be a pleasant conversation.”

The world ripples around me.

For a second, I'm back in that college dorm, sneaking outside Clarissa's room.

"Sometimes, I found myself thinking these dark thoughts. Like maybe I should head to the balcony and jump off. End it all."

I hang up, grit my teeth and stalk toward the balcony.

That was ten years ago. We were kids. Fragile. Broken.

She wouldn't do that now, would she?

A woman in a blue satin dress that looks like it's hanging on to her by a thread slides in front of me.

"Cody Bolton!" She sets a hand on my arm. "It's good to see you. It's been so long since we caught up."

"Who are you?" I ask. It's not a question I want answered. It's just the fastest way to tell her I don't give a damn about her or her touchy hands.

She flinches in embarrassment, but I'm already brushing past her. I wonder if she was one of the women who harassed Clarissa and pushed her outside. If I had time, I would have found out and punished her accordingly.

As it stands, I can barely move fast enough.

I storm through the open balcony doors. We're too many floors up. If she jumped...

A shadow moves in the corner.

My gaze falls on Clarissa. She's standing on the opposite end of the door, tucked in the darkness where no one can see her.

My breath catches.

Memories from that night outside her dorm swarm back to me.

"Have you ever felt that way? Like you're a waste of space? Like you're dirt under someone's boot? Like you don't

matter? That's how I feel when I go to those events with him. I feel like nothing."

I start moving.

She straightens her back. "Cody, how did you—"

I seize her arms and pull her body against my chest. Ducking my head in the crook of her neck, I hold her tight.

"Like no one would care if I was gone."

"Cody, what's..." Her words are muffled against my suit. "What's wrong?"

"Like maybe it would be better for him if I was gone."

My heart is pounding a crazed rhythm, moving fast enough to drill through my ribs.

I squeeze my eyes shut, drowning in the memory of her darkest confession. The one she doesn't know I overheard. The one that made me leave her behind for ten years, thinking it was better for her to be without me.

"He doesn't know. I couldn't tell him. How could I when that world he's entering is the one that makes me want to die?"

"I'm sorry, Ris." I caress her, running my fingers down her back as I lean my forehead against hers.

Emotions tangle in my veins, pounding through me like raging tyrants.

"That's why I felt relieved when he didn't show up to the wedding. It's bittersweet. I love him, but it hurts to be with him. It hurts so much."

"I'm so sorry." I rub my nose slowly along her jaw, burrowing against her skin as if it's possible to fuse our bodies together. "If I could turn back time, I would have run away with you. Everything else is meaningless."

"Cody."

"I regret that decision," I growl. "I should have—"

"Stop. Just... stop apologizing."

I watch her silently.

“This world,” she gestures to the inside, “is brutal. I’d much rather be with people who wear their pain and brokenness out loud than with people who act like they have it all together when they don’t.”

I nod.

“I wanted to go home.” She inhales a deep breath. “Then I saw you and... and it felt like I already was.”

“Ris—”

“Don’t say anything.” She dips her head. “I drank too much wine and I’ll lose my courage if I’m sober.”

My lips curl up.

She trembles in my arms before framing my face with her soft hands. Her eyes, ringed in shadows and moonlight, slide down to my lips. Hesitantly, she leans forward.

I don’t rush.

I don’t push.

I let her come to me.

The narrow gap between us closes.

When our mouths finally collide, I feel an energy blast rip out of our bodies and tornado through the balcony. It’s a wonder the lampposts don’t flicker. It’s a wonder we don’t shatter the foundations of the hotel.

I cradle her in my arms like the priceless diamond she is. Softly, my lips explore hers, finding all the places I once knew. Reacquainting myself with them again.

She sighs into me and opens her mouth. My tongue flicks against her bottom lip before slipping inside and tasting every airy breath she releases.

It’s a soft *I missed you* kiss that’s only made more intense by the dazzling stars overhead and the striking moonlight. And we’re a part of the night. Something magical and mystical that can’t be explained with mere words.

She pulls her head back and I squeeze her tighter, my breath deepening.

“Was that... different than you remember?” Her lips coil up in a smile.

“Better.”

“Five stars?”

“Worth the wait.”

She chuckles, but I cut her laughter short by diving in again. This time, I take control of the kiss and it's not long before I'm devouring her like I've desperately wanted to since that day in the elevator.

Her fingers slide into my hair, attacking my scalp and raking down my face into my beard. Fire burns at my feet, but it's sweet. Like a hellish paradise. I deepen the kiss, pulling her closer, stamping my name on her with my hands, my tongue, my teeth.

She moans and I know damn well that if I don't stop myself, I'm going to throw her on that bench and give the security team an eyeful.

I'm almost growling like a panther when I jerk back, head snapping to the side because I know if I look at her, it'll be game over.

Clarissa gasps for air. She's soaked in moon-lit silver and gold. Way more expensive than any of those women in there. Way more than I deserve.

“You ready to get out of here?” I ask.

She takes the hand I hold out to her.

We weave through the crowd. The music is louder and there are people on the dance floor. The networking part of the party is almost over. I've shown my face. Made my introductions. It's time to go.

Clarissa keeps her eyes on me as we move, but she falters when she glances at a group of women off to the side. They're glaring at her like she hacked their bank accounts.

I notice and straighten my shoulders. “What did they say to you?”

“Nothing that was worth a response.” She slides her hand up my arm. “Can we not with the revenge plotting? I’m in a good mood.”

“Because of me?” I tease, smiling for her while keeping a hard glare on the women.

“Sure. If that makes you feel better.”

I laugh and allow her to drag me away, but I make a mental note to find out the names of every woman in that group and make them pay. At the very least, they need to be punished for hurting my princess.

“Cody,” Clarissa warns, her tone similar to a mother shooing their child away from the cookie jar.

I open the door for her. “Would you like to come somewhere with me?”

She kicks off her heels. “Where?”

“A surprise.”

Eyes narrowing adorably in my direction, she says, “I don’t like surprises.”

“You’ll like this one.”



CLARISSA GASPS when she sees the helicopter. I’m glad her hair is braided back because the wind from the chopper is relentless.

I help her inside and keep a hold of her hand as we take flight.

She squeals. “Look at that view!”

“I’m looking,” I say, my eyes fixed on her.

She glances at me and shyness steals over her face. “I’m talking about the city, Cody.”

I kiss her forehead, right under the bulky headset we're wearing to hear each other. She chases me down when I pull back, planting a kiss on my lips.

My smile takes over, unable to be contained. How freaking adorable can one woman be?

I slip my arms around her, content to watch her excitement at the view. Every late night, every brutal negotiation, every scathing article in the press and every disappointment was worth it just for this.

My money finally has a true purpose—putting that expression of awe and delight on Clarissa Maura's face every chance I can get.

"Is that an island?" Clarissa points down to a small circle of land surrounded by water. From the top, all we can see is an ocean of trees and the sprawling expanse of a roof.

I soak in her excitement with quiet pride.

When we land, I help her off the helicopter and gesture to the villa. "This is my private getaway."

Her eyes widen. "This... this island is yours?"

"I also have a private island in Belize if you want to go further next time." I wink.

Her jaw drops.

"This way." I lead her down the path carefully. She's still wearing heels and the terrain makes her move at a snail's pace.

Impatient, I sweep her into my arms.

She locks her hands around my neck. "Don't you think you're overdoing the Prince Charming thing?"

"I don't want you breaking your neck before I've had a chance to relieve you of that dress." I nuzzle her nose. "We don't have a hospital on the island and broken bones are a turn off."

She swats at me. "You're such a prick."

"Better than Ice King."

“Honestly, I’ve always had a thing for Frozone.”

“*The Incredibles* Frozone?” I raise the pitch of my voice.
“Where is my *super-suit!*”

“That’s it. Take me now.” She flails her arms and tilts her head back dramatically.

Don’t worry, baby. I will.

I chuckle and walk up the path to the house.

“It’s beautiful.” She gasps at the sight of the mansion.
“And it’s so huge. What do you need all that space for, Cody?”

“I rarely have time to visit anymore, but this place was intended to be my hideaway from work.”

“Makes sense.” She bobs her head. “I’d need my own private island too if I lived right above the company I owned.”

I give her a side-glance, hearing her sarcasm.

The door is open and I set her down once we get inside.

“It’s beautiful.” Her eyes are pinned to the arched ceilings, extravagant chandeliers and winding staircase. The property manager already set a fire and it’s crackling cheerfully in the fireplace. “Wow.”

Clarissa’s admiration does something to me. For a second, I soak in the sight of her. The woman of my dreams. Right in front of me. Not a figment of my imagination. Not the secret longing I buried myself in work to escape.

She’s here, generous curves barely hidden in a gown. Hair tied up. Fingers holding tightly to my arm.

Sweet, gorgeous, vulnerable.

Mine.

Isn’t that what her kiss meant?

She’s ready to be mine again.

“Would you like some wine?” I ask, moving to the kitchen to cool down.

Ris looks like she wants to explore the house and I would never deny this woman anything. Even if my own raging desire is out of control.

“That depends. Is Doberman and his team coming over?”

I freeze halfway to the island counter, hearing a seductive note in her voice. “No.”

The reason I flew her to my private island was to shake off my team. No one knows about this property. We also have security cameras on all perimeters. There’s no chance of Winifred or anyone sneaking in. Which means there’s no need for Doberman to be right outside my door.

“Are there any,” she clasps her hands together, “security cameras?”

I take a ragged breath and move toward her. Dragging my hand down her back, I whisper, “No security cameras. Anything you do in here is for my eyes only.”

“Then forget the wine and kiss me again.”

“With pleasure.” Swooping in, I press my lips to hers so roughly that she moans. Breath ragged, I tangle my fingers in the back of her neck and drag her closer. Her curvy body thrusts against mine. She’s practically clawing at my chest.

Pulling back just slightly, I look into her eyes and let the darkness, the overwhelming beast that belongs to her, come out.

“I swear to you, Ris. I won’t ever leave you again. No more broken promises. No more wrong choices. I’ll always choose you.”

Our eyes fuse together.

Hers are dark chocolate storms, hazy with equal parts desire and fragility.

“Don’t break that promise this time,” she says.

I devour her lips again, sealing my vow with a kiss.

Sweet mercy. It’s perfect.

It's home.

She tastes like wine and strawberries.

Like college nights under rusty fans and tiny cots that could barely fit my body and hers.

Like laughter and holding hands in the quad.

Fiery. Uncomplicated. Youthful.

The past and the present collide as I walk her backward.

We're different people.

Better in some ways.

Worse for wear in others.

But that fire between us, that connection we have—we'll always have—burns bright.

"I'm going to rip you apart tonight, princess," I growl, guiding my hand down the curve of her spine.

"Sounds painful," she whispers against my lips.

I chuckle with lust. "Are you afraid?"

"No." She wraps a leg over me, hooking it at my waist. "I want this. I even dreamed of it."

A low animal-like noise rips out of me. "You dreamed of me?"

"Yes."

"So did I." I use my tongue to trace a hot, messy line on her throat. "Every night."

"Cody," she murmurs, breathless.

"What was I doing to you in that dream?"

"You think I'll make it easy for you?" Her smile is dangerous.

"Playing hard to get?" I slip my hands under her dress and meet fabric instead of skin. Snarling, I growl, "Are you wearing tights?"

"Spanx."

“Take it off.”

“You want me to take off my Spanx before I take off my dress?”

“You’re very mouthy.” I nip at her neck, dropping kisses over her throat and collarbone. “Was that a part of your dream?”

“If I say yes?”

My fingers press against her through the tights and I watch her face change in an instant. The teasing drains away, replaced by wide-eyed pleasure. She whimpers, “Cody.”

“Still want to talk, princess?”

She shakes her head.

Thoughts of what’s underneath this gown call to me. Taunt me. I hate this dress with a fiery passion. I hate those tights. I hate anything that’s standing between her supple brown body and my ravaging hands.

“Let me show you why reality is better.”

I reach behind her dress. The sound of a zipper groaning as it splits open mingles with our quickening breaths. She slides her dress to the ground and I almost lose it right there. She’s an angel. My angel. Perfect in every way.

I can’t wait to reacquaint my tongue with every inch of her body and feast on her until she’s nothing but a limp, shivering puddle of satisfaction.

My body pangs with need, spiking a physical alarm through my whole system like a man who’s been denied his favorite dessert for years suddenly presented with a tray of it.

I move my lips back against hers. My tongue plunges inside her mouth, desperate for another taste. My hands roam her chest and my mouth soon follows, drawing lines down the same path.

She throws her neck back and I pull her deeper into my arms, flicking my tongue against her skin and making her

pant. When I've said my hellos to her top half, I slide my lips lower and kiss both her inner thighs.

Sweet mother...

Heat ravages me. Need lurches against my pants zipper, screaming to be buried so deep inside her they'll never find the end of me.

I push her thighs further apart and approach reverently.

The sounds she makes when I tease her fill the room. My hands and tongue are a composer, drawing out a symphony of lyrical mewls from her mouth, setting the whole damn house on fire.

She's as desperate as I am, arching up and down against my invasion. Her hand digs into my hair, her nails retracing the lines she etched in my scalp on the balcony. Those sweet, sweet moans of hers spur me on, urging me to lick, to suck, to unravel her inch by inch.

Viciously, I explore her until my fingers are slick from the pattern of tracing out one word.

Mine, mine, *mine*.

This body.

This woman.

This pleasure.

I can't get enough. I'll *never* get enough.

She bawls out and I smile darkly. The night is just beginning. I've barely scratched the surface of all the hot, wicked things on my list to celebrate our grand reunion.

"I want you." She tugs at my shirt.

"Where are your manners, princess?" I nip at her ear.

"I'm not going to say please."

"Then tell me if this is better than your dream," I demand.

"Are you so jealous you want to compete with my imagination of you?" she fires back.

“I’m jealous when anyone who isn’t me gets to touch you.”

“Maniac.”

“You have no idea.”

A husky laugh falls out of her and it sends a crazed hunger rushing through my blood.

I kiss her mouth for being so feisty and then I kiss her again for being so perfect. We get lost in a long insatiable tangle of limbs and tongues.

Still kissing, I gather her up and set her on the rug near the crackling fire.

Her lithe brown body glistens, shoulders rolling in a tense little gasp.

I’ve been waiting for this for ten years. Ages. I spent my life starving for her touch.

Which makes the sound of my ringing cell phone a furiously unwelcome distraction.

I pop my mouth away from Ris’s body. She groans and moves her hand over mine when I start to put the phone on silent.

“Don’t.”

“Ris...” I already know where she’s going with this.

“Check. It could be important.”

“Nothing more important than this,” I growl.

She looks up at me through heavily lidded eyes. “You can’t say that anymore, Cody. You have a son now. Or temporarily. It doesn’t matter. Joel might need you.”

Reluctantly, I back away, leaving her on the rug looking gorgeous, sweaty and ready to be ravaged.

It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life.

Vargas’s name fills the screen.

I smash the button to answer the call. “You better hope someone’s dying.”

“Someone is,” Vargas says.

My shoulders snap to attention and confusion descends.

“Tell me you’re joking,” I snarl, meeting Clarissa’s concerned look as she sits up.

“It’s Joel.” Vargas pauses. “He’s in the hospital and... Cody, it doesn’t look good.”

THE PAST

CODY

“YOU SCHEDULED a business meeting on our wedding day? *Our wedding day*, Cody?” Ris yanks her suitcase off the bed and slams it on the ground. “Why would you do that?”

“Whitley and Carson’s is the most influential angel investment group in this year’s round. They’re the ones who chose the date. There was no way I could say no.”

“You can’t keep doing this to me.” Anger glitters in her brown eyes. “I’ve been patient, Cody, but this isn’t a photoshoot or a tux fitting this time. This is our wedding.”

“Ris, I’m not ditching our wedding.”

“Your meeting’s an hour before our appointment at the Vegas chapel.”

“We can push the wedding down an hour, but we can’t get another shot with Whitley and Carson’s again if I don’t show up.”

“Wow.”

“Princess, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If I say no, *everything* I’ve worked for would be for nothing.”

She frowns.

“This isn’t just my future, Ris. It’s yours too. I’m doing this for us.”

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk about it.” She gives me her back and kicks the suitcase for good measure.

I’m in trouble.

I slide my arms around her waist, hugging her from behind. “Don’t be mad, princess.”

She wiggles. “Get off.”

“I love you.”

“The feeling is not mutual,” she sasses.

I nibble her ear. “Have I told you how beautiful you look today?”

“Don’t try to charm your way out of this.”

I hear the smile in her voice and squeeze her tighter. “It’s my dream, Ris. It’s our dream.”

“*Our* dream is not for you to go to an investor’s meeting on the day we say ‘I do’. My mom already thinks this is a bad idea. It’ll be hard enough getting married without her there. It’ll be impossible if you’re not there either.”

“I know. I know.” I rub my hands down her arms. “I promise my meeting is not going to get in the way of our wedding.”

“How can you promise that? You’ll have to catch a second flight to Vegas. So many things can go wrong between then. So many things already have. Besides, your phone screen is totally cracked.” She points. “That’s a bad omen.”

“My phone works perfectly fine. Don’t worry, Ris. I’ll make it. I swear.” I kiss her neck. “I want to be your husband so badly I can taste it. Nothing is going to keep me from walking down the aisle with you.”

She says nothing.

I kiss her neck again. “Don’t be mad. I hate when you’re mad at me.”

She whirls around and points a finger in my face. “You better keep your promise or I’ll never forgive you, Cody Bolton. I mean it.”

“Understood, princess.”

“I will disappear and never speak to you again.”

“Never.” I kiss her cheek. “Gonna.” My lips graze her jaw. “Happen.”

Our lips meet in a passionate collision.

She kisses me back, her arms winding around my neck and her smile digging into my lips.

“I love you, Ris.”

“I love you too. Now shut up and kiss me.”

I laugh and walk her backward to the bed.



THE NEXT DAY, I give the pitch everything I've got. There's so much riding on this. Ris is already ticked off. I can't fly to Vegas for my wedding without hearing a yes.

“You have potential.” The man across the boardroom grins so broadly, his face might explode. “I like it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I'll have someone send the contract over next week. We're expecting big things from you, Bolton.”

“I'll blow those expectations out of the water.”

“That's the spirit.”

The investors clear out of the room. I open my phone and scroll to Clarissa's number. The name is saved as 'Princess' with a heart beside it. Before I can call to tell her the good news, I see a line of angry messages.

Cody, I'm in Vegas.

Where are you?

I already got the marriage certificate, but our Elvis looks a little hungover.

Cody, have you caught a plane yet?

I'm waiting in my wedding dress.

You better text me back now or I swear the wedding's off.

I cringe. Uh-oh.

I didn't realize it was so late.

I text Ris back.

I'm heading to the airport now. I'll be there. I swear.

I catch a cab to the airport.

On the way, my phone rings and my gut suddenly twists with foreboding.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Is this Cody Bolton?” an unfamiliar voice says.

“Yes.”

“We’re calling about your mother, Elizabeth Bolton. Her medical files have you as her next of kin.”

“Medical files?” I croak. “What do you mean? Is my mom in the hospital?”

“She’s been receiving treatments for a while now. Didn’t you know?”

My throat thickens to the point I can’t swallow.

“We advise you to get here as fast as you can, Mr. Bolton. Your mother’s fought valiantly, but she’s losing this battle. I’m afraid she doesn’t have much time left.”

My heart pounds and I quickly shoot Clarissa a text but, just as I press send, my phone dies.

“No, no. Come on.” I tap the device against the palm of my hand.

“You okay back there?” The taxi driver peers at me through the rear-view mirror.

My eyes slide to the airport rising in view and then swing back to my phone. I grit my teeth, my heart roaring in pain.

“Can you turn the car around? I’m not going to the airport anymore.”

HOSPITAL RUNWAY

CLARISSA

CODY'S STEPS LAG BEHIND, and it feels like I'm dragging a stubborn mule to the slaughter. I glance over my shoulder, tugging on his hand. "You okay?"

He nods.

"You're slowing down."

"I'm going as fast as I can."

"This is fast for you? One of your steps takes up half the building."

His lips curl up. He can't quite make it look like a smile.

"Joel will be okay. He's a fighter. He's not going to..." A lump of emotions hit my throat. "He'll pull through."

I've been telling myself that since the helicopter ride back to the city.

"He's going to be fine," I mutter.

Cody's eyes are glued to my face. "Are you going to cry again?"

"No."

He hands me his handkerchief with a wry frown.

Tears swell and I hold them back with all my might. Pushing the handkerchief away, I sob, "There's nothing to cry over."

"Is that why you finished my entire Kleenex box on the drive to the hospital?"

"Do *not* mention that in front of him." I lift a finger. "Joel will take one look at our worried faces and laugh so hard he cracks a rib."

"The kid doesn't laugh."

"He does laugh."

"Not with me." Cody ducks his head, looking troubled.

“You’ll have a chance to hear him laugh because he’s going to be okay,” I say it again like a mantra. “He has to be.”

“I know.”

“Then what’s with the resistance?”

“I don’t like hospitals.”

The statement takes me by surprise. Cody’s like an impenetrable fortress. Strong. Solid. Unbreakable. I’ve never seen him shaken.

Is it because he’s worried for Joel or is it something deeper?

He squeezes my hand and quickens his step. “Don’t overthink, princess.”

“I’m not. I’m just…”

“Worrying?”

“I’m not worried. Joel will be fine.”

“That’s not what Vargas said.”

“Vargas said a lot of things, but most importantly, he said the doctors have hope. We should too.”

Cody doesn’t respond, but he moves a little faster. His shoulders are a hard, slashing line and his expression is back to the default Ice King mask.

“Bolton!” Vargas waves from across the waiting room.

My heart drops when I see how haggard he looks. Vargas’s tie is yanked down, his cuffs are rolled back and his hair looks twice its usual size.

“How is he?” I ask, getting close.

“The doctors are with him now. I haven’t heard any news.”

“Hopefully, no news is good news,” I say.

“What happened?” Cody demands.

“We’re not sure. He was at home all night. Everything seemed normal. According to the nurse, he went in to check on Joel and give him his meds. Joel was occupied on the phone so

he left. When he went back in, Joel was on the ground, having seizures.”

Cody steps forward threateningly. “Where’s the nurse now?”

“Not here.”

“Why’d he run?”

“Probably to keep from getting incinerated,” Vargas says.

I set a calming hand on Cody’s chest. “Let’s not blame anyone before we have the full picture.”

Cody snaps his mouth shut, but his body is on edge. I see the worry bubbling beneath his nuclear-bomb expression. He’s barely holding on.

I know because he’s squeezing my hand for dear life.

“What did the doctors say when you got here?” I ask Vargas.

“Something about cardiac arrest. His heart just couldn’t handle any more strain and it gave in. The next few hours are the most vital. The doctors say it could go either way.”

“No, let’s think positively.”

Vargas purses his lips. “We’ve got to be prepared for anything. If Joel doesn’t make it, the fall-out will be brutal. The press will have a field day—”

“Who gives a damn about the press?” Cody growls. “We’re talking about a kid’s life here.”

Vargas looks sheepish. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant,” Cody says darkly. “But you heard her. We think positively.”

I try to smile, but the worry inside me expands until it fills the whole room.

A door to the left opens and a doctor walks out wearing a mask over his face. “Who’s here for Joel Constantine?”

“Me.” Cody lumbers forward. “I’m his fa—foster dad.”

“We’re all here for Joel.” I press in. “Doctor, how is he? Is he okay?”

“His heart stopped.”

Sorrow hammers into my head like a murder weapon.

“But we managed to bring him back.”

Vargas keels over, both hands on his knees. “Oh, thank God.”

Cody’s about to pinch my fingers clear off.

I wiggle my hand around. “Cody.”

He looks down, recognizes he’s leaving marks and quickly loosens his grip. “Sorry.”

The doctor continues, “The worst isn’t over yet, I’m afraid. Joel’s heart can no longer function with his mobile ventilator. We have him on our ECOS ventilator, but it’s only a temporary solution.”

“What does that mean?” I press.

“If he doesn’t get a new heart soon...” The doctor shakes his head.

Stricken, I stumble back. It feels like the floor is sliding to one side and my feet can’t stay balanced.

Cody slips an arm around my waist. “You okay, princess?”

“Yeah,” I breathe.

He glances up at the doctor. “What do we have to do to make this happen? I don’t care how much it costs. I want the best, healthiest heart flown in tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bolton, but you can’t just order a heart like it’s a dish off a menu.”

“You can do anything with enough money,” Cody fires back.

“Not unless you plan on cutting someone’s heart out and serving it up on a silver platter.”

Cody’s expression darkens.

The doctor shudders. “He’s not... actually considering that, is he?”

“Doctor, is there no other way?” I beg. “We can expand the search. I’m sure if we look, we’ll find the heart we need.”

“I’m afraid that’s not how it works. Joel has been moved up on the priority list, but there is no guarantee a compatible heart will be made available in time. It’s all up to Fate now.”

“Up to Fate?” Cody growls. “You’re saying you saved him so we could watch him die?”

“We’re not God, Mr. Bolton. There’s nothing more we can do.”

Cody glares into the wall.

The tension is ramping up.

Tempers are sparking from all sides.

I step in. “Thank you, doctor. As long as Joel’s still breathing, then we still have hope. When can we see him?”

“We’re moving him to the ICU now. You can visit him when he’s settled.”

“Thank you.”

The doctor takes off. He’s moving faster than necessary.

I think he’s trying to get away from Cody.

Vargas whirls around and yanks his tie off completely. “The kid is a brat, but he doesn’t deserve this.” He paces up and down. “I can’t believe it. The last time I saw him, he was being a smart aleck, talking crap about my tie... so full of life.”

“He’s still full of life,” I remind him.

Vargas twists around. “Don’t you think it’s weird?”

“What’s weird?” I sigh in exhaustion. It feels like the room is spinning and I lean deeper into Cody’s chest. In response, he rubs my shoulder.

A few hours ago, I was on a private island. Cody was kissing me all over and my heart was racing. Now, we’re

surrounded by stark white walls, bright lights and the overwhelming scent of bleach. My heart is beating fast for a completely different reason.

Vargas paces the other way. “It’s so out of the blue, isn’t it? Why did the kid suddenly have a heart attack? His meds were working fine. His machine was fine. His nurse didn’t see anything wrong with him.”

“What are you saying?” Cody asks gruffly.

“Did you two fight again?”

“Vargas, what the hell?” I snap.

Cody whips around. “I gotta get out of here.”

“Wait, Cody!” I slant Vargas a dark look and take off after him. “Cody, slow down!”

People stare at us with wide-eyes. I don’t blame them. We look dramatic, running around the hospital in our gala outfits.

I catch up to Cody halfway down the hallway.

My fingers curl around his suit jacket. “What’s wrong?”

A soft expletive whispers past his lips. “Vargas is right. I pissed the kid off tonight. I told him I was going to the gala with you. He didn’t want me to and I didn’t listen.”

My jaw slackens.

“Dammit, Ris. I rubbed it in his face. He was clearly upset.”

“No. *No.*” I run my hand down his back. “It’s not your fault, Cody. There has to be another explanation.”

Vargas’ harried footsteps catch up to us.

His eyes dart between me and Cody. “She’s right, Bolton. You can’t blame yourself. I didn’t mean to throw that on you. We won’t know the whole story until Joel wakes up.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Cody growls.

A terrifying hush descends on all three of us.

Cody's the first to break it. "Standing around talking won't fix anything. I should go home. Pack some things to move in here for the time being."

Vargas lifts a hand. "I'll stay with him if you want."

"No. I'll do it myself. Get all the research files from my desk and bring them here. Since I'll be moving into the hospital, I might as well do some reading."

Vargas heads out.

"I'll come home with you," I offer.

In the car, Cody fastens my seatbelt for me. His indifferent expression chills me to the bone. How is he so calm right now?

My fingers slide over his. "Cody, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Vargas didn't mean to say that. No one thinks you're responsible for this."

He pulls his hands back.

Hurt crashes through me.

"I'll take you home now," he says in a frigid voice.

I frown. "I'm not going home. I told you. I'm coming over and helping you pack."

His jaw clenches. "I'll call you with an update, Ris."

"Oh, screw you," I hiss.

His head swings around like a haunted doll.

I know he's shocked.

I'm shocked.

But I'm also pissed the hell off.

"Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I can't feel when you're pushing me away?"

"I'm not pushing you away, Ris."

“Oh? You’re just insisting I go home when it’s clear you need me more than ever?”

He stares straight ahead.

“This isn’t the part of the movie where we break up over something stupid. We did that once. And I’m not going back for a repeat.”

“Who said anything about breaking up?” Cody growls.

“I can see right through you, Cody Bolton. I know what you’re doing and I won’t let you use your Ice King powers on me.” I take his hand and slide my fingers through it. “I’m not going to let you push me away.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“It’s too late to back out now, Ice King. You made the mistake of chasing me. You made me fall for you again, so guess what that freaking means?”

“What does it mean?”

“For better or worse, buddy. That macho Superman crap where you bear all the trouble alone? Yeah, that’s not going to fly. It was fine when I wasn’t here. You could be the beast locked up in a mansion, growling at your singing plates and candles...”

“Is that a... *Beauty and the Beast* reference?”

“Don’t interrupt me.” I lift a finger.

His lips twitch.

“I’m here now.” I tap my chest. “I’m not leaving you or Joel alone, so cut the crap and turn this car around *right now*.”

His Adam’s apple bobs.

“Cody, I will scream.”

“I can’t do it right now, Ris.” His voice is ragged. I’ve never seen such a look of anguish on his face. He seems like a different man. One caught in a nightmare.

“Do what?”

He keeps quiet.

“For the love of—just *talk* to me, Cody?”

He stares straight ahead. His eyes glint with pain. “I just...”

“You just what?”

“I can’t look you in the eye right now.”

“What?”

“If Joel really is dying because of me—”

“I said he wasn’t.”

“But if he is,” Cody inhales, “that’s not something I can walk back. That’s a stain I’ll carry with me forever. And it’s one thing if someone out there gets hurt. But if I hurt Joel...”

“You’re being extremely annoying right now.” I squint my eyes. “It’s like you’re not hearing me, but that’s fine. I still want to hold you. I still want to kiss you. I’m still on your side.” I lift our hands. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. I knew you were an annoying butt-head before I walked into this, but you know what you’re not?”

“What?”

“A murderer.”

His throat bobs.

I settle back into the chair. “Hurry up and take us to your place. I need to raid Joel’s closet and underwear drawer.”

For a second, I think Cody will be his usual stubborn self and do what he wants.

Instead, he turns the car around and mutters, “He’ll never forgive me if I let you see his Hello Kitty boxers.”

“Are you kidding? Now I *have* to see them.”

Cody chuckles and lifts my hand to his mouth. His lips are soft against my knuckles. “I love you. You know that?”

“Of course I know that. Now shut up and drive.”



I FINISH PACKING a bag of Joel's necessities. Walking over to Cody's office, I lean against the door and watch him. He's sitting in his chair, putting a laptop into a case.

The groan of the zipper reminds me of the way my dress sounded when he peeled it off me. Was it just earlier that he was growling in my ear, making me scream with his expert caresses?

The Ice King. The man I swore I'd never give into again.

He had me on my back. On a fluffy rug.

Naked.

And now we're here packing for the hospital.

How fast the night can turn.

I slip into the office. "Hey."

"Hey." He glances up. His eyes turn velvet green when they rake over my body. "My shirt looks good on you."

"Don't get any ideas." I pad into the room. "You ready to head out?"

"Not yet." He ropes an arm around my waist and scoops me into his lap, holding me so close I can feel his pulse pounding under his skin.

We sit like that for a moment, just... breathing each other in.

Cody's gaze drops to the bottle I'm clutching. "What's that?"

"Wheel grease. For... for Joel's wheelchair." I feel the emotions balling in my throat already. "I don't know why. I was packing his stuff and as soon as I saw it I couldn't let it go." My eyes swell with tears again. "What if he never comes back, Cody?"

"What happened to thinking positively?"

“I don’t know. It’s harder than it sounds.”

He sets his chin on my shoulder. “Joel’s wheelchair makes a weird creaking sound when he moves around at night.” Cody closes his eyes. “At first it was so irritating, but now the house feels quiet.”

“You miss him.”

He shrugs.

“It’s okay to admit it.”

“I barely knew him.”

“You barely knew me before you started harassing me for a date,” I remind him.

“*Harassed* you?”

“What else would you call it?”

“Something not-felony adjacent.”

“You admitted you stalked me and spied on my student information,” I tease, glad to see the wrinkles in his forehead smoothing out.

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you that.”

I smile.

Cody smiles too.

I drop a kiss on his bicep. “I have a question.”

“If it has anything to do with the extent and frequency of my stalking you in college, I plead the fifth.”

I can’t help chuckling.

Right now, I’m so worried about Joel that I’m grateful for any hint of levity. Even if it’s unintentional.

“We’ll come back to that.”

“Maybe.” He draws a circle into my back.

“It’s about tonight. Why did you rush to the balcony to apologize?”

“That?” An eyebrow arches. He traces a heart this time.
“No—”

“If you say no reason, I’m leaving your lap and sitting on that chair across the desk.”

He holds me tighter.

“I mean it, Cody.”

He sighs against my neck. His hot breath sends goosebumps racing up my spine.

“Security told me you rushed outside looking upset.” He turns his head slightly and gazes at me with eyes so hot, I might catch a heatstroke. “I lost it.”

“Is that it?” I slide my hands over his neck. “The way you looked at me. The way you spoke to me. It felt more intense than a simple check up on my well-being.”

He glances away.

I turn his chin back in my direction. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He cradles my waist. “The day after our wedding, I came back to your dorm room to see you.”

My heart tumbles out of my chest and starts beating on the floor. “You came back? But I never saw you.”

“I left after what I overheard.”

My breath gets trapped in my throat.

“You talked about how you couldn’t take it anymore. That being with me made you tired and sad because you felt like you had to be someone you weren’t.”

“Cody...”

“You’d never come to me about it. You never told me that being with me was eating you alive. And I was an idiot. I kept dragging you to those networking events. I kept telling you not to worry about what people said.” Cody shakes his head. “I was a coward because I didn’t have the power yet. I couldn’t protect you. I *needed* them. And I think I would have asked

you to keep hurting until I could stand on top of them for you.”

“Cody...”

“That wasn’t fair. Not to you. How could I drag you back into my life after hearing how broken you felt?” Cody’s jaw clenches. “I couldn’t do that to you, Ris. If I couldn’t protect you, it was better to let you go. So I left. And I never looked back.”

I blink and blink, trying to absorb that information. If I’d known he showed up the day after the wedding—if I’d known he hadn’t just abandoned me without a word— would I have forgiven him faster? Would I have sought him out? Would we have spared ourselves ten years of separation and pain?

My lips tremble. “I was secretly hoping you’d come back to me. Every day, I hated you and missed you equally. If I’d known... we wasted ten years, Cody.”

“Don’t think of it like that.”

“How am I supposed to think about it?” I cry out.

He runs his fingers over my forehead. “The kid I was in college—he wasn’t good enough for you. I wouldn’t have given you the attention, the love, the world you deserve. I would have ruined you. Ruined us. Just like I ruined our wedding day. I needed to grow up. I needed to become a better man for you. A man who could choose you, even if it meant losing the world.”

My gaze drops from him to my feet.

Cody nuzzles my neck. “Ask your questions. I have nothing to hide.”

“Why,” I dig my fingers into the flap of his collar, “why didn’t you show up to our wedding that day? I waited for you until midnight.”

“Midnight?” His eyebrows hike.

“Your last text said you’d be there. You swore you would. I stayed. Like a fool, I stayed and waited.”

My heart pangs at the memory. The last thing I expected to be doing on my wedding night was sobbing my eyes out next to a hobo who was higher than a kite.

It was the worst night of my life.

And I'd once slept next to a dumpster with my mom so...

That was saying something.

Cody's eyes burn like twin flames. He opens his mouth as if he'll unveil something important.

Just then, his phone rings.

"It's Vargas." Cody puts it on speaker.

Vargas' voice rings with joy. "I just got a call from the hospital. Joel woke up!"



CODY SKIDS to a stop outside of Joel's hospital room. Conflicting emotions roar through his eyes.

"Come on." I take his hand and open the door.

The first thing I hear is Joel's heart monitor beating strong and steady.

Relieved tears flood my eyes. I kept telling myself that Joel would be okay, but it's another thing to *see* him alive and moving.

Sure, he's hooked up to so many tubes, he looks more machine than boy.

And yes, I know he needs a new heart.

But he's a kid that beat the odds. It won't be easy, but I believe he can continue to do so.

"It's good to see you, Joel." I approach the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now that you're here," he croaks.

I chuckle, noting his watery smile. He's too weak to go full flirt-mode, but it's a valiant effort.

Cody shuffles forward, hunkering like a silent beast who doesn't know how to make friends.

"Cody was really worried about you," I say, trying to fill the awkward silence.

"Somehow, I don't believe that."

My eyebrows cinch when I hear the heat in Joel's words.

Vargas hears it too because he chuckles nervously. "I'm going to find the doctor. Make sure we've got the best room. I think this one is too stuffy."

The door clicks softly.

"What's that?" Joel points to Cody's overnight bags.

"Oh," I smile brightly, "we brought some clothes for you to change into—when you're allowed to of course. Your phone. Some comic books. A few things to decorate this place so it feels less," I search for the right word, "clinical. The other bag is for Cody."

Joel stares at him with hate-filled eyes. "Why? Are we having another interview in here?"

"Joel, Cody was really worried about you. He drove like mad when he heard you were in the hospital."

Joel looks at me, his harsh eyes softening.

But it only lasts for a second.

Stiffening, he turns away. "I don't want him here."

"Fine," Cody says darkly.

"Cody, don't leave." I frown at the patient. "Joel, what's going on? You're being totally unfair. Cody cares about you."

"Me? He only cares about himself!"

The heart monitor starts beeping faster, but I'm so confused and frazzled I barely hear it.

"Where is this coming from?" I demand.

Cody just glares into the wall, not saying anything.

“He’s a user and a liar.” Joel cuts a finger in Cody’s direction. “You’re just so far up his butt-crack you can’t see it.”

“Watch how you talk about her, kid,” Cody growls.

“Joel, that’s not true.” I scramble to understand this sudden hatred. Joel and Cody aren’t going to win any father-son races, but they’re not this antagonistic.

“I don’t know what you guys fought about earlier tonight and, frankly, I don’t care. No matter the circumstances, you’re a family—”

“He’s *not* my family and he is *not* my dad.”

The beeping is even louder now.

My eyes swing to the machine in alarm.

“Ris, it’s okay. I’ll leave,” Cody says, his expression dark.

“Exactly. Run away rather than admit the truth, you liar!”

The machine goes crazy.

Joel’s eyes start rolling back in his head.

“Joel!” I scream, rushing toward him.

Nurses flood the room.

Two of them shove us out into the hallway.

Cody leans his forehead against the wall right outside Joel’s room. I can hear his heavy breathing. It looks like his heart just shattered. No matter how hard of a front Cody puts on, he’s soft with the people he cares about.

To hear Joel slash at him like that...

“Cody,” I say, drawing near to him.

“Just—just give me a minute, Ris.”

I watch him walk off, his shoulders slumped.

Utterly dejected.

Vargas, who I hadn't even realized was in the hallway too, moves toward me. "I've never seen him like that."

"Why is Joel so angry?" I ask.

"I have no idea."

"I'll be right back." I hurry after Cody.

I find him in an empty hallway, looking through the large windows. In the reflection of the glass, I see that his eyes are red.

My heart aches for him as hard as it aches for Joel.

Silently, I slip my arms around his waist and hope my presence brings him comfort.

"I'm not crying," Cody says. "I sneezed a few seconds ago."

"Of course. I didn't say anything."

Cody reminds me of his big brother Clay right now. Hiding their vulnerable side is definitely a Bolton family trait.

Cody sniffs quietly. It's easy to think that he's an unfeeling, cruel robot. And there are days when that might be close to the truth.

But the Ice King is not who he really is.

He's sweet, generous and goes over and beyond for the people he truly loves. When necessary, he sheds that grumpy boss skin and a reliable, caring man takes form.

Cody clears his throat. "Can you stay with him tonight? I'll make arrangements for a new nurse tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Thank you." He twists around and tugs me forward so I'm hugging him from the front.

His arms close around me and he leans some of his weight on my body.

"I don't know how I could have done this without you."

"You'll never have to find out," I murmur.

“Ehem.” Vargas appears behind us.

I start to pull away from Cody, but his hands band around my waist.

“Is the kid okay now?”

“He’s stable. But the doctors think,” Vargas’ face flushes, “they think it’s a good idea for you to stay away from him. For the time being.”

I hear Cody’s heart shatter for a second time, but his face shows no signs of pain.

“Understood. I have other matters to tend to.” He checks his watch. “I asked Ris to stay with him tonight. I’ll head back to the office.”

I frown. “The office? Shouldn’t you—I don’t know—go home and sleep? We were up late last night helping Maggie. We barely got a few hours in.”

“There’s too much to do.”

“Like what?”

“Like catching Winifred.”

“Winifred?” I gasp.

“The police have been looking for him. Tonight, we found out he snuck back into the city, but no one knows why.”

“About that, we got a lead,” Vargas says.

Cody and I both go still.

Vargas flashes his phone. “I just got a call from Doberman.”

“They found him?”

“No, but they know why he’s here.”

“Revenge?” Cody looks bored. “Who did they confirm it with?”

“They found an online server made up of disgruntled ex-employees—”

“Wait. Wait.” I wave a hand. “An online server. Cody has his own anti-fan group?”

Cody’s expression is blank. “Let me guess. Their logo is a bear with a knife through its head.”

“How did you know?”

“All the hate mail lately has that same image.”

“You get hate mail?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal.

“We believe the guy who threw the spark plug porcelain at your window belongs to this forum. Clay and his team are trying to locate him.”

“Wait. You’re hunting down Motorcycle Guy? By yourself? Outside of the police?”

Cody nods.

“Why didn’t you tell me,” I stammer.

“I didn’t know you wanted the details.”

“Of course I want to be informed.”

“We have it handled.”

“Clearly.”

“I didn’t want you to be overwhelmed.” He drapes his fingers across my shoulder. “Don’t be mad.”

“I *am* mad.”

“From now on, I’ll share relevant information with you.”

“*All* information.”

Cody presses in. “We can negotiate the terms—”

“Ehem.” Vargas clears his throat again.

Cody and I glance his way.

“Can you not flirt right in front of me when we’re discussing a potential threat? That would be great.”

I lift my chin. “What did your investigation on Motorcycle Guy yield?”

“You have evidence that Winifred hired him?” Cody adds.

“We have evidence they’re associated, but we don’t believe he was hired by Winifred. We think he’s working *with* Winifred.” Vargas scratches his chin. “We’re trying to figure out how many people in the hate group are an active threat against you.”

Cody’s fingers tighten on my waist. “I see. How does this play into Winifred’s next move?”

“Winifred seems to be the leader of the group. The posts before he joined were bitter against you but pretty harmless. Winifred was the one who got them organized and elevated the threats.”

Cody’s eyes narrow. “That’s why the online campaigns against me felt so intentional.”

“And why the window and ice cream incident did not. These guys aren’t professionals. They’re just fueled by rage and playing blame games.” Vargas shakes his head. “Winifred’s got more to lose. He’s using them for something.”

“Whatever Winifred wants, he won’t succeed,” Cody promises, a determined look in his eyes.

My phone rings.

“It’s my mom,” I mouth, taking a step away and putting the phone to my ear. “Mom, hi...”

“Why the heck are photos of you and Cody Bolton everywhere online?”

My lashes flutter. “Someone took photos of us?”

Cody gives me a puzzled look.

I shake my head.

“You really think galavanting around with a billionaire won’t get you photographed, Clarissa? Have you lost your mind? Wait. Don’t answer that. I know you have.”

“Mom,” I groan.

“What is going on out there?”

“Nothing, I...” My eyes meet Cody’s. “It’s nothing.”

“Fine. Then I can see that *nothing* for myself.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. “What does that mean?”

“I’m coming to town, sweetie. And you better have some big flipping answers when I do!”

THE INTERVIEW

CODY

‘ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES’. That’s always been my philosophy. But what do you do when the punches don’t stop coming?

I groan, unable to sleep despite my body demanding it. I’ve been driving on pure adrenaline and sheer will. Sooner or later, I’m going to crash.

Sleep feels like a foreign concept anyway.

I’m in bed alone, craving Clarissa the way newly-converted vegans crave meat. I wish I could steal her away from the hospital, but Joel needs her more than I do tonight.

Going cold turkey is the least I can do.

Even if Joel hates my guts.

A sting that’s starting to become familiar cuts through the center of my soul. It’s like someone is flinging Japanese knives at my ribs.

I couldn’t care less about the hate organization that rallied to life because of me, but Joel’s anger makes me choke.

Control or be controlled, Cody.

I turn on my other side and harden my heart.

Whatever.

Joel is just some kid I took in. He’s old enough to forge his own path. Once I get him a heart, I’ll wash my hands. Forget he ever existed.

Things will go back to normal eventually.

I turn again and force myself to get some rest but, when I wake up the next morning, my eyes are gritty and it feels like I didn’t sleep at all.

There’s a *ding* from the elevator.

I open the door and groan when I see Clay on the other side.

My brother's jaw is as hard as steel.

"I'm guessing you didn't find Winifred," I mumble, stepping aside so he can walk in.

"No."

I groan. This guy is like a cockroach. He keeps running around, dodging our boots.

Clay's facial expression remains tightly severe. "How are you?"

"Me? I'm great. Ris hasn't called, crying her eyes out, so Joel's probably still alive. That's good." I shuffle to the coffee machine and start a brew. I'll need caffeine for this conversation.

"Island and I went to visit Joel after dropping the kids to school this morning. He didn't seem all that pleased to see us."

"Oh, he hates me now," I say it casually and pour myself a cup. "Coffee?"

Clay stares at me like he can see right through my BS. "Do I want to know?"

"Kid had a heart attack because he was so angry with me. You can fill in the rest of the blanks," I snarl. Pain crawls into my stomach.

Sarcasm is the only reaction I can safely process. I don't understand Joel's sudden switch from lightly hating my guts to fully wanting to skin me alive.

It's better not to think about it.

Cody shakes his head. "You don't have to try so hard to convince me. Or yourself."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're hurt."

"I'm fine."

"It takes you a while to warm up to people, but when you do, you're loyal for life. I'm your brother. I know you better than anyone. You'd die for the people you love." He pauses.

“And that includes Joel, doesn’t it? You care about him more than you expected, don’t you?”

“I thought Darrel was the therapist.” I take a sip.

“Well, I *have* been going to therapy. Maybe I picked up some skills.”

It’s hard to imagine my stoic, military brother talking about his feelings in therapy.

“Good for you. Is that all?”

“No.” Clay slides a letter over the table.

I stare at it, having seen enough hate mail to know what I’m looking at.

“My team and I have been circumventing your mail. Assessing whether the threats are valid or not. We found this.”

I don’t touch it.

“The sender talks about you *and* ‘everyone you love’ this time. They don’t mention Clarissa by name but—”

My shoulders snap to attention.

Damn.

In the past, these threats meant absolutely nothing to me, but that was before Clarissa. Before I had someone to lose. Someone to protect.

I’m a danger to her.

I tighten my fingers around the hate mail. “Do you know who sent it?”

“Based on the logo, probably your anti-fan group.”

I suck in a tight breath.

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about all this, Cody. I think we should talk to Clarissa—”

“No.”

“She deserves to know about this.”

“I don’t want her to live her life in fear. Not because of me.”

“What do you want to do then?”

“Get her a full detail.”

Clay blinks slowly. “For a full detail, we need her approval.”

I grit my teeth. That will *not* be a pleasant conversation. Clarissa is used to her freedom. There’s a reason I haven’t told her I’ve had someone following her since the Hatches incident.

Clay’s phone rings.

Mine does too.

His lips curl up and I point. “Island?”

“Clarissa?” He arches a knowing brow toward my phone.

“Keep me updated,” I say, walking him to the door.

Clay nods and disappears.

I answer Ris’s call, keeping any hint of my troubling conversation with Clay out of my voice.

“Hey, princess. How did you sleep?”

“Super well. Hospital cots are my jam.”

I chuckle. “Sounds comfortable.”

“Mm-hm.”

There’s a pause.

“Are you going to ask about Joel?” Ris prods.

“He’s alive or you wouldn’t sound so chirpy,” I say.

“Cody—”

“Have you eaten breakfast yet?” I ask, leaning against the counter.

She sighs and lets the topic fall through. “A little.”

“I can stop by. Bring you something.”

“I’m okay.” For a second, her breath is all I hear and then she says, “I didn’t dream of you yesterday. For once.”

“You’re always in my dreams. I thought about stealing you away from the hospital all night.” My voice dropping low, I whisper, “I hate that we were interrupted on the island.”

“There’s always next time.”

“When is next time?”

Her laughter makes my heart swell. “I don’t know. But I promise, when I get my hands on you, no one will be able to stop me.”

I smile, imagining those sinful brown eyes going hazy with lust as I take her fully.

“On a totally unrelated topic, my mom is here.”

Clarissa’s mention of her mom makes my blood cool in an instant. Nothing like talking about a parent who hates me to send my mind reeling back to PG territory.

I straighten. “My number one fan?”

“Yeah, about that... can you pick her up from the airport in an hour? The doctors want to run some tests on Joel, and I don’t feel right about leaving him alone.”

“He has a nurse, Ris,” I grunt.

“It’s not the same as me being here with him.” She pauses. “Do you not want to?”

How can I say no to this woman?

“Of course not.” I clear my throat. “I’d love to pick up your mom.”

“Thanks, Cody. I’ll text you the details.”

The text comes in immediately after I hang up.

A sigh gets trapped in my chest.

Great. Looks like I’ve got one hour to prepare for Clarissa’s mom.

Is there any way out of this? Because I'd take a round with my hate group over Liandra Maura any day.



THE AIRPORT IS BUZZING with activity. The crowd is thick, but I see Liandra right away.

She's much smaller than Clarissa, barely five feet. Her thinning hair is in braids pulling away from her forehead. Her skin is like dark walnut and there's not a wrinkle in it. She's a beautiful woman. Even more beautiful when she smiles.

Which she isn't doing right now.

And probably will never do in my presence.

Liandra spots me a little after I see her. That dark scowl on her face is like a bat signal screaming into the sky.

I approach carefully, in case she bites.

"Ms. Maura."

"Cody." Her voice is as flat as the pancakes I once made for Clarissa in college. "I'd say it's a pleasure, but that would be a lie."

I paint a smile on my face that I don't feel.

If Clarissa is like the soft, sweet, singing Snow White in those animated fairy tales, her mother is like the dwarf that desperately wants to gouge the prince's eye out. I'd say she's 'Grumpy', but I think she's more like 'Murdery'.

"It's good to see you again, ma'am."

"Yes." Her tight frown says the opposite. "My bag."

I gesture to Vargas who I brought along with me because I need a witness in case my body goes missing.

My assistant scrambles to take Ms. Maura's bag.

"Not him." She snaps her fingers and points. "You."

A muscle in my jaw flexes.

Remember, this is Clarissa's mom.

I keep my expression calm and pick up her bag without complaint. My strategy is simple. Show her that I can take it and win her over with my sincerity.

She loves her daughter.

I love her daughter.

We have more in common than she thinks.

The driver takes the bag from me as soon as I get outside.

Liandra humphs. "He can't even take care of simple things himself."

I turn to her with a nod. "Clarissa said I should take you to her place, but her apartment is a little cramped so I booked you a suite at a hotel—"

"How do you know my daughter's apartment is cramped?" Liandra steps into me, her tiny frame barely halfway to my chest. "How far have you two gone?"

I blink again.

Vargas—the saint—breaks the awkward tension. "Ms. Maura, you and Clarissa look so much alike. It's like you're sisters."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, son." Liandra's mouth doesn't move from its hard line. It's like that frown is carved in. "And I'm not going to Clarissa's or a hotel." She juts her chin out. "I'm sticking with you this morning."

Vargas gives me a panicked look and I return it.

"Ma'am?"

"Didn't you hear me? I said I'm keeping my eyes on you, boy. Since my daughter's clearly gone and lost her mind, I'm going to take it back from you and return it to her as soon as I can. Now," she tilts her head to the side and gives me a challenging look, "where are we heading first?"



AT MY OFFICE, Vargas knocks on my door and brings in a cup of coffee. He throws a cautious look over his shoulder before setting the cup on my desk.

“I’ve met a lot of people who can’t stand you, Bolton, but I think she takes the cake.”

“No need to be scared.”

“She’s going to staple your tie to the back of your hand when you’re not expecting it. You just watch.”

Ridiculous.

“Do you know what Liandra does for a living?” I murmur, pausing my research to glance up.

“She said she doesn’t have a job.”

“That’s not true. She’s a professional mama bear. She hunts down the people who need care and protection and she delivers on both. If she’s that way with strangers, how much harder is she going to protect her own daughter?”

We both glance at Liandra.

She’s glaring at me from her seat outside. I can’t blame her.

I’d hate me too if I was Clarissa’s mother. The only thing Liandra knows is that I’m the jerk who left her daughter on our wedding day and never called or showed up again.

“I’m glad you’re so calm about this.” Vargas wipes his sweat with a handkerchief. “But she keeps asking where our security cameras are. It’s like she’s looking for blind spots.”

I chuckle. Whatever Clarissa lacks in spunk, her mother makes up for in spades.

My phone rings.

It’s Ms. Phoebe.

“You haven’t forgotten your promise of giving our girls a business talk, have you? We’re about to open next week. Can you schedule us in?”

I check my watch and then glance at Liandra. “How about I do it today?”

Vargas’s eyes widen. He mimes a giant X in the air. “*You don’t have time...*”

“I can be there in an hour.”

I hear my assistant grunting in frustration.

“Sounds good. I’ll see you then.”

I hang up.

Vargas’s lips are twisted in disapproval. “May I remind you that, on top of all the things you have to do today, you’re also being targeted by your very own anti-fan group? This is not the time to be deviating from the schedule.”

“I’ll bring Doberman.”

“That’s a given. But can Doberman protect you from *her*?” He juts his chin at Liandra.

“Liandra just needs to know that I have her daughter’s best interest at heart. Which I do. This is the perfect opportunity to show her that.” I swing my suit jacket off the back of the chair. “Meetings can wait. This can’t.”

“You think one little lecture is going to stop her from hating you?”

“It doesn’t hurt to try.”

Liandra shoots to her feet when I get outside. “Where are you going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Her eyes narrow in suspicion. In that moment, she looks so much like Clarissa that I can’t help but love her.

I gesture to the door.

Liandra follows me, not losing that look of suspicion until we get to the co-op. We step inside and she reads the

manifesto by the door.

It's the first time I see her smile.

"Cody." Ms. Phoebe waddles toward me. She's wearing a giant muumuu over a pair of leggings.

"Ms. Phoebe, I want to introduce you to Liandra Maura."

"Clarissa's mom?" Ms. Phoebe gasps. "It's such a pleasure to meet you."

"You too. I love what you've done here. Giving vulnerable women the chance to own their own businesses is a genius idea."

Ms. Phoebe grins. "It's nothing but a calling. I can't take much credit."

"Mr. Bolton!" Laura gallops toward me.

I nod at her.

"Those computers you sent over are *amazing*." Laura's eyes sparkle. "I swear, I can do my homework so much faster here than on my busted laptop."

I see Liandra watching me with a curious look.

"Where are the ladies?" My gaze slides around the indoor market. The booths are empty.

"We use the kitchen for lessons. It's cozier that way." Ms. Phoebe motions for us to follow her. "Even Chef Baley mentioned that it was well stocked." She winks at me. "This way."

Liandra's shoulders start to relax and I see the light. Maybe I can survive this day without my future mother-in-law poisoning my drink.

And since I'm a 'go big or go home' kind of guy, I'll even take this opportunity to gain Liandra's full approval.



PENCILS SCRIBBLE furiously as I walk the length of the small kitchen.

“The biggest mistake you can make is thinking business is like charity. Making money is not a bad thing. Never feel guilty for putting a monetary value to your efforts.”

I glance at Erica as I say, “Business is a mental battle. Think like a business owner. Think like a boss because that’s what you are. You’re powerful. You dominate. You own this space.”

My eyes slide to Maggie next. “Business isn’t soft. It’s not emotional. Business is all about law. You have to apply the laws to be successful. That’s the only way you make it.”

Maggie nods.

Erica listens keenly.

The other women look entranced.

My alarm goes off.

I clasp my hands behind my back. “Any questions?”

No one says a word.

I’m not sure if I broke them.

Ms. Phoebe shuffles forward. “Thank you, Cody. That was very inspiring.”

Applause breaks out, and I squirm. Why are they clapping? All I did was skim the surface of the lessons I’ve learned.

Lowering her voice so only I can hear, Ms. Phoebe whispers, “Have you considered a future as a motivational speaker?”

Her praise takes me by surprise.

Who knows. Maybe I’ve gone soft because I know these women now.

I’ve seen Erica’s parents, where she lives, how suffocated she feels.

I’ve seen Maggie cry over a regular two-bedroom house because it represents a fresh start for her and her daughter.

These women aren't just faceless blobs in a random charity anymore. They aren't numbers on a report that crosses my desk and then get shoved into Vargas' lap for tax returns.

They're people I care about.

People I'm rooting for.

"Bolton..." Vargas points to the door.

It's time to go.

Quietly, Liandra follows me to my car. She climbs into the backseat and I settle in beside her, undoing my jacket.

The car moves off and I check my phone.

Clarissa: You still alive?

Cody: Barely.

Clarissa: I owe you, Cody.

Cody: Don't worry, princess. I know just how to collect.

Liandra lifts her chin. "Was that rehearsed?"

I look up from my phone, perplexed.

"Did you warn those women I was coming and ask them to make you look good?"

"No, ma'am. I didn't."

She humphs.

I swivel toward her. "Ms. Maura, I know what you must think of me. And it's deserved. What I did to Clarissa was terrible and I regret hurting her. But I promise you that from now on—"

"Promises?" Her eyes are sharp. "Mr. Bolton, your promise means nothing to me. I know your type. You're a rich man who preys on the weak to feed your ego. You don't have the capacity to love anything but money. And if my daughter weren't so blinded by nostalgia and her *idea* of you, she would see that too."

I flinch.

“What you did to Clarissa left a deep and pulsing wound. Honestly, I’m not surprised that you were able to lure her in again. She never got over you. Never got over what you did to her. But that girl is my heart and soul. Everything I do is for her. I won’t just sit by and watch you break her again.”

“That’s the last thing I want to do.”

Liandra glares into the back of the headrest. “I’m opening a women’s shelter in our hometown.” She pauses. “And I’ll ask Clarissa to come with me.”

The declaration stops me cold.

“I know she has a life here. Friends. A mission. I can see her influence all over the Do More Project, but they can manage without her.”

“Are you suggesting that she leave to help you or to get away from me?”

“Why can’t it be both?”

“Ms. Maura—”

My phone rings, cutting me short.

“Excuse me.”

The moment I put the phone to my ear, Vargas’ frantic voice rushes forward.

“Cody, bad news.”

“Is it Joel?” My heart lurches to my throat.

“No. At least, not that I’m aware of.”

I breathe out.

“It’s Clarissa.”

My shoulders go tense again.

“Check the links I just sent you,” Vargas says.

My eyebrows furrowing, I tap on my assistant’s message.

Instantly, a picture of Clarissa pops up.

*WHO IS THE BACHELOR OF THE YEAR'S SECRET
LOVER?*

A MODERN DAY CINDERALLA

Horror gnaws at my chest when I skim the article. There are pictures of me and Clarissa at the gala together. Us dancing. Us holding hands.

But that's not the bad part.

The article blasts personal details about Clarissa's life, including references to her family's struggle with money and homelessness.

I exhale shakily. "Liandra, did you speak to any reporters recently?"

"I did a small interview when I got the funding for the new shelter." She folds her arms over her chest, looking suspiciously at me.

"Was that reporter local? Did you know them?"

"I..." She tilts her head to the side. "You know, I'm not sure. They said they were from the local paper, but I kept checking and never saw a write-up. I just figured they'd decided not to print."

"I think they did, but it wasn't a local newspaper."

A sick realization crawls over her face. "I was bamboozled, wasn't I?"

Holding in another rough sigh, I punch Clay's number.

My brother answers brusquely. "Hello?"

"Clay, can you scrub an article from the web?"

"I don't control the internet, Cody."

"Is that a yes?"

"I'll see what I can do."

I hang up and call Vargas back.

Liandra is sitting at the edge of her seat. "What's going on? Who was that reporter? Why would they lie to me?"

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this.”

“Bolton,” Vargas sounds nervous, “this article is spreading like wildfire. It feels just like that smear campaign against you earlier this month. Way too organized.”

I grit my teeth. “Winifred.”

“I think it could be.”

“I want my lawyers all over this. If we can’t shut down these tabloid sites, I’ll buy them over. I don’t care how it’s done. Take those articles down. Now.”



CLARISSA RACES into her mother’s arms and squeezes her tight. “Mommy.”

“Hi, baby.” Liandra rubs up and down Clarissa’s back.

We’re standing in the hospital hallway. Through the glass pane in the door, I can see Joel lying down. The machines keeping him alive are loud in the room and the tubes sticking in and out of his body look like something out of a sci-fi movie.

I hate how helpless the kid looks.

He should be up and glaring at me, eyes full of life and mouth full of insults. He doesn’t belong on that bed, looking like death warmed over.

“Thank you for picking mom up.” Clarissa beams and I drag my eyes away from Joel to look at her. “Did you two have a good time at the co-op?”

“It was fine,” Liandra says stiffly.

“Mom, did you meet Ms. Phoebe?”

“Yes.” Liandra scowls harder. “She seemed to have nothing but good things to say about Cody. A little try-hard if you ask me.”

I see I'm still no closer to winning Future Son-in-law of the Year.

"Ms. Phoebe doesn't lie or sugarcoat things. Cody played a big part in getting us all the help and resources we needed. He went above and beyond for all of us."

"Don't bother singing his praises in front of me, Clarissa. I'm not raising my hands and shouting amen, no matter how hard you preach."

Doberman appears in the hallway. He nods once.

I nod back. "Ladies, would you like to have lunch at The Louvre? I booked us a private room."

"No thanks. I'm going to cook. *That's* how we do things, Mr. Bolton. We don't spend money like it grows on trees."

"Mom..." Clarissa scolds.

I'm going to assume I'm not invited to *that* cook-out.

I back off. "Maybe next time then."

"Join us," Clarissa offers. "My mom makes an amazing casserole."

Liandra looks like she'd rather gouge my eyes out than sit across a table from me and share her casserole.

I shake my head. "I'll drop you both off, but I won't stay."

Clarissa nods. "You want to say bye to Joel?"

"He's sleeping."

She peers in, looking surprised. "Huh? He was up a second ago. I wanted to introduce him to mom."

"It's fine. Let him sleep." I choke out the words. "The nurse will watch him until you get back. Your mom's in town. You can take off a few hours."

"Are you okay?" Clarissa steps close to me and squeezes my hand. Her eyes scour my face.

How does she do that? It's like she sees me, the parts of me I try so hard to hide. I want to gather up all my worries, spread them out in front of her and work it out together.

But I can't.

I have to be strong for her.

Control, don't be controlled, Cody.

I'm about to change the subject, but Liandra does it for me. She tugs on her daughter's free arm until Ris drops her hold.

"I'm starving, honey. And I want to see your fancy apartment."

"It's not *that* fancy, mom." Clarissa laughs.

The two women walk to the parking lot accompanied by Doberman's team. Clarissa's curls bounce with every step. Her laughter is the sweetest music.

I want to keep that laughter going. I want that smile to be permanent.

But it seems like that smile is destined to leave her beautiful face.

And it'll all be my fault.

I move to follow them when something deep inside makes me stop. Hesitating, I turn back and watch Joel's frail body. It doesn't feel right just leaving.

Awkwardly, I approach the bed and reach out to pat his shoulder.

Then I stop.

Clear my throat.

Pull my hand back.

"You got this, kid."

He gives no indication that he heard me.

Awkwardly, I leave the hospital room and join the ladies outside. I check my phone on the way and note that the articles haven't disappeared.

My blood heats when I see the negative comments about Ris online.

What's a girl like that doing with Cody Bolton?

You think she's an escort?

I saw her selling weed once. I'm sure it was her.

My temperature rises until I'm seeing red. I'll have Vargas hunt down every last one of those creeps and slap them with a lawsuit so severe they'll never get out of it alive.

Clarissa touches my hand. "Cody, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." I pocket my phone before she sees the messages. "Just work."

Clarissa narrows her eyes but, thankfully, her mom reclaims her attention.

When we arrive at her place, Doberman and his team park behind us. They line up on the street and then follow us into the apartment.

"Is all that necessary?" Liandra gestures to the guards. "People are looking at us like we're weird."

"For now, it is necessary," I say simply.

Liandra frowns and shoots inside the apartment.

"Are you really not coming in?" Clarissa asks. "I'll get mom to behave."

I shake my head and cradle her face, rubbing my fingers over her chin. "Ris, there are some weird articles circulating. For the time being, don't check your phone."

"Why not?"

"Just don't. Promise me."

Her eyes search mine. "Is it that bad?"

I nod.

She sighs. "Okay. I promise."

"Another thing."

"What now?" She groans.

I glance at Doberman.

She sees the direction of my gaze and shakes her head. “You’re not going to ask me to live with my own scary team of guards, are you?”

“It’s for your own good.”

She frowns. “Cody, the police are looking for Winifred. They’ll find him.”

“It’s not just Winifred. In the future, anyone can use you to get to me. Clarissa, just one look at us and they’ll know that I’d burn my company to the ground for you. I can’t allow people to use you against me.”

“So what? I’m your weakness now?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Her eyes darken.

I tease a circle under her jaw. “When it comes to you, Ris, I’ll do anything—*anything*— if it means keeping you safe. And that’s a dangerous power to give to my enemies.”

“Cody,” she slips her hand into mine, “I’m a big girl. I can handle whatever comes my way.”

“You can handle it better with the detail.”

“I don’t *want* security detail. I don’t want my entire life to change, even for you. I’ve *just* gotten used to the idea of being your date to those fancy galas. Special occasions are one thing. Everyday life is mine.”

For a second, I seriously consider carting her over my shoulder and locking her in a tower. Maybe that makes me like every wicked beast in every fairy tale movie. But at least those villains were on to something.

She smiles up at me. “You want to lock me up, don’t you?”

“You’re a mind reader now?”

Clarissa leans into me. “I said I can handle it alone, but I take it back. I want to handle anything that comes our way together. With you.”

My lips remain flat. “Me *and* a security team.”

“Uh-uh. I agreed not to check my phone. Now I need you to promise me something.” Her fingers dig into my jacket. “Don’t do anything crazy without talking to me first. Okay?”

I nod.

“Promise me, Cody.”

I can’t do that.

I can’t make a promise I know I’m going to break.

I kiss her forehead. “Go have a good time with your mom.” Easing back, I slip my black card into her hand.

She sees it and her eyes widen. “Cody, no.”

“Keep it.” I curl her fingers over the card. Leaning down, I hover over her until her face is mere inches from mine. “Everything I have, everything I am, belongs to you, Ris.”

“Cody...”

I press a kiss to her lips.

It’s only supposed to be a quick peck—we are surrounded by Doberman and his team after all—but our lips cling to one another. Our tongues brush.

My heart trips over itself, *needing* more. One taste of her mouth isn’t enough.

She closes her arms behind my neck. Her kiss is sweet and urgent.

“Clarissa...” Liandra opens the door. When she sees my lips fused to her daughter, she yells a little louder, “Clarissa! I need help in the kitchen.”

“C-coming.” Eyes hazy, Clarissa smiles up at me. She’s so beautiful I feel a physical ache in my chest.

All I want to do is protect her.

But what if she’s safer away from you than with you?

Clarissa disappears into her apartment, and I leave down the stairs.

On my way past the mail slots, I notice a red letter peeking out of the locker with Clarissa's apartment number.

My legs freeze.

No.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the image away.

But it doesn't change.

In a frantic rush, I grab the letter and rip it open.

There's a cartoon drawing of a teddy bear with a knife through its head. That's all. There are no words. No threats. But it's enough to prove that the fingers of darkness that lurk around my life are now approaching Clarissa's too.

Pressure mounts in my chest, crushing my ribs.

It's all starting to mount into one giant crap-mountain.

The cyber bullying attacks.

The letters.

I know what comes next.

And I won't let it get that far.

Urgently, I stalk outside and call Vargas.

"Book me an interview. Someone with clout in the society pages." I climb into my car and stare straight ahead.

"All of a sudden?"

"Just do it!"

I toss the phone, shimmy my tie down and call Clay.

"Yeah?"

"They know where she freaking lives. These creeps... they left a letter in her mailbox, Clay."

I'm shaking with anger.

Rage.

Helplessness.

Control or be controlled.

“Cody, I can hear that you’re upset. I’d be freaking out too, but you need to calm down. Where are you? Let’s talk about this, come up with a plan.”

“No, I’ll take care of it myself. Just hire more guys. I want Clarissa’s apartment freaking *surrounded*. I want the *President* to be jealous of her detail, you hear me?”

“Cody...”

I hang up and see a text from Vargas on my phone.

Vargas: I got Entertainment Hopper Beat. They can be ready in two hours.

Cody: Make it thirty minutes.

In precisely forty-five minutes, I’m sitting in a studio under hot lights giving my first public interview since the Bachelor of the Year debacle.

The interviewer is a beach blonde flirt with too much Botox and a strange way of rounding her words so they all sound like questions.

“Mr. Bolton, you’re a *hard*,” her eyes drop to my pants and she gives me a cheap, seductive smile, “man to get a hold of.”

“I tend to steer away from the local entertainment buzz. Most of it is lies anyway.”

“When you say lies, are you referring to the picture of you and Clarissa Maura that went viral today?”

My throat tightens for a minute.

Control the situation, Cody. Worry about everything else later.

I take a deep breath and nod. “Yes.”

“And what is your relationship with Ms. Maura?”

I speak in a cool tone. “We are currently collaborating with Ms. Maura and the Do More Foundation. It’s a co-op initiative that enables vulnerable women to open their own businesses. Ms. Maura is one of the people responsible for that project. She’s a capable, intelligent and giving woman that I admire.”

“That’s nice and all, but you still haven’t answered the question. Are you in a relationship with Ms. Clarissa Maura?”

I stare at the camera. On the computer screen turned in our direction, I see the live video of me. There are hearts popping up everywhere. People are watching. Listening. Waiting.

My fingers curl into fists on my lap.

I keep my tone steady and firm. “No.”

OFFICE BREAK

CLARISSA

I FLING my arms around my mother and squeeze her tight. She swats at me, but I don't let go.

Most daughters tend to be close to their mothers, but the way I love mom has an extra depth to it. We were in such a tight spot while I was growing up. Sleeping in cars, in women's shelters—so many things could have gone wrong. But she shielded me from all of it. Made it feel like an adventure.

I'll be forever grateful to her for that. For making my childhood a happy one, even if we didn't have much.

"The casserole smells great," I tease. "I'm a good cook."

"You? All you did was chop some vegetables."

"Don't you know it's the vegetables that are important, mom? If I screwed up on that, everything would be ruined."

"Humph." Mom taps my knuckles twice and I release her.

She turns to me. "We need to discuss something."

"Is it Joel?" I pretend to be clueless. "Because if you want to know why I was at the hospital with him, I can tell you right now. He's Cody's foster son and he's kind of like a nephew to me."

A nephew that keeps hitting on me, but still...

Mom flumps down into my small sofa. "Honey, it's not that."

I shuffle awkwardly.

"I got a surprise opportunity to open a women's shelter."

"What?" My eyes widen and I fling myself down in front of her. "That's incredible. Congratulations."

"I want you to come with me."

My eyelashes flutter and I ease back. "Mom. Are you just trying to get me away from Cody?"

“I know you have history with that boy and I can see how you’d be drawn to his...” She glances at the black card that I left carefully on the kitchen table, “assets, but this man is the same one who broke his promise to you ten years ago. It’s too soon to say he can be trusted again. I think some distance would be good for you.”

“Distance isn’t going to stop us from loving each other.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Mom gently takes my hand in hers. “But it might stop you from rushing.”

“I’m not rushing.”

“You’re not thinking clearly either. Clarissa, I know you. You get very, very foolish when you love someone. To the point that you make questionable decisions.”

“Mom.”

“Your heart is so pure. So innocent. You’re no match for a calculative billionaire like him.”

“He’s a kind, loving man, mom. You just have to get to know him.”

“I don’t care how kind and loving he is. It’s not a good match.”

“What does that mean?”

“There’s a reason men like him don’t marry girls like us, sweetheart.” She cradles my face.

I pull out of her hold. “If this is about him being white and me being black—”

“It’s not because of skin color. It’s about you two being in very different places in the world.”

My old insecurities crop up as if they’d been lying in wait.

You’re not good enough. See? Even your mom knows.

“Think about it. You help people because of your past. He chases money because of his. The way he thinks, the way he treats people, the way he views himself and the world, it’s intrinsically opposite to the way you do. You have two

different values. Love can conquer anything, including racial differences, but it can't conquer differences in beliefs and values. It just can't."

I stay quiet, staring at the blank TV screen.

"At least think about my offer," mom says.

"I'll consider it," I say to get her off my back.

The oven timer beeps.

Mom and I have lunch together and watch a movie. She falls asleep halfway through.

I pause the television and glance at her face. She still looks so young. So full of life. Probably because she's moving through the world on her own terms. Doing exactly what she wants to do.

'I want you to have a full security detail'.

Being with Cody won't be a bed of roses. I know that. We're already clashing about the future and how to handle the threats we'll face.

I don't want to live like a bird in a cage. I want him, but I also want to be free.

Why can't I forge my own path?

Why does it feel like I have to choose between two extremes?

The silence settles in around me.

I hate having nothing to do. Ms. Phoebe gave me the day off so I could take care of Joel, but I can't even check my phone to while away the time. I'm tempted to turn the device on, but the gravity in Cody's voice when he told me not to look at those mysterious articles lingers.

I trust him.

I'm sure he'll explain himself soon.

I use mom's cell to call the hospital and check on Joel.

"He's still sleeping," the nurse says.

“Any news about the heart transplant?”

“No. Not yet.”

I sigh and hang up.

Might as well clean up my tiny guest room so mom can have somewhere to sleep tonight.

An hour later, mom wakes up and we go grocery shopping. I used most of the groceries Cody bought me and I’m in sore need of food that isn’t canned or boxed.

Hours later, we return from the local bargain store and I’m surprised to see Vargas waiting in front of my apartment.

“Cody couldn’t get you on your cell phone,” Vargas explains before I can ask what he’s doing here. “I’m to take you to his office.”

I note Vargas’ heavy expression. He’s staring at the ground as if he can’t bear to look at me.

My heart pinches.

Is something going on? Does it have anything to do with why I felt like we were being watched everywhere we went?

“Mom, I’ll be back soon,” I say.

Mom bristles, but she doesn’t keep me from leaving.

I follow Vargas to the car.

As we get closer to our destination, unease slithers around my stomach.

‘You get very, very foolish when you’re in love’.

Mom has a reason to be concerned, but I’m not stupid. I know Cody loves me. Whatever this is, whatever’s going on, we’ll get through it together. This time is different than it was in the past.

We’re older.

More mature.

He sees me as his equal partner.

Everything is going to be fine.

The sun is setting when I get into the elevator and punch in the right floor. Most of the employees are gone. I guess it's about time to get off work.

My pumps echo in the chilly silence. Curiously, I push open the door to Cody's office.

He's standing with his back to me, hands in his pockets. He looks both gruff and sexy when he turns around. His white shirt is unbuttoned at the top, the cuffs rolled up to show off his muscular arms. His hair is deliciously ruffled.

Striking green eyes pierce me to my soul.

He always looks princely, but there's something about seeing him in his office, the city skyline throwing light against the velvet sky, that gets to me.

I walk toward him, noticing the strain in his face. "Did something happen?"

"I wanted to see you." He touches my face as if I'm made of glass. "Did your mother let you out without a fight?"

"I'm an adult. She can't keep me from leaving my own apartment."

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He smiles, but it's with a hint of sadness. "Has she spoken to you about the women's shelter she's going to run?"

"You know about that?"

Cody nods.

My lungs, stomach and intestines feel scrambled. I can just imagine how mom brought that up to him.

"I'm not going. My life is here." I walk around his desk, tracing a finger over the solid wood. "Ms. Phoebe, Laura, the co-op. They're all here." I pause and glance up. "You're here."

Our gazes lock.

He walks around the desk as if we're two magnets and he can't help but be close to me. His forehead rests on mine. "I

love you.”

My eyes dip to Cody’s lips.

An electric tingle surges through me.

I’ve been missing him all day.

“You know,” I step closer and play with a button on his crisp white shirt, “we’re not going to be alone again for the foreseeable future. What with my mom here. And us looking after Joel at the hospital.” I rise on the tips of my toes, aiming for his delectable mouth.

He turns his head away.

I’m stunned.

“Ris, there’s something I need to tell you.”

An alarm goes off in my head, and I beat it back.

No. We’re fine. He said I’m enough. He said he won’t break his promises.

As long as I have him, I have nothing to worry about.

Nothing except making the most of our time together.

I place a finger to his firm, perfect lips. It’s hard against my skin and hotter than any pair of lips deserve to be. “Do you really want to spend this rare opportunity talking?”

Cody’s eyes flare with desire.

“I don’t,” I whisper.

A flicker of indecision pulses through his green eyes, but it doesn’t last. I see the moment his desire wins out. He grabs me and wrenches me forward.

Hips-to-hips.

Nose-to-nose.

I feel his hard body and my blood pumps faster, a promise of passion barely leashed, gnawing against all restraints.

Cody whips me off my feet and places me gently on the desk.

Fire pumps through me when our lips collide.

His kiss feels frantic, urgent.

A little unhinged.

I can't understand the weird energy. His mouth is hungry, but there's something more. It's like he's working through something big. Something painful. Whatever it is, it's weighing on his mind, on his heart. It's there in the emerald-green of his eyes, right behind the tension and need.

My heart throbs for him.

With him.

I want to give him everything.

I want to make it all okay.

Cody's mouth sucks mine with a vengeance, longing surging in every touch. I wrap one arm behind his neck. The other, I slide under his shirt, feeling the hot ripped abs flexing under my fingers.

Cody drags his lips away and groans. I feel the absence of the pressure and stare up into his near glowing eyes.

"Are you sure, Ris? This isn't," he runs a hand through his hair, "this isn't where I wanted you for our first time."

"This isn't our first time," I remind him.

"First time after getting back together."

That's such a ridiculous statement.

I don't care where we are.

I just want him.

"Is there anything expensive on this desk?" I ask, easing flat on my back.

"Nothing worth more than you," he answers.

"Then come here."

With an almost inhuman growl, he claims my mouth again, sinking his teeth into my bottom lip like he wants to tear straight through. My hands drop to his back as he digs me into

the smooth surface of his desk. Eagerly, I drop my palms a little lower.

He grunts when I squeeze what's mine and I arch my hips, giving him a reward in return.

The kiss goes on forever, time suspended in a world where we only need each other. I devour his mouth, moving my head to deepen the kiss and running my hands over all the places my fingers can reach.

Breath thickening, Cody pulls back and slowly takes off his shirt. He's a sculpture of a man, every inch of him carved from solid rock and stretching over perfect muscles. My eyes devour him. Lava flows in my veins, so thick and pulsing that I can hear it crackling in my ears.

"My turn," I tease.

He doesn't laugh. A jaw muscle flexes and I see him hesitate again, as if he's having thoughts of stopping us here.

Rather than let him slow the momentum, I reach for my shirt and whip it over my head. When I fumble with my jeans, Cody stops me with a hand. His touch sends a tremor down my spine.

For a moment, I think he's going to tell me to put my clothes back on.

But he doesn't.

His Wizard of Oz green eyes drill into my soul as he jerks me forward and tilts my chin up. I lose my breath when he kisses me again. Gently this time. So tender it stuns me. The kiss is hypnotic. A promise. Like he cherishes me. No, even further than that. Like one of us is going to die and he thinks this will be the last time we ever get to hold each other.

All I can do is kiss him back, helpless against the ripping tide that lashes between our bodies and binds us together. Our tongues collide in a sensual dance, and I release a loud groan, barely holding on.

Cody breaks the kiss again and I really wish he'd stop doing that. I'm gasping for breath when I meet his gaze. The

angsty whirlpools in his eyes unravel me. His hand flutters to my face, tracing down the line of my cheekbone.

It's different than any way he's watched me before.

He's riveted, pensive, nostrils flaring like a freshly released prisoner who doesn't trust that he's really free.

"Are you... trying to memorize my face?" I breathe out.

He shakes his head and presses his mouth once more against mine. I taste his tongue and sigh in... well, not quite satisfaction.

I want more.

I want everything.

Desperately, I grab his massive shoulders, pulling him even closer. My hands drag down his chest, tracing the lines etched in his granite body.

Cody senses my impatience, but he doesn't move any faster. He drops kisses down the line of my jaw bone, my neck and then moves to my chest. My muscles coil as he nibbles, caresses, and sucks.

My head rolls back.

My body burns until I fear I'll turn to ash.

I hope Cody has insurance because I'm going to *ruin* this desk.

Especially if he keeps growling like that.

On fire, I grab his short hair and rake my fingers through it. Soft, needy sounds escape my mouth and I grind against him. If anyone stops by this office, they're going to think I'm being suffocated.

And I am.

I'm suffocating in sweet, sweet pleasure.

Cody's tongue is on fire as it blazes down my stomach, placing reverent kisses over my jeans.

"You're killing me," I moan. "Let's skip all that—"

“I’m not going to rush.” His eyes meet mine. They’re hard. Firm.

It’s like he wants to torment me.

Keep me from quenching my raging thirst.

Hold my freedom just out of reach.

My heart thumps. “Time is limited. Any moment now, your phone might ring with another emergency.”

It’s a true and present fear. Since we’ve gotten together, there hasn’t been a moment of peace.

Cody’s face lingers over mine, all parted lips and emerald-green eyes so conflicted it’s like I’m watching him be torn apart in real time.

“I know, princess.” His jaw clenches in that sad way again, even as his eyes blaze with enough fire to burn the room down. “I know that more than anyone. But for now, it’s just you and me.”

His lips brush mine as he speaks and I feel my doubt, resistance, and misgivings crumble.

I smile, rubbing my fingers down his chest and then sliding lower. “Just you and me, always.”

Cody lets out a carnal growl when I rub against his trousers.

“Nothing is going to change us,” I whisper.

“I hope you mean that,” Cody mumbles.

My eyebrows hike in confusion. Before I can ask what he meant, he unbuttons my jeans and carefully rolls the rest of my clothes down to my ankles.

Cool air blows against my exposed skin, but I barely feel anything because the flames in Cody’s eyes are keeping me warm. His fingers scrape my inner thigh and I buck, already on the edge of snapping apart.

Cody kneels in front of me and kisses my ankles. My thighs. He caresses me silkily, cool hands singeing my hot

skin, moving upward and then back down again.

I'm all whimpers, sitting on pins and needles, hot bones and skin that burn for his touch as much as lungs crave oxygen.

His teeth graze my inner thigh.

I inhale a sharp breath, a roaring wind in my head that drives out every sound but my own heartbeat.

The air is so tense. Hot enough to scald. Dripping sweat like rain from my forehead.

I'm on the edge of insanity, wiggling to get closer to him. Willing to promise almost anything. Ready to beg like a woman possessed.

Cody's hands roam me and his lips follow the trail until, finally, he's *there*.

The heat is instantaneous.

My body twists, writhing against him, back snapping so sharply I'm about to bang my head against the ceiling. His fingers are daggers, his tongue a sword. He's the owner of my pleasure, and my body knows it well.

I arch my back. Cry out again and again, matching the insanely reckless pace.

Fire burns me in places I didn't know were so sensitive, so hungry.

My toes curl.

Tears fill my eyes.

I'm spinning out. Crashing against rocks. Falling apart.

Loving every second of my own destruction.

Cody seeks out the last drop of my pleasure, torching me with scalding kisses that prove he's bigger than time. Because I don't feel the tick of the clock. I can't even feel my legs. He dragged me into a place that's somewhere beyond the finite. Punishing strokes a symbol of my surrender.

I dig my nails into his back, screaming too loudly. It bounces over the walls, rattling the desk harder than an earthquake.

Cody's insistent, pinning me down and claiming everything inside me. My soul. My heart. My mind.

The desk feels like it'll cave in. I'm buzzing on top. A seductive vibration that belongs only to him.

"Please," I beg. My legs feel boneless, but I wrap them around his, arching my hips up.

He kisses me instead of giving me what I want, in full tormentor mode, his tongue stroking my bottom lip and then claiming my mouth in a torrid preview of what's to come.

It takes all my strength to wrench my mouth away. I inhale the breath that shudders out of him, sensing his epic battle for restraint.

I stare up, chest heaving and legs shaking, eyes pleading.

More.

Finally, I hear the groan of his zipper.

Cody stretches up and curves his fingers under the back of my neck. When he kisses me, I taste more than just myself. I taste gratitude. I taste sorrow. I taste heartbreak.

He presses in. Roots himself in me. His kisses silence the way I hiss, the way I moan as I adjust to what once belonged to me and then, suddenly, didn't anymore.

Ten years.

Oh, ten years and it's different.

So different.

And yet the same.

My fingers lift up to his cheek, seeking out more than just his body this time. Seeking his smile. Seeking answers.

He meets me. Holds me. Cradles me like I'm precious glass.

I don't understand any of it.

My heart pounds painfully. The tears I cried pool on the desk and gather at the base where my spine meets my head.

His eyes collide with mine. Barely human. Brimming with desire.

And yet so afflicted.

He's a paradox. A swirling tornado of contradictions.

Dragging me to ecstasy while locked in his own personal hell.

He holds me captive.

I do the same.

My legs lock behind him and I pin him to me because, deep down, it feels like he'll disappear.

"I love you," he whispers, his forehead against mine.

I'm on the verge of crying. His emotions tear me apart. I feel it like his heart left his chest and climbed behind my ribs, nestling beside mine. I feel it like we're one freaking person.

He grabs my wrist and rubs the tender skin on the inside before pinning my arms above my head.

"I love you, Ris," Cody whispers, his voice heated. Angry. Determined. A broody king dragging me to ecstasy, ruining me with every tender sweep of his lips.

"I will always love you. You are everything to me. I breathe for you. I'd die for you. There is no one else on this planet for me."

He begins to move.

"You're mine, princess."

The urgency of his pace quickens.

I groan to the tune of sweet ruin. "Yours."

His teeth bares as if he needs to hear it as much as he needs this.

"Mine. Never forget that. Even if you don't understand."

I hear the possessive note in his voice. Hear the determination. The agony. The pain.

“I won’t.”

“Then hold on, princess.”

I reach up and kiss him as the desk rattles with the passion that explodes between us.



I’M A HOT, satisfied mess when Cody finishes with me. My legs can barely hold me up. It’s a good thing he pulls me into his lap so I can catch my breath or I’d probably sprawl on the floor like a human rug.

The chair creaks as it accepts both our weight. Our bodies are fused together. My legs dangle over his and I resist the urge to nuzzle him like a cat.

That would be weird.

But I doubt he’d mind.

This is only the beginning for us, and there’s no turning back. With every feral thrust, he etched his name inside me and I did the same.

He’s mine.

I’m his.

It’s perfect. Nothing can tear us apart this time.

“That was... way more intense than I remember,” I whisper.

His voice is still, low. “Should I apologize for my past self?”

“No, no.” I chuckle. “I just meant something was different. Or maybe *we’re* different? I don’t know. Maybe it’s because we’re in your office. Like rebels.”

He doesn’t laugh.

Again, I feel that unease.

“Are you okay?”

He nods.

Cody’s heartbeat pounds so close to mine that I wonder if he never took his heart back. Maybe it’s still right there in my ribs. Maybe that’s why he feels more like the Ice King than my...

Boyfriend?

Lover?

Do we need to define this?

My fingers curl around him and I ease up, staring into his face.

I want to tell him I love him. I thought this moment would be perfect for it, but the expression on his face is frigid. The word hangs on the edge of my tongue, refusing to take the plunge.

Something’s off with Cody.

I don’t know what it is.

I only know that it’s gotten worse.

There’s a distance between us, one I don’t understand how to cross. I want kisses and cuddles, but Cody doesn’t seem interested. He pulls back and stares out the window.

The stars are twinkling brightly. There are so many of them, as if they all wanted front-row seats to the fireworks that sparked on the desk.

“Is something wrong?”

Cody opens his mouth but, before he can explain, his cell phone rings.

“It’s Clay,” he says, patting my bum lightly.

I nod and climb out of his lap, feeling dismissed.

Hurt clips the edge of my heart, but I tell myself I’m overthinking it. Cody spent an immeasurable amount of time claiming me on that desk and, later, against the windows as if to show me off to the stars.

He's probably worth about a million dollars an hour.

Of course he has other matters to tend to.

But that doesn't stop the irritation from growing. I stare at his clenching jaw. Why is he pushing me off?

I get that I'm the one who started this, but he definitely finished it. He came at me like a man starved. He muttered the sweetest words in my ear as he did the filthiest things to my body.

How can he just... switch off like that?

I reach for my clothes and tug them on. My phone is in my purse. Feeling petty, I turn it on just because he told me not to.

I've got over a thousand notifications.

Some are from mom.

Others are from Cody.

A few are from Ms. Phoebe, Laura, Island and the farmhouse ladies.

Why is everyone trying to reach me?

Curious, I tap on mom's message.

Mom: I told you not to trust him.

There's a link to an article.

I click on it.

My fingers go numb.

CODY BOLTON DENIES RELATIONSHIP WITH CHARITY WORKER. SAYS SHE'S 'JUST A COLLEAGUE'.

Am I dreaming right now?

But no.

It's right there in black and white.

The words are so startling, so ridiculously cruel, that I think it's a joke at first.

But then I read the article.

If I had any hope that this was a lie, the evidence is there for me in crisp definition. There's a video of Cody in a red sofa, wearing the same outfit. White shirt. Black trousers.

Tall. Rich. Elegant.

"I admire her generosity," Cody says and the captions emphasize the coldness, the lack of feeling, *"but I have no romantic interest in Ms. Maura."*

I expect a quick jab of agony. A gut punch of betrayal. Instead, the pain is slow-moving, like a worm crawling over a bed of nails—each painful slug impaling it deeper and deeper on the sharp edges.

Tears fill my eyes and I squeeze the phone tighter as I scroll down to the comments.

I knew she was a gold digger.

Told you! Why would someone like him be with someone like her?

She's not even that pretty.

"Yeah," Cody's voice rumbles in the background while the floor crumbles from beneath me, "thanks, Clay."

I whip around, the cell phone hoisted up in my hand like a stone.

Cody meets my frantic eyes and then, slowly, his gaze slides to the device. Awareness makes his jaw slacken, but he blinks and the chaos is gone. Leaving a statue of indifference beneath.

Somehow, I manage to stay on my feet while wave after wave of betrayal rolls over me. My blood pounds faster, harder, struggling to get to my brain. Struggling to make sense of this harsh turn.

"What the hell did you mean by this?" I hiss, shaking the phone back and forth, hoping it's like a magic eight ball.

Should I sleep with my ex-fiancé mere hours after he tells the world I mean nothing to him?

One shake.

One answer.

Absolutely not.

Oh crap. What have I done?

You get very, very foolish when you're in love, Clarissa.

Guess mom was right.

“What the hell, Cody?” I yell this time.

His face is calm which makes me even more delirious with anger. I bare my teeth, a rough sound tearing out of my throat that's part guttural curse and part embarrassed grunt.

“What do you think it is?” he asks.

Coward.

I let out a bitter laugh.

A few minutes ago, his powerful body had me in a chokehold as he hammered into me, hips slashing harder than a power tool, hands fusing us together until I was full to the brim with him.

Now, he's hammering me into the ground with his coldness.

Hurt is swelling in my throat. Pain like a thousand tiny needles are shooting into my neck.

Cody stares at me. Gone is the tender man who held me, who growled delicate words of love in my ear, who interspersed violently passionate thrusts with kisses like gentle rain and caresses like a summer breeze.

He's a dark lord now.

Pure villain.

Well-intentioned—villains always are. The best of them always have a reason. It's what makes them compelling. The tragic backstory. The past rooted in bloodshed, anger and betrayal.

We would root for villains if not for one thing—on their quest to make things right, they hurt people, especially the people they love.

Right reasons, wrong means.

“I know why you did it.” I bite the words out. I wish I didn’t. I wish I could just throw him away and make it so that his words are the real culprit for this sense of betrayal.

But I can’t.

His eyes thaw. “I wasn’t sure if you would understand.”

I’m insulted. “Do you think I don’t know you? Do you think—I spent every year of college loving you. I knew you better than any of those subjects. I craved you. What made you smile. What made you think. What made you angry. Every quirk of your eyebrow. Every hint of a smile. Of course I know why you did this.”

He walks closer to me. I’m attacked by his spicy, masculine scent. By the memory of his kisses.

Tears blur my vision. “But I asked you.” My heart shatters in real time. “I asked you not to make decisions without me. I asked you to treat me like a partner. To do this together.”

His face darkens. He turns away from me. “You wouldn’t agree to the security detail and the threats against you were getting worse. I made a choice.”

“You made the wrong one!” I yell.

Silence descends between us.

The seconds blur by as I stare at him.

“Do you even know what you did wrong?”

“I expected you to be angry.” He folds over, presses both hands flat against the desk, right into the mess, the stains born from our love. “But I’d rather you be angry with me and alive, than happy with me and...” His voice clips.

“We should have made that decision *together*.”

“You don’t understand—”

“Don’t treat me like I’m an idiot, Cody!” I shriek.

His mouth snaps shut. His green eyes glow with anger.

I laugh brokenly.

This moment feels so familiar.

This emptiness.

This loneliness.

“I was an idiot for believing that you’d really changed. You haven’t. You’re the same guy who left me at our wedding. Full of good intentions, but it’s always about you. You don’t care about me. You never have.”

His eyes sharpen. “Don’t.” He shakes his head. “Yell at me if you want. Doubt me if you want. But never doubt my love for you.”

“You *love* me?” I laugh bitterly. “You love me... so you got on air and told the world that I mean nothing to you?”

“If you want, I’ll explain to our group of friends—”

“Don’t you get it, Cody? I don’t care what the world thinks of me. I only care what you think. But back then and now, you could never give me what I really want.”

There’s a note of finality in my voice. It rings through the room and sends a flash of alarm through Cody’s eyes.

He reaches for me. “Clarissa.”

I hold both hands up so he can’t touch me. “I need some space.”

He doesn’t fight. Doesn’t hold me back.

He just nods.

And somehow, that hurts even worse.

I stalk to the door and then stop. “You left me first, Cody. This time, I’m the one walking away.”

THE HEART REVEAL

CODY

HELL IS LIFE WITHOUT CLARISSA. I keep torturing myself with thoughts of her. Her sweet smile. Her brown skin. Her hands reaching for me, moaning my name in that way I like.

I miss her.

But I can't even dream of her.

Somehow, even my subconscious knows I don't deserve to.

"How long are you going to stay here staring creepily?" Vargas asks, peering at me through the rear-view mirror.

I keep my eyes trained across the street where people are moving in and out of the co-op. Through the door, I see a hint of colorful banners and well-crafted kiosks.

I had the booths torn down and remade into stalls with more space, shelving and fans to cool the women down.

Vargas licks his lips. "Bolton, you can't keep doing this. We're so behind on our next project that our research team is asking if we're going broke."

"We're not going broke," I mutter.

"We will if you keep spending all that marketing on this co-op," Vargas grumbles in response.

I ignore him.

Clarissa is gone, but she would want the foundation to be successful.

And yes, I know that's not what she *really* wants from me. She made that clear.

But it's the most I can do right now.

"Bolton," Vargas insists.

"Any movement from Winifred?"

“The answer hasn’t changed since the last time you asked me.”

That earns him a dark glare.

We’re moving too slowly.

I need to crack down on my anti-fan group and rip the masks off all the nameless threats. That’s the only way I can bring Clarissa back. It’s the only way I can keep her safe.

I don’t plan on being a lovesick CEO, pining over the woman that he lost—twice—forever. And I sure as hell can’t keep running the company with a brain that’s too grieved to function.

I’m skating by on a prayer.

Ironically, our stocks are up. My image is that of a single man with a sick foster kid. And it’s raking in the pity points.

People think they can trust me. They’re wrong. Without the woman who’s responsible for this coal of a heart beating again, I’m nothing but a monster.

A tired monster.

I’m barely making it through the day. I can’t stand my office. Every time I see my desk, I think of Ris—her glorious body clinging to mine, silky skin under my fingers, legs wrapped around me, hot cords of heat binding us as I burrowed into her. The taste of her is etched in my head, no longer a distant ten year memory, but a living, present haunting.

That’s what she is. A ghost.

Sitting here, outside the co-op that meant so much to her, is the closest I can get to having her with me.

And it’s my own private hellscape.

Vargas motions to the driver. “We gotta go.”

I turn and glare at him. “Who said we’re leaving?”

“I just got a text from Doberman. They found the guy who smashed your window.”

At the police station, I meet Clay and Andre, Clay's cyber security ace.

I'm pretty sure the kid is just here to gloat about cracking the code and finding the perp before the cops.

"They've already started questioning him," Clay says, gesturing inside.

I follow my brother without a word.

Through the two-way mirror, I see a man with dark hair and a beard. He's of similar height and build to the guy on the motorcycle.

The detective scribbles something on a notepad. "Do you know the real identities of others on the server?"

"A few of them. Most aren't active anymore." He shrugs. "There's a long list of people who hate Cody Bolton, but not enough to make it a hobby."

"What do you do in this group?"

"We mostly post memes..."

Vargas chuckles.

I glare at him.

He keeps a tight face.

"When did you meet Hugo Winifred?"

"Winifred joined the group the day he got fired. It was weird the way he joined without an avatar. But then, he wasn't like the rest of us. He didn't come to whine. He came to organize a revolution."

"What kind of things did he post?"

"Things like we should teach Bolton a lesson. Get him to share some of that wealth. Make him respect us by any means possible."

I fold my arms over my chest, listening.

"Up to that point, we'd only challenged each other to send a few letters to Bolton's address. Stupid hate mail with no real message. Just to mess with him."

“Still illegal,” the police growls.

“Right.” He hangs his head. “And I’m sorry about that. Honestly, it wouldn’t have escalated from there, but things got a little out of hand. The way Winifred was talking would rile anyone up.”

“Where is Winifred now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know what he might do next?”

The guy shakes his head. “No. But I do know that I was the only one who followed him in the real world. People started getting uncomfortable with his calls for action and the server got a lot less active.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s one thing to hate on the boss. Memes and stuff, not much to it. It’s another thing to try and plot harm. Bolton’s a bastard, but giving him that much thought isn’t worth it. The others had their real lives. Their new jobs. Families. Not like me. Not like Winifred. They tried to tell me not to bother. That Bolton wasn’t worth it. But I got sucked in because nothing was working out for me.”

My fists tighten into a solid rock. “I’ve heard enough.”

Clay’s eyes are thrown in shadows. “What’s your conclusion?”

“He’s an idiot. And I’m not dropping charges.”

“Cody, that’s how we got his confession.”

“He could have hurt Clarissa,” I growl. “Glass could have fallen in her eyes. She could have been blind. Then what would he have said? Sorry?”

“Cody.”

“I don’t care what you promised. Tell him to lawyer up.”

I stalk out of the police station before my brother can argue.

Clay follows me into the dusk. “Are you okay, man?”

“Fine.”

“You look about as ‘fine’ as Joel does.”

I wince at the reminder of my foster son who’s currently fighting for his life in a hospital room that I can’t enter.

It’s not that I don’t check up on him. I do. But I’m stuck creeping down the hallway after he’s asleep.

Joel’s cold shoulder is just another reminder of how I let down all the people I want to protect.

“Have you been getting any rest?”

“Who needs rest.”

My brother grabs my arm. “Humans. Humans need sleep. And despite your nickname, you’re not made of ice, Cody.”

“I told you. I’m fine.”

“Are you troubled by the whole anti-fan thing? Or is it Clarissa?”

I whip around to stare at him.

He shrugs. “She’s been in touch with Island.”

“And?”

Clay waits, making me grind the words out.

“How is she?”

“Not well. But you probably guessed that.”

I feel sick to my stomach.

“Why don’t you just explain what you meant by that interview?” Clay suggests. “Just lay it all out and grovel.”

“She didn’t leave because of the interview.”

“Any woman would have been angry after hearing that.”

“Not Clarissa. She knows I didn’t mean a word of it.”

His eyebrows hike.

I lick my lips and shuffle nervously. “How often is Ris talking to Island?”

“It’s more like how often is Island talking to her. You know those ladies aren’t going to let one of their own disappear without an explanation.”

I run my hands through my hair. There’s a hole in my heart where Clarissa should be and it’s throbbing like mad.

“Good. That’s good,” I murmur.

My brother’s gaze spears into my face.

I start walking away.

He follows. “Cody, you’re killing yourself slowly. And I know because I was there. You’re not doing anything noble here. The longer you stay away from her, the more it seems like you don’t care. Why don’t you—”

“We need to find Winifred. I’m worried he’ll do something to Ris. And she’s so far away with only one tail...”

It’s my fault. She refused to accept my security detail when we were together. I knew for sure she wouldn’t accept it if Doberman and his giant buddies suddenly showed up around her.

Clay side-eyes me for cutting him off, but he allows the interruption. “If it makes you feel any better, I can track her cell phone if you ever need me to.”

“That does make me feel better.” Arching a brow, I ask, “Do you have a tracker on Island?”

He doesn’t respond, but his slight eye twitch tells me everything I need to know.

“Well, don’t you guys sound like a pair of romantic stalkers.” Vargas joins us. He stops in front of Clay. “You both left so early you missed the most interesting part of our guy’s confession.”

“He got us something we can use?” I ask.

“I think so. Apparently, Winifred told him he was funneling money from the company for a ‘good reason’.”

“Criminals always have a reason,” Clay grumbles.

“What was the reason?” I bite off, my eyes narrowed.

“A while back, Winifred claimed his family member died, leaving behind a boy about sixteen. With a heart condition.”

My whole face sours, lips twisting as the pieces click together.

“Apparently, the money he embezzled was supposed to buy this kid a heart. Unfortunately, Winifred tripped and fell and suddenly found himself at a casino, but he didn’t share that part.”

“Very common problem,” Clay says dryly. “Forgetting the pertinent parts of a sob story.”

“Doesn’t that description of the kid sound like someone familiar?” Vargas nudges my shoulder with his own.

“It might not be him,” Clay growls, watching me. “We have to question the source.”

I turn over all the evidence in my mind.

Joel’s sudden outburst the night of the gala. The harsh words he threw at me. The hatred in his eyes.

Liar. User. You only care about money.

Looking back, there was something off about his terminology. It didn’t feel like a mere sixteen year old having a meltdown against a parental figure. It felt like words had been planted in his mouth.

My mind traces back to every interaction with Joel, every bit of information I learned about his medical emergency.

The truth rams into me so hard I see stars.

“The phone,” I hiss.

Clay and Vargas stare at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“The nurse said Joel was on the phone before his heart attack. I assumed it was because he was trying to call me. It wasn’t that. He was talking to someone.”

Vargas goes pale.

Clay clenches his jaw. “Winifred.”



JOEL BLINKS RAPIDLY when I storm into his hospital room. I'm sure he thinks I'm a ghost, since the last time he saw me was the night of the gala.

Demanding words burst to the tip of my tongue, but I take one look at the machine keeping his heart alive and I can't do it.

I can't bark at him.

"Can I sit?" I ask gently.

Joel tilts his chin up. I hold my breath until he nods.

Dragging a chair close to his bed, I take my seat.

The air conditioner buzzes.

A humidifier puffs out a breath.

On the way here, my head was crammed full of words. I knew exactly what to do. I'd lay out all the evidence. Stack them up like dominoes one by one. Then I'd let them crash together. Fall into a heap, clattering so loudly he couldn't deny the truth in them.

But now, I'm drawing a blank.

Maybe I shouldn't have told Vargas and Clay to wait outside.

"Are you just going to stare at your shoes?" Joel asks grumpily.

I rub my throat, my voice thick. "How are you?"

"My heart is two seconds away from totally shutting down." His eyes narrow. He can barely lift his head but he can still glare daggers. "How do you think I am?"

He's got enough energy left to snap at me.

At least there's that.

"Good job chasing Clarissa off, by the way."

I shift in my seat, numb and conflicted.

The mention of Clarissa is low.

Don't lash out at him, Cody. He's got a bad heart.

"I knew you were going to hurt her sooner or later, but I didn't think you were such an idiot to do it publicly."

I start tapping my fingers on my knees.

"If I had someone like her, if she liked me as much as she liked you, I would *never* have gotten in front of the world and denied her like that. I would be yelling my love for her off the freaking rooftops."

Joel's heart monitor beeps faster.

"Because of you she's gone. She left me and her friends and all her work at the co-op. She can't stand you *so* much that she's probably never coming back. Not that I can blame her." His eyebrows are two angry slashes on his face.

The heart monitor is turning red with warning.

I lean forward. "Hey, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

"If you can't have a conversation without blowing a gasket, I'm leaving."

"Leave then!"

I frown at him. "If I go, you won't hear why Clarissa and I broke up."

He pauses, calculating whether the carrot I'm dangling in front of him is worth it.

"Why did you?"

"Uh-uh. The only way I'm staying is if you cool it."

Joel inhales a deep breath and pushes it out. Slowly, his heart rate returns to normal.

"Make it quick," he grumbles. "My heart is barely holding on. I don't want your face to be the last one I see before I croak."

If I could, I'd point out that I'm the one paying for this hospital room *and* the machine keeping him alive. If anyone should be annoyed here, it's me.

But I decide to be the adult in the room and keep that thought to myself.

"Do you know someone by the name of Hugo Winifred?" I ask.

Joel's eyes widen. He's too innocent to hide his responses, but he makes a valiant effort to scrub it away.

"We're supposed to be talking about Clarissa."

I cross one leg over the other. "A few weeks ago, I gave Winifred his walking papers. He was embezzling funds from the company. My mistake was that I didn't have him arrested right away. He took off before the police could catch him."

Joel swallows hard.

"Who is Winifred to you, Joel?"

He quickly glances to the side. His breath fogs up the mask on his nose. "No one."

"You don't have to lie to me—"

"I said I don't know him." Joel huffs.

"Fine." I get up to leave. "I wanted to be the one to talk to you, but I guess I'll let the police handle this."

"The police?"

"I wasn't lying when I told you Winifred stole from the company." I take a step toward the door.

"You're just trying to scare me!" he calls.

"Kid, believe it or not, I'm trying to help you. If you know where he is and you're not saying anything, you're only putting yourself and Clarissa at risk."

"Clarissa?"

I shake my head. "Forget it."

"Wait."

I stop.

“Winifred... is mom’s cousin.” Joel’s feeble voice rattles through his oxygen mask. “They were more like friends than family. Mom said he helped her out when my dad left.”

I return to the chair by his hospital bed. “Was he the one who called you the night of the gala?”

Joel eyes me suspiciously.

I scoot to the edge of my seat. “Joel, you asked me why Clarissa left. Here’s the truth. She was being threatened by my enemies. I was desperate, so I did something I knew she wouldn’t like, fully expecting her to leave me.”

His lips mash together.

“But the one who drove me to that place of desperation was Winifred. He hates me and he’s willing to do anything to get back at me, even hurt the people I love.”

“Oh come on, Uncle Win wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“He hurt *you*, didn’t he?” I growl.

Joel goes still.

“Vargas said you’d been put into the system. That means your uncle didn’t take you in. When was the last time you heard from him before that night? Has he even called you since then? Sent a dime to help you?”

“I’m not mad at you. It’s his fault. He knew what he was doing by goading you. By involving you in this fight. If he’d left you out of it, you wouldn’t be here holding on for dear life.”

The kid picks at a thread in his hospital sheet. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to paint yourself as the hero, but you’re not. You don’t care about me. Even if Uncle Win isn’t involved in my life, he’s family.”

“*I’m* your family too.” Roughly, I add, “Do you think I’d be here if I didn’t care about you at all?”

“Uncle Win was right. You’re good at this. At manipulating people.” He shakes his head. “Aren’t you here to

get something from me? Don't bother talking about me being family because I won't fall for it."

I rub the back of my neck. This kid.

He still doesn't believe me.

"Every day at twelve o'clock, you used to go hunting down a bag of chips and hide out in the bathroom to eat it so I wouldn't scold you."

His eyes widen. "You knew about that?"

"Yeah, I knew about that." I huff. "Your wheels make this creaking noise when you're trying to be quiet."

"I thought I put enough grease," he mumbles.

"I miss... that sound. The house feels empty without you there."

"You're saying you miss me." Joel's lips curl up mischievously.

"I wouldn't use those words."

"What words would you use?"

My eyes roll to the ceiling. "I've... gotten used to having you around."

"That means you miss me, Fake Dad."

I cough. "Let's focus, shall we?"

Joel keeps grinning.

I pretend not to notice and say, "I respect that you're trying to protect your mom's cousin, but Winifred is dangerous."

"He's really not. I know him."

"You don't know what people are willing to do when they're backed into a corner. Right now, Winifred is running from the law *and* he's angry with me. That makes him unpredictable. I need to find him before he does anything to hurt someone we both love."

"Do you really think Uncle Win will go after Clarissa?"

Hell. Just the mention of it is like a punch to the gut.

“I don’t know. But I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

Joel’s tongue darts out to lick his lips. He struggles to sit upright. I move behind him, helping to fluff his pillows.

“That night, Uncle Win called me and told me that you had it out for him. He said you fired him after he stood up to you in a meeting. He said you’d always hated him.”

My eyebrows cinch together. “None of that *ever* happened. The day I fired your uncle was the first time we met.”

“He said you hated him and that you only chose me as your fake son because I was related to him and...”

“And what?” I say slowly, sensing that he’s struggling with this next part.

“He said that I shouldn’t get too comfortable. That you were going to throw me away the moment I stopped being useful. He told me that I don’t mean anything to you and that you probably wanted me to die so you could earn sympathy points.”

“And you believed him?”

“What was I supposed to believe?” Joel hisses. “You only hired me for the PR and you never said anything about staying together.” His shoulders slump. “Not that I expected you to. I get that I can be a lot.”

Screw it. I hate seeing him down on himself.

“You’re not the problem, Joel, I am. Apart from my brother and his family, I’ve been alone all this time. It’s easier that way. Everything is under my control when it’s just me. With other people, there are too many variables.”

“Variables?” He snorts. The mask on his face gets cloudy again.

“Too many things that can go wrong. Too many things that I can’t control. I feel that pressure for you. And for Clarissa. I want you to be safe. And if anything happens to you, I take it personally. I want to fix it. I’ll *obsess* until I can make it right.”

“Why do you think you have to make it right on your own? You can’t control everything. You can’t even control if it rains or not.”

“I can take an umbrella,” I fire back.

“Or you can share mine,” he answers. “It doesn’t have to be that complicated.”

We were supposed to do this together.

Clarissa’s words echo in my head.

Joel stares at me. “When you’re so obsessed with control, you don’t treat people like family. You treat them like prisoners. I’m not a child. Neither is Clarissa. We’re responsible for ourselves. We control ourselves. You don’t always have to fix it. And even if it needs fixing, you don’t have to fix it alone.”

I sigh as the realization hits. “Share the umbrella.”

Clarissa wanted to share hers, and instead, I took the umbrella and impaled her with it.

“You’re a wise kid.” I eye Joel with a hint of respect.

“I’ve been watching a lot of *Doctor Phil* re-runs in here.”

I chuckle.

Clay knocks on the door. “Joel has a visitor.”

My eyes widen when I see Dawn and Elizabeth Stinton sprinting inside. Max Stinton’s wife is wearing shorts and a comfortable blouse. The daughter is in a T-shirt with the Stinton Auto logo on it.

Dawn gives me a warm and welcoming hug. “Cody, it’s good to see you.”

“You too, Dawn.”

“Hey.” Joel tips his chin up at Elizabeth.

“You’re not dead today,” Elizabeth says, smiling at him.

Joel’s lips curl up. “Nope. Sorry to disappoint.”

I point between them. “What’s going on? Why are you here?”

“I brought non-hospital food.” Dawn opens a carton and a smell of fresh vegetable dumplings fills the room.

“And chai?” Joel asks.

“You’re just as addicted as Vanya is.” Stinton’s wife rolls her eyes. “Yes, I also brought Dejonae’s heart-patient appropriate chai.”

“Sweet.”

Elizabeth walks up to me. “You’re Joel’s dad, right?”

“Foster dad,” Joel corrects her, but the words don’t sound as angry as usual.

“How come you’re never around?”

“Elizabeth,” Dawn scolds.

“What?”

“Just play your game and stop assaulting Cody with questions that have nothing to do with you.” Dawn shoos her daughter away.

My eyebrows cinch when I see Elizabeth hop on the bed and shove a game controller into Joel’s hand. Expertly, she presses a button and the bed rises a little more so he’s sitting up.

Joel smiles broadly. Although his body is wasting away, his eyes sparkle with genuine delight. “I’m going to crush you today, Lizzie.”

“Eat my smoke, Jo-Jo. By the way, everyone calls me Beth.”

“Not me,” he says, flicking his tongue out as he concentrates on the game.

It feels like they’ve done that before.

It also feels like I’m in an alternate universe. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen Joel smile.

“Elizabeth, don’t smack-talk Joel. We don’t want him to exhaust himself coming up with insults for you.”

“Yes, mom.”

Dawn takes my arm and steers me outside.

I stiffen when I see Clay and Vargas talking to Max Stinton.

The CEO of Stinton Group catches my eye and nods.

My response is a scowl.

“Clarissa asked us to keep an eye on Joel,” Dawn explains in the hallway. “Nova suggested we take turns. There’s a shared calendar in our group chat. Very organized stuff. Anyway, we worked it out so there’s always someone with Joel. We keep him company when he’s not exhausted from all the meds.”

I’m shocked by their generosity. “You did all that because Clarissa asked?”

“We did all that because you’re family and now, so is Joel.” She nods as if it’s obvious.

But it isn’t.

Not even faintly.

“I guess I don’t understand why you’re standing guard. I have men watching him.” I gesture to the suits outside Joel’s door.

“Guards are not the same as family, Cody. Don’t you know you can be surrounded by people and still feel lonely? That’s no way for a child of yours to be.”

Max Stinton walks toward us. He gives Dawn a kiss on the forehead. “I’ll head back to the office and pick you girls up later.”

Dawn smiles at him. “Take the back road. I heard there was a really bad pileup on the 105 when we were driving here.”

“I will.”

They kiss and I glance away.

Stinton holds his hand out to me. “You’re Clay’s brother, right?”

I stare at his hand and reluctantly shake. “Cody Bolton. We met before. A pitch for Cormar Stevens a little under ten years ago.”

“Did we?”

“Yeah.”

Max scratches his chin. “Huh.”

I drop his hand. “Do you only know me as Clay’s brother?”

He purses his lips and asks hesitantly. “Should I know more?”

I stare at his clueless face and realize he’s not pulling my leg. He genuinely has no clue who I am.

Deranged laughter pools in my gut.

I want to throw my head back and howl.

Ten years ago, I was fresh out of college and eager to take on the world. Then I ran into Stinton. We were neck and neck in the races. David and Goliath. Except my sling shot was no use against a sword. He and his sharks with briefcases undercut my pitch and threw me to the wolves.

‘That’s business’ Max told me as I cowered, aching with disappointment.

It felt like the world was ending. I’d missed my wedding. I’d lost my girl. This pitch was my only salvation. My only purpose. I almost ended up in the hospital because I was working so hard on it.

All that, and Stinton screwed me over just because he could.

I swore I’d never forget it.

And I haven’t.

For years, it’s been festering inside me.

I look up at Max Stinton's face. He's got cold eyes, but they warm significantly when they move to Dawn. A smile crosses his face. He's got a wife. A daughter. A thriving business. He's been living life happily, unaware of my bitterness.

I bet it wouldn't bother him if he found out about it now.

How arrogant I've been. I secretly believed that I'd make Max regret what he did so many years ago. I'd make him remember my name. But I see now... it's all meaningless.

I guess that's why they say forgiveness is for you and not the other person.

"Is... something wrong?" Max asks, arching an eyebrow.

"No." I chuckle, humbled. And surprisingly happy.

It's like a weight is off my chest. I feel lighter. A little foolish, but free.

"No, it's good to officially meet you." I shake his hand more thoroughly. "I saw that Stinton Auto is going international. If you ever need help, call me."

"I'd like that." He winks. "I've heard of what you're doing in the M&A space. Superb."

As I exchange smiles with the man I abhorred for almost a decade, Elizabeth comes charging out of Joel's room.

"Mom! Dad!" Tears fly down her face.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

Max drops to his knees. "Sweetie, what is it?"

Elizabeth throws her arms around his neck, but she doesn't look at him. She looks at me. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What?" My heart stops cold.

"It's Joel. Something's wrong."

Dawn gasps.

Max looks at me in concern.

"*Joel.*" The name slips out in a pained hush.

An explosion of sounds erupt from Joel's room.
Warning alarms.
Urgent beeping.
A team of nurses rush past me.
I move forward on autopilot.
My heart is numb.
My feet are like lead.
I'm the walking dead.
"No. No! Joel!" I groan. "Joel."
I stop in the doorway.
My eyes slam on Joel's heart monitor.
A flatline.
Tears sting the back of my eyes.
No. It can't be.
"Joel!" I yell.
The kid doesn't hear me. He's lying on the bed. Still.
Eyes closed.
So, so pale.
My heart slices in half. I launch forward. "Joel, what the hell? Open your eyes! This isn't funny!"
I glance at the flatline.
Will it to start beating again.
"Joel!"
"Sir, you can't go in there." A nurse shoves my chest.
"Cody, stay back." My brother clamps an arm around me.
"Come on."
I fight to be free, but Clay is brawnier than me and he wrestles me into the hallway.
Once Joel's out of sight, I lose all the strength in my legs.

Gravity pulls me lower. I grab my brother's shirt to keep from hitting the floor.

"Clay." A groan pulls from deep in my chest and makes its way through my mouth. My hands are fists. I don't know what to say. What to do. It feels like I'm being ripped to shreds. "He's gone."

Clay's eyes turn red.

I'm shaking. Barely cohesive. "I promised him he'd be okay. I promised."

"I know, buddy." My brother hugs me.

It feels like my head is about to pop off my neck.

In the distance, frantic footsteps pound the floor.

Vargas runs into the hallway. "Bolton, we have a problem!"

I whip around.

Clay turns too.

Max Stinton joins us. I don't see Elizabeth and Dawn. They must have taken the little girl away to grieve alone.

Vargas' cheeks are flushed as he skids to a stop in front of me. Too many emotions are stuck in my throat. I can't breathe. I can't speak.

"Not right now, Vargas," Clay says. "Joel's... with the doctors."

At least he didn't say 'with God'.

At least he believes there's hope.

"But—"

I shake my head. I can't take any more.

Not right now.

"You'll want to hear this." Vargas moves insistently toward me, "I just got a call from Clarissa's tail."

My back snaps to attention.

My shattered heart snarls in pain. “Where. Is. *She?*”

“We don’t know.” Vargas gulps. “She’s been kidnapped.”

THE VAN RIDE

CLARISSA

THERE'S a man in my living room with a gun pointed in my back. In the reflection of my cabinet glass, I recognize his beady, desperate eyes.

“Winifred?”

“If you want to see your mother again, come with me,” he orders. His voice is trembling, but the hand holding me hostage is steady on my back.

My heart quivers. An icy sickness spreads through my gut.

I could scream.

Someone would come running.

Cody put a tail on me. I'm not sure if he thinks I wouldn't notice. Or maybe he believes I'm such an idiot I wouldn't recognize that my new 'neighbor' has muscles on top of muscles and happens to show up at all the places I do.

But if I scream, what happens to mom? What if Winifred has her already?

The gun digs into my back. “Your security is currently taking a nice little nap. So here's what you're going to do...”

Winifred pushes a hat over my head with a wig attached. He slides a coat across my shoulders and nods, as if satisfied with the degree of the disguise.

I want to fight. My fingers curl into fists and I calculate my odds. They're not good, but that doesn't scare me. Since leaving Cody, I've been feeling rather reckless.

Or maybe I've just been trying not to feel at all.

I'm crazy enough to take my chances with a bullet, but I can't risk angering Winifred. He could be lying, but if he really has mom...

“What did you do to her?” I hiss.

“She'll be fine. As long as you behave.”

Fear rises in me, and I understand why Cody is so obsessed with control. I wish I could roll my mom in bubble wrap and lock her in a human-sized hamster wheel. Anything to see her safe.

If even a hair on her head is harmed because of me, I'll never forgive myself. Never.

“She’s just an old woman,” I hiss. “She has nothing to do with this—”

“Shut up and walk.” Winifred shoves me through the hall. The gun is pressed to my back and his face smushes into mine. He has his arm around me, trying to act like we’re lovers out for a stroll.

I shudder, utterly repulsed. He smells like beer and fish.

He’d looked so smug in his business suit during my pitch. How long ago was that? It feels like ages.

Winifred had on an expensive watch that day. I remember because of the way he looked at the time and then looked down his nose at me. He called me a beggar. Made me feel like dirt.

Now he’s the one who looks like a bum. His beard is thick and scraggly and he desperately needs a haircut. Scratch that. A haircut *and* a shower. I’m choking on the putrid scent wafting off him.

There’s a black van waiting downstairs.

The back door slides open and a degenerate who looks even girthier than Winifred peers at me from the driver’s seat. These guys are definitely not professional criminals. They move with no finesse, no intelligence.

“This her?” The driver sweeps his eyes over me.

“Yup. She’s Cody Bolton’s lover. Guy worships her farts. I know we can get a good deal on her.”

“We better,” the degenerate says, popping gum. “I already took out the suit next door, but we gotta move.”

“I’m not moving until I see my mother.”

“Get in.” Winifred shoves me and I stumble into the car. He wastes no time grabbing duct tape.

I glare at him, considering my options.

My detail is ‘taking a nap’, which I now know means that he was taken out by Winifred’s partner.

My cell phone is in my back pocket, but it’s not like I can call the cops in front of them. The most I can do is stall and hope someone sees I’m being shoved into a black van.

“Where’s my mother?” I demand.

“You’ll see her soon enough,” the driver snarls.

I imagine crushing my sensible pumps straight into the back of his skull. I wish I hadn’t left behind all the shoes Cody bought for me. Mimi’s got a thing for long, thin stilettos. I could have used the back end of a heel right about now.

Winifred struggles with the tape.

“How do I get this damn thing?” Winifred asks, glancing at the other guy almost helplessly. “I can’t find the crease.”

“Idiot.” Snarly Mouth snaps the tape from him.

I eye the door, seeing that they’re both occupied.

“Keep the gun on her,” Snarly Mouth instructs.

Winifred lifts his weapon.

Dammit.

I missed my window.

My breath escapes in quick spurts. I need to be more focused in case another chance comes around.

“Here.” The guy hands Winifred the tape with the end flapping while Winifred gives him the weapon.

Snarly Mouth scratches the back of his neck with the gun. I don’t think that’s safe. But it would be no skin off my back if he accidentally blew his own head off and solved my problem for me.

“Make sure you tie her good.”

“I got it.” Winifred trembles as he binds me. Sweat runs down his face and he can’t look me in the eyes.

“You realize what happens if the police catch you, right?” I whisper so his unhinged partner doesn’t hear. “You’re not this guy, Winifred. You have goals. Ambitions. It’s still possible for you if you stop here.”

His eyes remain on the tape. “It’s over for me. Bolton made sure of that.”

“Cody can fire you from a job. But that’s it. He has no more power over you. You’re still free. In fact, you’re more free than before because no one can tell you what to do. There’s so much you can do with that potential. You have the chance to start again. To grow. To be anything you want to be.” I send the driver a side eye. “Anything except a criminal.”

Winifred flinches.

“You’re a good person.” I spit the words because his current actions clearly don’t align with that phrase.

“Don’t bother lying to my face. I can never be free. Bolton called the cops on me. If I stay here, I go to jail. If I get money from Bolton, I get a ticket to the Virgin Islands. The choice is easy. I’m not letting you go.”

The duct tape screeches loudly as he winds it around my hands.

“I’m not trying to ruin whatever you have going on here,” I speak fast. “Just tell me where my mother is. Tell me if she’s okay.”

Winifred’s eyes dart to his partner.

The guy scowls. “Hurry it up back there.”

He grabs my legs and ties the tape around my ankles.

“Winifred,” I whisper urgently, “we did charity work together. You helped a little girl find her teddy bear. Remember that?”

His hands go still.

“Please,” I beg, my eyes imploring. “Please just tell me.”

Winifred licks his lips and frantically pats at the sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand.

“If you’re done, let’s go!” His partner spits. “Unless you want everyone to know what we’re doing here.”

“Coming.” Winifred withdraws from me.

Worry gnaws at my gut and I start to reach for him before I remember that my hands are bound.

Winifred suddenly pauses. His face tightens in contemplation before he leans toward me.

“What are you doing?” Snarly Mouth barks.

“Let me duct tape her mouth. She could scream.”

“Make it quick.”

The duct tape snaps again as Winifred rolls out another piece. Leaning in close, he tapes my mouth and whispers, “We don’t have your mother.”

Relief explodes in my chest.

“But,” he adds, “that doesn’t mean we won’t hurt you if you try anything stupid.” The threat is accompanied by a hard stare and I know better than to push my luck.

Winifred climbs into the front seat and the car moves off. I roll backward, falling into the empty cavern of the van. The chairs were removed and my shoulder bangs hard against the metal floor.

Pain explodes up my shoulder, but I know I don’t have a right to cry out. The very thing Cody tried to protect me from is happening.

And there’s no one coming to save me.



THE MEN DRIVE for what feels like hours. I try to keep my eyes on the terrain rolling past my window in case I can get to my

phone and describe my location to the police, but I have no idea where we are.

Trees press in close and there seems to be no one around. We're far from any possible help. I doubt there's even reception this far out.

The van door opens with a metallic whir and Snarly Mouth jerks me up. My shoulder throbs painfully. I realize that, for all his kidnapping and criminal behavior, Winifred treated me a lot more gently than his partner did.

It's a dark, moonless night. My shoes crunch against loose rocks and grass pushing through what was once a concrete driveway. Winifred rolls up a shutter and his partner shoves me inside.

The smell hits me first. It's acidic and dense.

The interior looks as welcoming as the outside did. Dirty glass windows. Filthy floors. A dump of trash in one corner. Two pizza boxes are stacked on a foldable table. A bed is made up in the corner with a small radio hanging on the frame. It looks like Winifred's been here for a while.

I stop short when I see a chair with a rusty lock attached to the leg. The other end of the chain is anchored to a steel pillar.

My kidnappers prepared a nice little piece of the room for me. How sweet.

Snarly Mouth shoves me unceremoniously into the chair. Since my legs are bound, I almost slip and slam my face against the edge.

"Careful, Slotter," Winifred snaps. "Bolton won't let us be if there are any bruises."

Slotter? What kind of name is that?

I glare at Snarly Mouth. Just because I can't speak doesn't mean I can't curse him out with my gaze.

Slotter chuckles and kneels in front of me. He cuts the tape and attaches the chain around my ankle. When he's done, he looks up at me. His dirty hand curls down my cheek. Disgust

raises the hair on the back of my neck and I inch backward, trying to get away.

“Clarissa Maura.” His tongue curls over my name. “What’s so special about you?” I didn’t think it was possible, but his eyes are even beadier than Winifred’s. “I’m so curious.”

I jerk my chin away.

He laughs. “Spunky. Maybe that’s what he liked? A fight?”

“Come on, man.” Winifred’s voice wavers. “Let’s call Bolton and tell him we have his girl. The sooner he transfers the money, the sooner I can skip the country.”

Slotter turns his head and gives Winifred a frigid look. “Idiot. It’s better for them to *discover* she’s gone first. Let them panic. Really stew in it. People are willing to do anything when they’re afraid.”

“Fine.” Winifred spits the words through gritted teeth. “Let’s plan what we’re going to say.”

“No, I want to play with our toy first.” Slotter unleashes a villainous smirk.

“What does that mean?” The sheen on Winifred’s forehead makes him look like he got caught in the rain.

My breath hitches. I scoot as far back as I can. The legs teeter over and Slotter grabs the back of the chair, slamming the legs on the ground.

The pounding fear in my veins makes me feel like a balloon about to pop.

“Let me see what we’re working with.” He reaches a grimy hand toward me.

I mumble behind the duct tape, craning my neck away from him.

It’s no use.

“Ah!” I cry out when Slotter roughly tears the duct tape off my lips.

“Don’t hurt her,” Winifred reminds him. “That’s our only insurance.”

“Shut up.” Slotter grins at me, showing off yellow teeth. He must be on some type of drug. People don’t look that insidiously unhinged naturally. “Nice lips.” His gaze slides down my body. “A little on the thinner side. I like ‘em much thicker. But her tits are nice. And she’s black, so her behind has got to be—”

“Not every black woman has a big butt, you bastard.”

It’s a weird hill to die on, I know. But this guy gives me the creeps. If he touches me again, I’m biting his finger off. I’ll risk catching a disease if it means inflicting just *a bit* of pain on him.

Slotter’s grin gets bigger and meaner. He rocks back on his haunches. “You don’t seem like a billionaire’s type.”

I forget that I’m scared. Right now, all I feel is angry.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s not because you’re black.”

I stick my tongue out in disgust. There’s duct tape on my tongue and it tastes ghastly.

“I love black women,” Slotter adds.

Makes sense. That’s why he has me tied up in a chair, threatening my life. Because he just loves and respects black women so much.

“It’s not that you’re ugly. You’re not. But the kind of woman that a man would launch a war for? I don’t see it. You just seem,” he sniffs like he smells something bad, “low class.”

I stiffen. He managed to shove his finger into a very particular wound. One I thought a degenerate punk like Slotter couldn’t recognize.

Guess I was wrong.

“Do you see what I’m saying?” He glances back at Winifred. “A man like Bolton can have any girl he wants, so why her? I just don’t get it.”

Winifred shrugs.

My nostrils flare. “Sorry to disappoint, but you’re doing this for nothing. Cody and I broke up.”

Winifred looks shocked. “You broke up?”

“Didn’t you see that video? He told the world I was just a colleague. He’s ashamed of me.” I glance at Slotter. “And maybe he’s right to be. I *am* low class. I was homeless growing up. I could only go to school because of a scholarship. I never fit in with the other girls there. Guys never used to look at me. I’m nothing like Cody.”

“I heard he got his first break in college,” Winifred says, coming closer to me. “Bolton was a lucky bastard since he was young.”

“He was. He lived a charmed life. He doesn’t have a bruise on him. He could never understand me or anyone like me.”

“But you still got together,” Slotter pointed out.

It’s like they’re interviewing me for a relationship podcast. They’re so invested.

“I heard he’s been spending lavishly on you. Built someone a house just to make you smile.”

“It was for the charity.”

Both men groan.

“Come on, girl.” Slotter laughs. “You know that’s not true.”

“Cody’s not coming for me,” I insist.

In my heart, I don’t believe that. Cody will do anything to find me. The moment he hears I’m missing, he’s going to use every resource at his disposal to get me back, but I don’t want him to. I don’t want him to get hurt or lose anything because of me.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Slotter grins.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A man doesn’t hire a personal bodyguard for the woman he hates. Sorry, sweetheart. You can’t fool us.” Slotter reaches out as if he’ll touch my cheek again. I wind my shoulders back, ready to bite. He sees me tense my muscles and pulls his hands away. “I don’t buy it.”

I keep trying to mislead them. “You don’t have to believe me. There’s a whole video on the internet. Go watch it.”

“I have watched it. And I’m willing to bet that song and dance was because he loves you so much, he didn’t want something like this,” he gestures between them, “to happen. Not that it helped. As you can see.”

He’s right and that’s my fault. Cody’s insistence on a full security detail seems much wiser in my current predicament.

Slotter leans in, grinning. “Do you regret it now? Breaking up with him?”

“No.”

“Why?”

I glare his way.

He lifts his gun and starts stroking it. “We don’t have internet or a TV here. Until enough time has passed, you’re all the entertainment we’ve got, baby.” He tilts his head to the side and stares at my chest. “If you don’t want to talk, I’ve got other games we can play.”

Winifred gives me an imploring look.

He can’t control Slotter if things get out of hand. I don’t have a choice.

Lips flattening, I spit, “I know Cody did that interview to protect me. He’s always been that way. He does things without consulting me and says it’s *for* me.” I think of our wedding. His insistence that he was attending that meeting for me. For us. “But it’s just an excuse. He wants me to shut up and follow his lead because he thinks it’s best. He doesn’t stop to ask if I agree.”

“A man in charge. An *alpha*.” Slotter scoffs at the word. “I used to work for a boss like that. He gave me this scar.” He

lifts his hair and shows a cruel burn mark at his hairline. “You got any scars?”

“Cody doesn’t hit women.”

“Hm.”

“He just... likes to be in control. Especially when he thinks it’s for your own good. I couldn’t turn my brain off and blindly agree anymore.”

Slotter cracks a beer and offers it to Winifred.

He shakes his head.

“More for me.” He tips the bottle to his lips, eyes glinting in the darkness. “So you know he loves you, but you left.”

I nod.

“And you love him too?”

I swallow hard.

“Do you?” Slotter asks, getting in my face.

“What does that have to do with—”

He cocks the gun at me. “Entertainment.”

My jaw works. I hate them both so much it burns me inside.

Swallowing back the bile in my throat, I look away. “Since I left him, I haven’t been able to eat or sleep. I listen to that damn interview at night because I miss hearing his voice.”

“You could just call him,” Slotter suggests.

My eyebrows tighten. “He should call me. He hasn’t sent a text, a video. Nothing. He’s the one who was wrong. He should apologize.”

Slotter laughs.

I realize I revealed way too much information and clamp my mouth shut, glowering into the distance.

Slotter shoves his elbow into Winifred’s side. “Look, she’s embarrassed.”

Winifred just smiles in discomfort.

“How much do you think he’d pay for you to come back to him in one piece?” Slotter sets his beer down and counts on his fingers. “Let’s see... one million? Ten? A hundred?”

“More. He’d pay more for her.”

“You’re so sure?”

Winifred stares at his partner. “Last week, his entire security team was on the chopping block and she got him to spare them.”

Slotter drinks, looking unmoved.

“Do you know what they call Bolton?”

“Ice King, right?”

“His employees call him Ice King. The rest of the business world call him the Grim Reaper. With one word from her, the Grim Reaper didn’t take any souls.”

Slotter’s eyes glint at me. “Impressive.”

My tongue darts out to wet my lips.

“I wonder what he’d be willing to pay if we sent him a pinkie?” Slotter touches my finger.

I curl it back, my heart hammering in fear.

He laughs and swigs his beer again. “Love is such a dangerous thing. Here you are, acting like you’re nothing, and here we are, about to charge your boyfriend a hundred mill for the privilege of seeing you again.” Slotter chuckles. “Ironic, right? We think you’re worth more than you do.”

Slotter’s words pierce me.

We think you’re worth more than you do.

That’s not true.

I’m confident in myself. In my ability to help those in need. In my heart and the love I have to give. In my mission of lifting up as many women as possible. I’m confident in my intelligence, my determination and my humility.

But stick me in a room with a bunch of rich people and I disappear into myself.

It's so ridiculous now that Slotter laid it out for me.

Cody thinks I'm priceless.

My kidnapers think I'm worth at least a hundred million dollars.

But I don't see myself the same.

My brain keeps churning.

Until I slam the breaks.

Am I having a self-realization moment in the middle of a kidnapping? Really?

"Think we can call now?" Winifred asks, checking his watch.

Slotter nods. "Someone should have been alerted by now." He jerks his chin toward a corner of the room that's far from me. "You make the call. I'll listen in." His eyes flicker with mistrust when he shadows Winifred. "So you don't double cross me."

While the men walk away, I think fast. If I have any hope of saving myself, I need to find a way out *now*.

My eyes surge around the room, looking for a weapon. The pillar behind me has a few loose pipes scattered around the base.

It's too far away.

But it's the only option I've got.

I keep my gaze on Slotter and Winifred. They're focused on the flip phone opened before them.

Heart pounding, I ease down in my chair and push my hands as far as they can go. It's not far enough.

Bits and pieces of their conversation waft to me.

'If you want to see your precious woman again...'

'You want to make threats, Bolton?'

Sweat rolls down my face.

I still can't reach it.

Slotter yells in the background, "*No cops. And you don't want to play any tricks or I'll blow her freaking head off.*"

My pulse spikes.

I need to hurry.

Scooting my chair back, I get closer to the pipe and wrap my fingers around it. I draw it up and hide it behind my back just as the boys end the call.

Slotter is grinning from ear-to-ear.

Winifred's eyes crease with relief.

My fingers dig into the pipe. I'm shaking harder than before.

"Guess how much you're fishing us, beautiful?" Slotter grins, showing off all his rotten teeth. "Guess."

I glare up at him.

I've never stood up to anyone before.

Not the people who laughed at me in college.

Not the girls who constantly berated me at those networking parties.

Not Winifred.

Not the office workers who gossiped when I broke my heel.

I don't defend myself. People like me get kicked around and rise, only to keep our heads down. Blend in. Make zero waves.

People like me don't fight.

You can do this, Clarissa.

My fingers adjust around the pipe. My mouth is dry. I can taste my own sweat slipping over my lips.

This is not a plan.

I have no idea what I'll do after I take them out, but it's a first step. And I always tell my clients 'the first step is the hardest one, but it's also the most freeing'. I need some freedom right now.

"Gah, he's an idiot." Slotter shakes his head, coming close enough to me. "Three hundred million. For nothing?"

I burst out of the chair with a roar. "I'm *not* nothing!"

My hands are tied behind my back and my left leg is chained, so I can't swing the pipe far. But I swivel my body and give it everything I've got, smashing the iron into Slotter's groin so hard that his future children scream in agony.

He sinks to the ground, moaning in pain. His new position puts him right in line for another swing. I take it, smashing the pipe into his temple.

Slotter flops to the ground, out like a light.

I stand over his body. "I don't need to be worth something to Cody to be valuable, you punk. I am more than enough on my own!"

My chest heaves, rising up and down.

Power surges through my veins.

Damn, that felt good.

I look up, glowing from my adrenaline rush...

And meet the barrel end of Winifred's gun.

Instantly, my blood runs cold.

"Winifred," I say softly, trying to get through to him, "let me go. I'm not going to tell anyone about this. I promise."

"Cody's sending the money to our off-shore bank account as we speak. In a few minutes, it'll all be over." He shakes his head. "And yet, it doesn't feel like enough."

"Winifred..." I take a step.

He shoves the gun in my face and I freeze again.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this." His bottom lip trembles. "It really wasn't."

I stare blankly at him.

“At first, I only wanted to help Joel get his surgery.”

“J-Joel?” My eyes widen. Why is he mentioning Joel?

“I did steal money, but it was for a good cause. I swear.” Winifred’s voice sounds feeble and unfocused. “And then I thought, *what if I can win enough money for the surgery and pay the loan back in one go?*”

Winifred’s eyes are on me, but it feels like he’s not seeing me.

“After that, I got desperate. Took more money. Kept trying to win it back.”

My mind is still on Joel. I start connecting the dots. Is Winifred the reason Joel got so angry at Cody overnight? Did he say something to him?

“I was going to return the money. I swear. But Bolton... Bolton ruined everything.” His lips fall into a dark line. “He set my world on fire. And I don’t know if taking his money is enough. I don’t think it hurts enough.”

His eyes are glassy when they meet mine. “My world shattered. Do you know what it feels like when your entire existence is in jeopardy? When it hurts just thinking about getting up in the morning?”

“I know...” I whisper, “that you’ve been consumed with revenge. But the more hate you have for a person, the more control they have over you. Don’t give anyone that much control, Winifred.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m obsessed with him.” The gun moves toward me. “But I can’t control that. Just like he can’t help being obsessed with you.”

“Please...”

“I can’t walk away like this. Without knowing I inflicted the same pain he did to me.”

“You’re getting the money, Winifred.”

Spittle flies from his mouth as he shrieks, “The money is nothing to him! He can make it back. He’s that smart. That resourceful. It won’t hurt him.” A crazed grin crosses his face. “But if he loses you... won’t that break him? Won’t that ruin him for life? Knowing he lost the woman he loves and it was *his* fault. He’ll never recover.” Deranged laughter pours from his lips. “He’ll live in agony for the rest of his life.”

I inch back.

“I’m sorry, Clarissa. You’re a nice girl. You don’t deserve to be in the middle of this. But Bolton loves you so much. He’d die for you. He really would.”

“Winifred.”

His finger eases on the trigger and I know he has no intentions of holding back.

I close my eyes, regretting so much.

My last days with mom could have been more joyful.

I could have loved myself properly. I never really got the chance to.

And Cody...

I would have stayed and worked things out instead of running away. I would have barged into his world and taken over rather than cower.

“Goodbye, Miss Maura.”

Boom!

A gun goes off.

I wait for the pain to tear through me, but it doesn’t.

Instead, my ears ring.

My feet remain on the floor.

I’m alive?

I hear Winifred’s body flop.

A door bangs open.

Clay walks in holding a gun still pointed at Winifred.

“Ugh.” Winifred is at my feet, groaning in pain, a bullet hole torn through the hand that was holding the gun on me.

A siren wails in the distance.

Cody rushes into the room followed by Doberman and his security team. I recognize my beefy neighbour. The man who called himself ‘John’ when he introduced himself to me in the hallway last week smiles sheepishly.

I knew he was security.

“Perimeter is clear,” Doberman says. “I think it was just these two.”

Cody’s eyes knife into my gut. I can’t stop looking at him.

“*Are you okay?*” he mouths.

I nod.

His lips curl up slightly. Watching him is like feeling the sun on my face after a hurricane. I drink in his broad shoulders, square jaw and those eyes full of love.

I’m more than enough and I don’t need you to tell me that.

I just need you in my world.

The realization settles on me and fills me with peace.

Cody moves toward me.

A world of ‘I love yous’ rush between us.

I start running to him, ready to throw myself into his arms.

“Clarissa!”

Cody’s knocked to the side as Island makes a beeline for me.

My jaw drops. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you were kidnapped,” she says. “And I wanted to help. All the farmhouse ladies came to join the search. Speaking of, I’ll send them a text so they know you’re safe.”

Clay looks me over. “Are you alright? The ambulance is outside if you need to get checked out.”

“I’m fine.” I notice Cody stepping away to answer a call and frown. “How did you find me?”

“Clay tapped your phone,” Island explains.

“He *what?*”

“I know.” Island slides her boyfriend a side eye. “We’ll talk about that later. But in this case, it was necessary.”

Winifred stopped the van halfway to the warehouse and chucked my phone. I thought it was overkill at the time. I had no idea the guys had a *tracker* on my phone.

“We wanted to get here sooner, but we lost your signal and there was a really bad accident on the freeway. Traffic was brutal,” Island adds.

I have so many questions, but the police enter the warehouse. They slap handcuffs on Winifred and a just rousing Slotter. The two men are carted through the door.

“Did you do that?” Clay points to Slotter’s busted face.

I nod.

He smiles at me for the first time. “Nice.”

“Ghastly people.” Island rubs my back. “I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

I tense, recalling Winifred’s evil villain speech. “Clay, I think Winifred is connected to Joel.”

“He is,” Clay says quietly.

“Where is Joel now? Is he okay?”

Clay stares at the ground.

Island shuffles.

Their sad expressions make me uneasy.

“W-what happened?” I whisper. “Is Joel... not... in the hospital anymore?”

“He’s in the hospital,” Island croaks.

My eyes dart between them. Why are they hesitating?

Island chews on her bottom lip. “Sweetheart, Joel is...”

“Awake!” Cody storms past his brother and sweeps me up in his arms. “He’s awake.”

“Was he sleeping?” I ask cluelessly.

“You could say that.” Cody grins at me. “And I have even better news.”

I slip my arms around his neck, so grateful to touch and feel him in this harrowing moment. “What?”

“He’s getting a heart.”

Tears slip down my face. Overcome with gratitude, I pull the man I love closer and plant a wet, sloppy kiss on his lips.

THE LUCKIEST MAN

CODY

I DRAG Clarissa into my lap, unable to let go of her. Joel is unconscious in the hospital cot, looking extremely pale after his heart transplant.

A part of me wants to shake him and demand he open his eyes. The other part doesn't mind the privacy.

It's been non-stop chaos all night.

The kidnapping.

The search and rescue.

The mad dash back to the hospital to see Joel being wheeled into the OP.

I love our giant, nosy friend group.

And I appreciate my security team.

But Clarissa and I haven't had a moment to ourselves.

As the humidifier hums, I hold her tight and the world completely disappears.

There's only her.

And Joel.

Yeah. Ris and Joel.

It feels right.

"I can't believe I almost lost you both," I growl. My throat burns with emotion.

The ups and downs I experienced tonight could make a grown man cry.

Ris cups my face. "I'm right here. And so is Joel."

We both turn to look at the patient.

Ris leans her head against mine. "I never thought the sound of a heart beating on its own would be so sweet to my ears."

I listen to the steady sound of the machine.

Going off to rescue Clarissa while grieving Joel nearly broke me. I told myself not to focus on anything else, but there was this gnawing hole in my gut.

I was worried about Ris.

I was worried about what I'd say *to* Ris when I found her.

I didn't want to give the woman I love the news that Joel was gone.

"I'm glad he pulled through," I say.

"But it's bittersweet, isn't it?"

"What is?" I glance down at her face, memorizing the soft flutter of her lashes and those sweet as molasses brown eyes.

"Our miracle came with a cost. Someone had to die in that accident for him to live. Right now, another family is grieving the way we would have. I'm grateful, but I'm also sorry."

I tense, my arms closing around her body in a tight grip.

She taps me.

"Sorry." I ease up. "The doctors can't legally tell me who donated the heart, but the accident was all over the news. It won't be difficult to find a name."

"I want to give something too. Although my money can't compare to yours."

My eyebrows hike. "I thought you were going to scold me and tell me money can't replace a person."

"No, it can't. But having the bills paid means you have one less thing to worry about while you grieve."

I kiss her cheek, in awe of her.

She's the woman I lost.

Then I got her back and made the mistake of losing her again.

This time, I'll never let her go.

Clarissa smiles at me, the warmth in her eyes stoking a fire in my bones. “I’m learning that money isn’t so bad if it helps people.”

“Then let’s help more people. As many as you want.”

Hell, if I only make money so I can funnel it into her charity work, I’ll be a happy man.

“You’re a softie, Ice King. How has no one found out?”

“It’s my best kept secret, princess.”

She sighs and cuddles closer to me.

I run my fingers over her wrists. The skin where they taped her hands together is rubbed raw. Anger blazes anew in me. I want to break Winifred out of prison just so I can slam my fist in his face. Slotter too. The men who put bruises on my baby don’t deserve to live.

Ris softly unclenches my fist, pulling at my fingers. “Who do you want to fight with now?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Maybe I just like clenching my fists.”

“Or maybe you like fighting a little too much. Everyone would think that *you* were the soldier.”

“Leave me again and I’ll fight my way from here to wherever you are,” I growl.

“I believe you.”

My eyes linger on hers. “I love you.”

“I believe that too.”

“You want to get married?”

Her eyes go wide and she sits straight up.

“What? You don’t believe me this time?”

“Right now?”

“No, I want you in a big dress. A giant wedding. All our friends there. The people you love. The people I love. I want you in the spotlight. I want doves flying out of freaking cages while I pledge my life to you.”

“That’s animal cruelty.”

“Robot doves.”

“AI cruelty.”

I laugh and nuzzle her neck. “I want to spoil you.”

Her lips twitch. “That sounds awful.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“You’re already planning the wedding?” she asks. “I haven’t said yes.”

“You’d say no?”

“Has this night *not* been eventful enough for you? You want to add a marriage proposal on top of everything else?”

“I’m not stupid enough to let you slip away from me again. Twice is more than I need. I’m locking you down this time, princess.”

Her smile makes my ice-cold heart pound like a congo drum. Everything I’ve been missing, everything I’ve ever wanted, is in my arms. I can’t live without her.

I don’t want to try.

My thumb slides over her jaw. “I’m sorry for going behind your back and doing that interview, Ris.”

“You should be.”

“I deserved that.”

She scrunches her nose.

“Things will be different going forward.”

“How different?”

“Not that much.”

“Hmf.”

“I can’t help that I’m obsessed with you. That part you’ll just have to live with.”

She flails dramatically. “Oh what a burden. A handsome, kind, sexy man is obsessed with me.”

I put her hand down so she knows I’m being serious. “I’ll do better at working things out together with you because I value your opinion. I don’t want you to think your voice, your needs, your dreams don’t matter to me. They do. I’m on your team. I have your back. I want to make all your dreams come true. There’s nothing that would make me happier than to shake out every secret wish in that pretty head of yours and turn it into reality.”

“What’s the catch?”

I look down at her with a smile so bright it could make the sun weep. “Full. Security. Detail.”

She groans.

“Ow,” a feeble voice comes from the bed. Joel’s eyes are slightly open.

“Joel, are you in pain?”

“I’ll call the nurse.” I press a button by the bed.

“Clarissa?” Joel croaks.

“I’m here.”

“It feels like,” the teenager winces, “someone cut my chest open.”

I glance at his hospital shirt where, just beneath the fabric, is a nasty gouge. “You had us really scared, kid.”

“Scared why?”

“Your heart stopped.”

“Only that?” Joel moans.

“Only that?” Clarissa echoes, her eyes wide. “You barely made it back to us.”

“But I made it.”

“You’re a miracle,” Clarissa says.

“You shouldn’t have doubted me, but I get it. My biggest skill,” Joel meets my gaze, “is being underestimated.”

I swear, my heart expands to the size of a building.

“Here, let me get you some water,” Clarissa says. She rounds the bed and puts the cup at Joel’s lips.

The kid drinks and then flinches again. “By the way, I think I overheard Cody giving a marriage proposal? Was I having a nightmare?”

“I think you mean ‘dream’,” I say dryly.

“No... I meant nightmare.”

“Yes, I proposed. What about it?” I narrow my eyes.

He glances at Clarissa. “You sure you want to get married to this old man when you could have a young buck like me?”

“You need to stop flirting with her. She’s going to be your new foster mom.”

“Over my dead body.”

“You’re not out of the woods yet, kid. That can easily be arranged.”

“Ehem.” Clarissa interrupts us. “I haven’t said yes.”

My eyebrows crash together.

Joel grins.

“There’s something you need to do first,” Clarissa says with a mischievous smile.

“Name it,” I growl. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to put my ring on her finger.

“Get my mother’s blessing.”



THE FARMHOUSE LADIES take over Joel’s hospital room while we drive to Liandra’s. It’s my first time setting foot in a

women's shelter. This one is decorated cozily, but there's no hiding the wear and tear of both the furniture and the women who inhabit them.

Clarissa's fingers are threaded through mine as she gives me the tour.

"Since mom and I have experience living in a shelter, we tried to incorporate all the amenities we wished we had." Her voice is full of passion and purpose. "Of course, space and resources are limited, but that means we have more opportunities for creativity."

I smile as she talks, drinking her in with every breath. If the last few weeks have shown me anything, it's that Clarissa Maura is way too good for me.

"Oh, there she is." Clarissa brightens. "Mom!"

My grin fades and the nerves take over again.

I've given a thousand pitches. Made multi-million dollar deals. Gone toe-to-toe with business tycoons all over the world.

But this is my most important project yet.

My heart is beating fast.

I hope I don't choke.

"You're here," Liandra says dryly. We haven't spoken since our mad dash to rescue Clarissa. I'd hoped working together would have thawed some of the ice between us.

Given that hard glare, I was wrong.

"Mom, be..."

I expect Ris to say 'nice'.

"... as mean as you want to." Ris gives me a kiss. "I'll go say hi to the ladies."

My jaw drops.

Ris flutters her fingers and waltzes away.

The betrayer.

Liandra sizes me up. “You know how to lay cement?”

“What?”

She leads me outside and points to a half-finished wall. “I need that fence done today. My contractor was dirt-cheap which explains why he ditched before he was done.”

I blink rapidly. It’s a billion degrees today and I’m wearing a full suit.

Liandra sees me hesitating. “You don’t want to?”

“No, ma’am.” I loosen my tie and swing my jacket off. “How high do you want this fence?”

I’m Cody freaking Bolton.

I’ve never laid cement blocks before, but there’s nothing the internet can’t teach me.

I’m almost done when Clarissa pops in to give me another glass of water. “Tired, babe?”

“I could do this all day,” I say, panting.

She brushes the cement dust from my shoulder. “If it makes you feel any better, you look really, *really* sexy right now. All the girls are lined up inside watching you through the window.” When I twist my neck, she says, “Don’t look.”

I set the cup down, wrap my fingers around her waist and drag her closer.

“Cody!” She laughs. “What are you doing?”

“You said we have an audience. Let’s give them a show.”

My lips collide with hers. Ris slings her hand over my waist and melts into me like butter. I don’t even have to pry her mouth open.

With a soft moan, her tongue tangles with mine, her teeth grazing my bottom lip.

I drag my mouth down to her chin and jaw before pulling back with a groan. We’re both breathing hard and it takes me a second to remember how to talk. “You’re getting bolder and bolder, princess. Someone’s been a bad influence on you.”

“I wonder who that bad influence could be?”

“Joel?”

“You’re blaming the child?”

“For a kid with a new heart, he sure has the same old attitude,” I mumble.

“I don’t know. He’s starting to sound and act like you. He’s even interested in studying business when he goes to school.”

“The kid is a natural shark. He conned me out of fifty bucks the other day.”

“Fifty bucks is nothing to you.”

“It’s the principle.”

“Maybe, rather than blaming Joel, you should look inward.”

“Funny,” I growl, sliding my hand over the small of her back where her spine indents.

I give her another quick kiss. She tastes so sweet that I moan softly. “Never change this lip gloss.”

“My lip gloss?”

“You taste like cherries.”

She snorts out a laugh. “It’s wild rose.”

“I don’t care what it says on the tube. I know what cherries are.”

Her smile lights up my entire world. I wish I could stand here staring at her all day, but I have a mission to complete.

“Go.” I nudge her away. “I need to get this wall done and you’re distracting me.”

“I could help.”

I kiss her forehead. “Not gonna happen. Your days of working hard are over, princess. Leave the sweating and grunt work to me.”

“What if I *want* to sweat?” She slides her hand down my chest. “What if I like grunt work?”

Her eyes look like melted chocolate, light brown in the sunlight, and it makes my heart dropkick my ribs.

I want to drag her into a storage closet and tear her jeans off. It takes everything in me not to act like a hormonal teenager with his first crush. But I came here for a reason and I'm not leaving until I get that blessing.

"You'll do plenty of sweating tonight," I promise.

"You better keep your word, Bolton." She blows me a kiss.

This woman.

I watch her walk inside, staring at the hips swaying back and forth like a hypnotic pendulum and then I get back to the wall.

By the time I'm done, my legs are jello and I'm pretty sure I pulled something in my back. Although I'm a gym rat, it feels like I employed a different set of muscles today.

Liandra walks outside while I'm bent over, hands to my knees. At the sound of her footsteps, I straighten.

"I'm... done," I say, trying to sound like it wasn't strenuous at all. "What do you think?"

She scowls at the wall. "It's ugly. The lines are crooked. The tin set is bleeding over so it's messy."

My lips tighten. "I'll hire a professional to do it again."

"Is that all you're good for? Hiring and firing people? You can't do anything yourself?"

"Yes, ma'am. I can."

She tosses a rake at me. "Sweep up all those leaves. And then mow the lawn." Her eyebrows tighten. "You *do* know how to use a lawn mower, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." I wipe the sweat on my forehead with the back of my hand.

Liandra watches me, waiting for a negative response.

I don't give her the satisfaction.

Keeping my expression neutral, I rake the yard with everything I've got and then struggle with the lawn mower. It gurgles to life only to die again.

"I pulled the string," I mutter. "Why isn't it working?"

Clarissa sneaks outside to help me.

"You have to feed the line." She expertly sets it up and the lawn mower roars to life.

"Thanks." I give her another quick kiss.

She returns it with a flirty wink and disappears back inside.

When I'm done with the yard, Liandra puts me to work in an old office.

I complete every task without complaint. The sun is gone and the moon takes over the sky by the time Liandra stalks into the room.

"Not bad," she says, glancing at the files I stacked... in the bookshelf I set up... on the wall I painted.

"I organized it by alphabetical order. The books, I went a little crazy with and organized them by color. Blues. Reds. Yellows. If you want, I could change that and put them in alphabetical order instead."

She eyes me curiously. "You pay attention to details."

"You can't make it in business without doing at least that."

Her eyes glimmer and she hands me a cup of water.

I want to ask if it's poisoned, but I keep that thought to myself.

After taking a sip, I turn to her. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"I know what you want to ask." She folds her arms over her chest.

"Then you know what answer I'm hoping for."

She says nothing.

“Ma’am, I love your daughter. I have for a very long time, and I can’t imagine a future without her. I’d like to ask for her hand in marriage.”

“Love.” She tilts her head to the side. “Love is a word we throw around so casually.”

I hold my breath.

“I know you love her, Cody. But as a mother, I can only do the best to look out for my child. Unfortunately, I don’t trust your version of love.”

My heart pangs. This is not going well.

“You didn’t show up to your first wedding. You left my daughter sobbing in her wedding dress. Do you know how evil you have to be to do that to someone you love?”

I glance down.

“And if I didn’t think you loved her then, maybe I could get over it. The problem is that I believe you loved her in college. I believe you wanted her. But love didn’t keep you from inflicting such deep pain. Even worse, you never came back. You never called her. You left without a word for ten years. You love her, but you were willing to stab her heart to death. If it was your daughter, would you be pleased with a man like that?”

“No, ma’am.” I lick my lips.

“Then you understand why I can never give you my blessing.”

“Ms. Liandra, with all due respect,” I inhale deeply, “I’m not ever giving up on your daughter.”

Her eyebrows rise.

“And I will be back here, every day, begging on my knees if I have to. Clarissa is the most important woman in the world to me. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for her. There is nothing I wouldn’t sacrifice for her. And you’re right. There’s no excuse in the world for what I did on our wedding day. Nothing that would make it okay. All I have is my own unshakeable conviction that she is the one I want to spend the

rest of my life with.” I gesture to the bookshelves. “So you can continue to test me, work me, and do whatever you want until your anger is appeased. I won’t complain. I’ll do it gladly.”

“Oh? Gladly?”

I glance around the space. “I’ve noticed that your rooms could use some updating. And there’s a big backyard with no playground. I want to bring my team here to do some work.”

“You’re trying to bribe me?”

“No, ma’am. Clarissa is my life. And you... you’re her heart. That means whatever is important to you is important to me.”

“You’re still offering to help me even though I said I won’t give you my blessing?”

“I don’t know what one has to do with the other.”

All of a sudden, Liandra’s lips curl up. Is she... smiling at me? It feels like I’m in the Twilight Zone.

“You can come in now,” Liandra calls.

The door creaks open and Ris walks in with a smile like the sun.

“What’s... going on?”

She loops her hand around my waist. “I have a confession to make.”

“Okay...”

“I hired Clay to investigate you.”

My eyes widen. “You did *what?*”

“Your brother is very thorough. It’s no wonder his services are so pricey.” Liandra crosses the room and takes a seat behind her desk. “Clarissa, show him what we got.”

I’m still reeling from shock that my *brother* did an investigation on me.

Clarissa spins a laptop around and shows it to me. “These are your cell phone records from ten years ago.”

“And this,” Liandra drops an old phone on the desk, “is the phone you were using back then.”

My jaw drops. “How did you get this?”

“Like I said, Clay is very thorough.”

I’m not sure if I should thank him or punch him the next time we meet.

“Ten years ago, you sent me a text saying your mother was in the hospital.” Ris’s eyes turn sad. “I’m sorry, Cody. That must have been hard.”

My chest squeezes tight.

“Unfortunately, Rissa never got that message.” Liandra taps on the spacebar and another image comes up. It’s a grainy video of me sneaking into Ris’s old dorm building. “This was taken the day after your wedding. The day after your mother...” She hesitates. “My condolences, Cody.”

I blink, still reeling from being double-crossed by them.

“We have evidence that you did, indeed, come back to see my daughter.”

“I told my mom about what you overheard.” Clarissa’s smile is gentle. “And you made the call that you thought was best for me.”

“That one, I can’t forgive you for.” Liandra gives me a side-eye.

“Mom.”

“What? He heard you were struggling and thought it was best to leave you? What are you? Romeo and Juliet?”

Clarissa approaches me. “Are you mad we looked into you?”

“No. I’m just shocked.” My eyebrows pull together. “Is this why you wanted your mom’s blessing? So you could reveal the result of your investigation?”

“No. I really do want her blessing.”

“But the investigation was my idea. I wanted to see what you were really made of,” Liandra says. “I wanted to see how you react when you get angry because the way you treat me is a reflection of how you’ll treat my daughter. I also wanted to know if you’d make excuses for the past.”

“You passed, Cody,” Ris whispers.

“With flying colors.” Liandra offers her hand to me. “Welcome to the family, Cody. I wouldn’t entrust my daughter to anyone else.”



RIS SITS in the passenger seat, her eyes on me as I drive. Her thumb gently strokes the back of my hand. The wheels of the car hum on the highway. The stench of my sweat is lessened by the sweet smell of her natural hair products.

“I’m not mad.”

“I know when you’re mad. This isn’t it.” She tilts her head. “But I don’t understand this look either.”

I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss each of her fingers. “I’m thinking of how my mom would have reacted if she met you.”

“You never talk about her. Back then and now.”

“Mom wasn’t... the easiest person to get along with.”

“Why?”

I stare at the road ahead of me. “When I was seven, my parents divorced. Dad was a soldier and mom was a stay-at-home wife. She’d built her entire existence around him. When they split, she took me and Clay stayed with my father.”

“You mentioned that once. When we were dating.” She nods.

“What I didn’t tell you is that mom...” I choose my words carefully, “really regretted the choices she’d made.”

“Marrying him?”

“Giving up all her control to him. She became obsessed with ‘regaining her power’. She drilled those lessons into me so I wouldn’t make the same mistake.”

Control or be controlled, Cody.

“That’s why you were so driven,” Ris whispers, putting the pieces together.

I park in front of my building. “The only way to have control is to have power. And the only way middle class people like us with no connections could have power is through—”

“Money.”

I nod.

She tucks her curls over one shoulder. “I had no idea.”

“Clay grew up to be a soldier like dad. But I... I inherited my mother’s fears. When I met you, when I fell in love with you, these two voices were clashing in my head. I wanted to keep myself safe. I wanted to love you recklessly. It was a fight.”

“Is it still a fight?” she asks quietly.

“No.”

Her lips curl up.

I’ll love making her smile until the day I’m in the grave.

“The difference between me and mom is that I’m willing to be used by you. I’m willing to lose. I’m willing to take the chance because the other option is living without you, and that’s not the life I want to live.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Clarissa tilts her head. “The difference between you and your mom is that you chose someone who won’t ever let you lose. Who won’t ever use you. Who won’t ever stop choosing you. Your heart is safe with me, Cody. I’ll keep it right here forever.” She taps her chest. “I promise.”

I squeeze her hand, trusting that she means it.



RATHER THAN TAKE CLARISSA HOME, I bring her up to the rooftop of my building.

“What are we doing up here?” Clarissa asks, gazing out at the city lights.

“I have something for you.” Her eyes widen when I bring out a velvet box and kneel in front of her. “I was going to do this in a helicopter or back at the island but Joel...”

“Is coming home tomorrow and you want to be close.” She smiles. “You’re such a dad.”

“I always wondered why Clay, Alistair and the rest don’t do anything fun with their money. Turns out, having kids seriously cramps your style.”

She laughs. “No, I don’t need an island or a fancy trip. This is perfect.”

“I’m glad you think so.” I crack the box open. “I love you, Clarissa Maura. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Ye—Cody...” Her eyes glisten.

I smile, knowing what that reaction is for.

Clarissa plucks something out of the box. It’s a glittering diamond solitaire, but it’s not the reason for the tears cropping in her eyes.

That honor belongs to the item the ring is placed on.

“My heel,” Clarissa gasps. “How do you have this?”

“I found it the day we bumped into each other in the elevator.”

It feels like just yesterday she was shooting daggers with her eyes while I was trying not to kiss the pants off her in that tiny, cramped space.

“Cody, you should have thrown this away.”

“This heel is worth more to me than the building we’re standing on.” I take her hand and slide the ring off the broken wand. “Because it’s yours.” I slip the ring on her finger. “Clarissa Maura, I don’t care which world you belong to. *You* are my world. And I’d leave mine behind in a heartbeat to be with you.”

She doesn’t say anything, but tears are slipping from her eyes.

“Princess.” I groan and wipe her tears away with the pad of my thumb.

“I love you, Cody. I always have. Always will.”

“Is that a yes?” I ask.

She inhales. “Yes.” Laughingly, she cups my face. “But make sure you show up to the ceremony this time.”

“Honey, the zombie apocalypse couldn’t keep me away.”

She laughs. I close my arms around her and brush my lips to hers. She kisses me passionately. Minutes turn into hours that turn into forever.

When the kiss ends, my heart aches.

What has this woman done to me? I’m completely consumed by her.

Clarissa glances up with a mischievous smile. “Do you have everything ready for Joel to move in tomorrow?”

“That and the adoption papers.”

“He’s going to think you only want to adopt him so he can’t get with me.”

“Even without the papers, he can’t get with you.” I kiss her hair. “You’re spoken for.”

“Speaking of, didn’t you make me a promise today? Because if this is what you meant by making me sweat—”

I sweep her into my arms and walk with her to the elevator. “Let me show you that I’m a man of my word.”

Her eyes fall closed in ecstasy as our lips find each other again.

Our future is sealed with a kiss.

This moment was ten years in the making. And through all the twists and turns, I know one thing for sure. Clarissa Maura was always meant to be my wife.



IT TAKES FOREVER to open the door to my place. Clarissa's lips are locked on mine and her hands are driving me insane. A guttural groan wrenches free as she unbuttons my shirt while still kissing me.

I finally get the door to work and scramble inside.

She pops her lips away, her breathing ragged. "Getting in practice for our wedding day?"

"What?"

"You carried me over the threshold." She gestures to where I'm holding her. "A little eager, are we?"

"You have no idea." I surge against her again.

She starts undressing with a blazing passion. Clothes fall to the floor, dripping a trail that leads to my bedroom.

I throw her on the bed and hear her playful laughter.

This woman.

"I think this is the first time we've used a bed." She sighs as I crawl over her.

"Is it?" I ask, only half concentrating as I grab protection. Then I'm on her again. She's so damn sexy that I can't even form cohesive words.

"What do you have against beds, Cody Bolton?"

"Nothing." With a wolfish grin, I dip my head and drop kisses over her chest. "But they're not always available when I want you."

She moans the way I like and my heart is close to exploding.

“Problem is...” I spread her wide. “I...” My fingers curve under her thigh. “Always.” I position her hips. “Want. You.”

Our bodies collide when our lips do.

Her soft body is taut under my fingers.

Mine is about to detonate. Already.

This woman is my weakness.

I hold on for dear life.

She groans. I think it’s my name. It’s too garbled to understand.

“You’ll be doing that a lot tonight,” I growl, savoring every inch of our closeness.

She arches her hips and electricity splits me in half, a high voltage that nearly drives me to insanity.

I kiss her greedily, all vestiges of control snapping.

The bed creaks like a madman.

I’m starting to think all my furniture need some greasing. First the desk and now my bed. But they’re not as loud as Ris is when she screams my name.

I hiss as her nails scrape down my back. Her curls cling to the sweat on her dark brown cheeks. “No wonder you’ve corrupted me.”

I drop a kiss on her lips, worshiping her sweet curves. Sucking on every sensitive nerve ending I can find. “No matter how corrupt you get, you’ll always be my princess.”

“If I’m your princess,” she gasps, “doesn’t that make you a prince?”

“No.” I arch up. “That makes me the luckiest man in the world.”

My fingers crawl into her hair and I hold her down, listening to her sweet, sensual moans as euphoria rips us both.

That night, we leave a human-sized dent in the mattress.

THE PRINCESS DRESS

CLARISSA

“MOM, don’t cry. If you start, I’ll start and then my bridesmaids will start and I’m going to ruin my makeup,” I hiss.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Mom’s eyes are red. “It just makes me emotional. My baby’s grown up and getting married.”

Vanya hands mom a napkin.

“Oh, thank you.” Mom stuffs it into her purse.

“That’s for you to wipe your eyes, Ms. Maura,” the supermodel points out.

“Honey, this napkin was touched by a celebrity. I’m not going to use it on my face.”

Vanya chuckles.

“Mama.” My bottom lip trembles.

Mom takes my hand. “I love you, Clarissa. You were such a sweet child, so trusting of the world, no matter how tough it was on us. Raising you alone took so much out of me, but I’d do it all over again. I’d fight to keep you. I’d work three jobs. I’d ask for help and bury my pride. It was all worth it to see the beautiful, amazing woman you’ve become.”

I can’t help it.

The tears are on the way.

“Quick. Tilt your head back and blink really fast,” Island says.

“That’s not going to work,” Kenya argues, rubbing her swollen belly. “She should just let it out and do the makeup again.”

“Are you kidding? The wedding is starting in,” Dejonae checks her watch, “two minutes.”

“If she doesn’t show up on time, Cody is going to barge in here with Doberman and Vargas and demand to know where

she is,” Nova agrees.

It’s true. Cody’s gotten a lot... clingier since the showdown with Winifred. I’m barely getting used to the security detail and his overbearing protectiveness isn’t making it easier.

“He’d deserve it. Give him a taste of his own medicine,” mom mutters.

I give her a side eye.

“Just kidding.” She laughs.

Ms. Phoebe waddles forward. “You look beautiful, Clarissa. Cry if you want to.”

“Thanks.” I squeeze the hand of the woman who’s been like a second mother to me.

There’s a knock on the door.

Joel, Abe and Regan walk in.

Regan looks adorable in her little flower dress. She’s clutching a basket of rose petals and her eyes are wide. “Auntie Ris, you look so pretty.”

“Thank you, Regan.” I bend down to kiss her cheek.

“Hey,” Abe says.

“Hey.” I smile brightly at him.

Cody’s quiet nephew hasn’t spoken much to me, but I realize that it takes him a while to warm up to people.

Even so, his eyes are soft when he looks at me. “Uncle Cody’s really happy.”

“So am I.” I touch his head, careful not to mess up his fancy hairdo. Island really is an amazing hairstylist. She managed to turn Abe’s usual floppy mop into a debonair style.

Joel walks over to me.

I feel tears stinging my eyes when I stare into his happy, healthy face. His heartbeat is strong now. I’m always grabbing his hand to test his pulse. Every time I feel the thump against my fingertips, it gets me emotional.

Now that he's no longer using a wheelchair, Joel towers over me.

He leans in to give me a hug and whispers in my ear. "There's still time to run away together."

I swat at him.

He chuckles. "If I have to concede to someone, I'm glad it's Cody."

"You should tell him that. I'm sure it'll mean a lot."

"Nah. I'll let him stew a little more first. Can't let him think I'll go easy on him just because we share the same last name now."

I grin.

Mimi storms into the room, looking amazing in a silver sequined dress. Her eyes cut to my face. She scowls in disapproval. "You were crying."

"One little tear." I cringe, showing her how small the tear was by hovering my fingers apart.

Mimi narrows her eyes. I don't mind her pushiness. Like Cody, that cold exterior covers a warm heart. She's been helping our entrepreneurs at the co-op dress for success. She's also the one who found me this gorgeous mermaid silhouette dress.

"Come, come. No more tears or you'll smudge the eyeliner." She gestures forward in that rough way of hers. "And you. The son." She snaps her fingers at Joel. "Time to go. The groom is ready."

"That's my cue." Joel waves at me.

Regan and Abe stay behind since they're the ring bearer and flower girl.

In the distance, I hear the live orchestra start up.

"Are you ready?" My mother offers her elbow.

"I've been waiting on this day for ten years." I wink. "Let's do this."



THE CEREMONY IS BEAUTIFUL. With the price tag attached, I expected nothing less.

Cody kept his promise to give me the wedding of my dreams—which to me means having all the people I love close. He flew in friends I hadn't seen in years and even paid for their hotel stays so I could have them around me.

In exchange, I made sure to say yes to all the grand, expensive gifts he showered on me.

It's a compromise we wouldn't have been able to make ten years ago.

Looking back, I can agree with Cody and say we weren't ready for marriage. Now, Cody's priority is me. And now, I'm not afraid of his world, of the people who want to judge me for my past, where I come from, and the scars I've earned.

I'm proud to be me.

And I'm proud to be his.

They both co-exist peacefully.

"You may now kiss the bride," the priest announces.

Cody dips me and lays a flaying-hot kiss on my lips that sends all his friends cheering. I feel dizzy when he sets me on my feet again.

"There are kids, sir," I whisper, trembling still.

His lips nip my ear and his hot breath blows over my skin. "Don't test me, princess."

"And what if I do?"

"That dress is not going to last the night."

Heat sweeps through me as I imagine all the ways he's going to ravish me. Cody's right. If we keep flirting, we're not going to make it to his—I mean *our*, according to the deed—private island in Belize.

The music starts and our bridal party dances down the aisle.

Joel blows me a kiss before he takes off too.

Cody gives him a hard stare, but his lips curl up. The two of them were meant for each other. It's uncanny how similar they are.

The reception starts.

I change dresses because both Mimi and Cody are extravagant overspenders and they ganged up on me.

The party starts in earnest. My husband has me sweating on the dance floor.

I'm having fun with all our friends when I see Sazuki motion to Dejonae and whisper in her ear. Dejonae shoots to her feet and rushes out of the room.

Cody sees where my eyes are going and he pulls me closer. "What's wrong, princess?"

"Dejonae looked worried just now."

"Sazuki's with her," Cody says, trying to calm me. "You know how he is. The guy only smiles when she's in the room. He won't let anything happen to her."

"What if it's not her who's in trouble?" I whisper.

Cody takes one look at my face and chuckles. "You can't help it, can you?"

"Help what?"

"Loving people."

I smile. "I love you the most."

"You better." He kisses my lips and then leads me from the dance floor. "Come on."

We sneak through the exits.

"You know," Cody whispers, "when I pictured us sneaking out of our reception, it wasn't to spy on our friends."

"Sh. They'll hear us," I murmur.

We peer into the parking lot where Sazuki, Dejonae, Yaya and another man are standing together.

Glass is everywhere on the ground.

Yaya looks sheepish.

“Dare?” Cody arches a brow.

“Dare?”

“My golfing buddy. We met at a marketing conference and hit it off. He’s not from here though, so we only play a few rounds when he’s in town. He said he wouldn’t make it, but I guess he got here in time for the reception.”

Yaya signs something to Dare.

He looks amused.

“What do you think is going on?”

“I have no idea.” Cody smirks. “But I know my buddy and I know that look.”

“What look?” I crane my neck to see further. “We should get closer. I can’t hear anything.”

“If we get closer, they’ll know we’re spying.”

“Doesn’t that look like shattered glass to you? I think Yaya did something to his car.”

“Come on, princess. Yaya is going to be fine.”

“How do you know that?”

Cody glances at Dare again and smirks. “I know.”

I let him lead me back inside.

When I start to head back to the reception, Cody yanks me the other way.

“Where are we going?”

My husband sends a wicked look over his shoulder. “Now that I’ve got you alone, do you really think I’m going to share you?”

I grin and rush behind him, feeling my adrenaline spike.

We run parallel to a long glass mirror.

I see myself in my wedding dress. Him in his tux.

And then the image changes.

For a moment, I glimpse the couple we were in college.

A much younger Cody. A more naive Clarissa. Running hand in hand through the quad, so sure that love would be enough to conquer all.

I grin at them.

So young.

So innocent.

I love them for their youthful passion, their big, grand emotions that they feel so deeply.

But it's not their time.

It's ours now.

I glance up at Cody.

My husband.

The man I married.

And I laugh when he sweeps me into his arms and plants a kiss on my lips.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you.” I run a hand down the side of his face. “Now shut up and kiss me.”

He kicks the door open and hovers his lips over mine. “Yes, ma'am.”



Thank you for reading *The Re-Proposal*. Curious about Kenya and Alistair's romance? **GRUMPY ROMANCE** is their enemies-to-lovers story.

[Read GRUMPY ROMANCE here](#)

Want an exclusive deleted scene with Clarissa, Cody and Joel? [Grab THE RE-PROPOSAL deleted scene here.](#)

GRUMPY ROMANCE

EXCERPT

GRUMPY ROMANCE CHAPTER ONE

Kenya

I KNOW something's off when I walk into my apartment.

Our apartment.

Mine and Drake's.

The air smells stale, like none of the windows have been opened all weekend. The clock's broken too. The hands are exactly on twelve fifteen.

I feel like I'm frozen in time.

It's creepy.

I tighten my fingers on the sparkly yellow suitcase rattling behind me. The luggage doesn't exactly scream 'ambitious pencil pusher crawling up the corporate ladder', but the long and pretentious title applies to me. Even if no one acknowledges it.

It's seven o'clock on Monday morning and I just returned from my first business trip.

The woman who was *supposed* to attend the workshop caught chickenpox.

Sad for her.

Wonderful for me.

Somehow, I got an amazing opportunity to prove myself as a competent, knowledgeable member of the team.

And I aced it.

My reward? Aches and pains from being cramped in economy next to a bodybuilder and his chatty manager. And a generous offer to come into work one hour later than usual.

Hurrah.

I shuffle deeper into the apartment.

My feet protest.

The past forty-eight hours, I've been marching up and down a well-lit conference room, speaking to Belle's Beauty sales reps about my top ten secrets for customer acquisition.

It's not like I'm an expert, but I do have experience. I've worked a variety of sales positions since high school. From what I've learned, people just want to feel seen. Heard. Valued. It's not that complicated.

Sure, there are a few pretentious customers who complain over nothing and ruin it for everybody. And those customers suck. But for the most part, people are good. I genuinely believe that.

I let the yellow suitcase bang to the ground.

The broken clock keeps staring at me.

It feels like a bad omen.

I pretend it's not there and pad to the bedroom, falling into the twin mattress. My hand automatically slides to Drake's side of the bed. It's cold.

Eyebrows wrinkling, I sniff.

The sheets still smell like my favorite detergent.

Weird.

Drake has a particular cologne that gets on everything. I had to change to a different laundry method to get that fresh scent I like.

Did he not sleep in our bed all weekend? I crawl out of the bed and stare at the rumpled blanket like it's an alien species. At that moment, my screen lights up with a call from my stepmom.

I pick it up. "Hey, Felice."

"Sweetheart, you're up. Perfect." Felice's voice is as breezy and whimsical as her personality. "Could you do me a huge favor and go check on your sister? She hasn't been answering any of my calls this weekend. I'm worried."

I jerk my attention away from the bed, my body on high alert. "Is she okay? Did she relapse? What did the doctors

say?”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” Felice says.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Her last check up was good. No sign of the cancer coming back. As long as she keeps going in routinely, we’ll be fine.”

“That’s good,” I mutter, but my heart is still beating fast. I suck in a deep breath. Sasha’s okay. Everything’s okay. Everything’s *great*.

“When you visit, can you pick up strawberries from the farmer’s market? The ones she likes?”

“Uh...” I stare with bleary eyes at the grey clouds and drizzling rain.

“And make sure you get the grapes too. Get seedless, alright? It’s better for her digestion.”

A familiar rebellion rises inside me, but I tamp it down.

This is about my sister. Not about me.

I paste a tired smile on my face, although Felice can’t see. “Of course.”

“I’m worried she won’t eat well now that she’s got her own place.”

“Sasha’s not going to starve herself.”

“I’m still anxious. I hate that she moved four hours away. The only thing that makes me sleep at night is that she’s living close to you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“You’re such a good sister, Kenya. In fact, people think you two are blood-related, you know. I tell them you and Sasha might as well be.”

My chuckle is short but genuine. I met Sasha when she was thirteen and I was fifteen. My dad married her mom and we moved in together. She used to follow me around everywhere. It was kind of adorable.

“How are things with you and Drake?” Felice asks.

I drag myself to the closet and pull out a thick jacket along with a cute red dress. It’s a bit over-done for work, but I haven’t seen Drake all weekend.

We’ve exchanged a couple texts and one phone call, but it only made me miss him more. I want his jaw to drop when we meet up later. That’s the only acceptable expression.

“We’re good. He’s super excited about a promotion at work.” Thank God. I barely saw him at home when he was competing for that position.

“When are you two getting married?” Felice asks, a teasing edge to her tone.

Anticipation makes my heart slam against my ribs. I try to keep it out of my voice. “Oh, we’re not in a rush.”

“Sweetheart, what’s the hold-up? You and Drake have been together for what? Three years now?”

“Yeah. We met my second year of college.” It was like something out of a movie. The dashing basketball jock. The shy, Lit major. A romance no one saw coming. Hallmark will call to make a movie about our love story, I’m sure.

“See? That’s more than enough time to put a ring on it.”

I sit on the edge of the bed and pull out my adorable ankle-high boots. “When we’re both ready, it’ll happen.”

“Alright, I know a brush-off when I hear one.”

I laugh.

“Give Sasha a kiss for me, sweetheart. And tell her to answer the damn phone when I call.”

“I will, Felice.”

The line goes dead.

My plans of getting a few hours of extra sleep derailed, I shower and dress for the day. As I hop out of my steaming bathroom, the odd *something’s not right* feeling passes through me again.

I freeze.

Walk back.

Stare at the tiny sink where Drake and I keep our toothbrushes.

His favorite face care products are gone. That man moisturizes like he's allergic to dry skin. I've never seen him run out.

My heart flip flops.

I notice his toothbrush is still there. So are his prized signed basketball jerseys. He wouldn't leave without taking those.

Calling Drake's phone leads me to voicemail.

The uneasy feeling doubles.

Something's weird about today.

The bed dips as I sink into the edge of it. I haul the ankle boots on, grab my purse from the closet and stalk past the mirror.

My harried reflection reveals a dark-skinned woman with a deep crease between her eyebrows, a flared nose, and frizzy black hair. I threw my coils into a bun because I don't have the time or the patience to wash it.

Whenever my hair gets attention, it's a twelve-hour affair. There's deep conditioning. Sectioning. Shampoo. Conditioner. De-tangling. The styling part is another six hours. Whoever said natural hair was easier than relaxed hair owes me an apology.

Once outside, I take a deep breath and smile at the earthy scent of rain. The clouds are grey and the sky is angry, but it doesn't scare me. The city is getting a much needed rinse-down.

All is well.

As I walk to the bus stop, I tell myself I'm being ridiculous.

A broken clock is a broken clock.

And maybe Drake ran out of his favorite products. That explains why they're missing from the counter.

I'm exhausted and overthinking everything.

Drake's been an amazing boyfriend.

And I'm an amazing employee.

I should be celebrating. I *know* I impressed the higher-ups with my sales performance or they wouldn't have invited me to HQ. After only a few months fetching coffee and feeling like I was dating the printer, they tapped me into the business meeting.

That means I'm being noticed.

Is that a coincidence?

No way.

Not even close.

When I worked in the department store, I stole the crown of 'Employee of the Month' three times straight. I know how to draw people in. Now that I'm a temp at Belle's Beauty HQ, I've been using every opportunity to prove I'm a hard worker.

Yeah, my Lit degree is gathering dust while I head in a completely new direction, but student loans don't really care if I'm following my dreams. I love food too much to be a starving artist.

What's important is that I'm no longer traipsing from one temp gig to another. It looks like I'm on the road to a permanent position.

Good things—no, *great* things are going to happen for me.

I catch the bus to the farmer's market and absorb the cacophony of activity. Baskets of fresh fruits delight the eyes. Flowers, paintings and old antiques are everywhere. Customers haggle over prices. Crowds jostle for warm coffee.

I'm in serious need of java, but I get the strawberries and grapes first. It doesn't take me long to make the purchase and I

reward myself with a cup.

I slurp loudly and ignorantly. An old man gives me a dirty look, but I forgive him because he's probably not gotten his coffee yet and even I hate people before that first sip.

The coffee keeps me company while I catch a bus to Sasha's apartment.

So far, the rain still hasn't let up.

Not a problem.

My umbrella's handy right here.

When I finally stumble into Sasha's building, I'm wide awake thanks to the mad dash from the bus stop to her front door. Shaking my umbrella to rid some of the water, I twist it tightly and lock it.

It makes a click when it hits the floor and I smile. Using the umbrella as a cane and channeling my inner gangster, I swagger to Sasha's front door and tap my knuckles against it.

No response.

"Hey, Sash! You home?"

From inside, I hear a faint groaning sound.

Panic overtakes me. Is Sasha hurt? Did she faint and hit her head against the tub? Do I need to call an ambulance? What if her cancer came back?

Dropping the act, I shove my hand into my giant purse and search for the spare keys Felicia slipped me when Sasha moved to the city.

My fingers shake and the keys jangle noisily, protesting my lack of coordination. Why do I always shake like an addict going cold turkey in times of crisis?

With a deep breath, I steady my fingers and stick the key into the lock.

There.

Open.

I desperately crash through Sasha's front door and barrel into the living room. My eyes skate across the overly girly decor—fuzzy pink pillows in a soft purple couch, funky beaded chandelier, fuzzy orange rug.

Sasha fancies herself an Elle Woods aficionado and her apartment reflects that. It's a little outrageous. A little cutesy. Very endearing even if it's hard to understand.

I swivel directions and head toward her bedroom.

Then I smell it.

That...

It's Drake's cologne.

I'd be able to pick it out in a crowd because I'm the one who got him his first set. He loves it and douses it on liberally wherever he goes.

My fingers tighten on the bag of strawberries and grapes. The rustling sound is soft, like the wind rushing through the trees, but the groaning that comes from Sasha's room is loud. And breathy. And way too low to be a sign of pain.

It finally dawns on me.

What I heard outside—the sound that made me barge into my sister's place uninvited—was not an '*I've fallen and I can't get up*' groan. It was something else. Something a lot more... private.

I take a step back, heat burning my face. My sister is an adult, so it shouldn't surprise me that she's getting certain... itches scratched. But I still remember her as the scrawny tween who wanted to be everywhere I was. It's hard to reconcile what I knew of her to that of an adult who can...

She's breathing hard.

Must be nice.

I should go. Maybe I'll call Drake and find out where he is. See if we can meet up to get our own time in. A weekend apart was long enough to go without holding him.

"You like that, baby?"

I freeze.

All of me goes cold.

Every. Single. Part.

Why did that voice sound like my boyfriend of three years?

I swear I have an out of body experience while I desperately try to make sense of everything my brain is throwing at me.

It can't be Drake. Even though it's the very same timbre. The very same growl. The very same husk that he uses when we're loving on each other.

It's not him.

Maybe it's his brother? Maybe it's a close relative? Or an impersonator?

People are into all kinds of crazy things these days. Impersonators aren't the weirdest...

Who am I kidding?

Stretching one foot in front of the other, I approach Sasha's bedroom door like one of those blondes in a horror movie.

The little voice in my head is screaming at me the way I scream at the TV.

What are you doing, you idiot? Don't you dare go into that room. What the hell are you opening the door for? Are you stupid? Do you want to die? See, this is why black people can't be in horror movies. We'd run at the first sign of danger.

But I keep walking.

Turns out, running straight toward death might not be a black or white thing.

It might be a 'person in a horror movie' thing.

Because even though I'm scared of what I might see, I can't stop walking toward the door. Can't stop the curiosity and the dread twining in my veins. Can't stop the pounding in my head that urges me to keep going even if it hurts.

I have to see.

Have to know.

I push the door with my hand.

It opens slowly.

Oh.

Oh, my go—

The bag of fruits falls out of my hand.

Grapes and strawberries roll through the room, scattering like teardrops on the floor.

I gasp, terrified by the sight of my sister on top of my boyfriend. I can't see what body parts are sticking into each other because a blanket is draped over their hips, but I can guess by the way they're moving that they're not exactly praying under there.

“Yes,” Sasha is bawling. “*Drake...*”

Drake?

Heart pounding at the confirmation, I twitch. The next thing I know, the umbrella is gone from my hand. I see it sailing through the air as if I'm not really connected to my body. As if I'm having some kind of trippy dream.

The umbrella slams Sasha square in the middle of her tan back.

She curses and goes sprawling down on Drake's chest.

He makes a garbled sound of distress as she crashes into him.

The angle must have been painful.

I hope she broke it.

I hope he can never have kids because of it.

“The hell?” Sasha flings her hand and presses it to her back. Her neck twists next and her head whips around.

That's when our gazes collide.

Deafening silence fills the room as she stares at me.

It's funny the way horror crawls over her expression.

If it wasn't my sister and my boyfriend—

If it wasn't *my* life—

It would be almost satisfying to see that split second of *oh damn, I got caught* slip into her eyes.

But it is my boyfriend.

And it is my sister.

In bed.

Together.

'Making the beast with two backs', as Shakespeare would say.

My hands start shaking again.

Hell.

Holy crap.

This can't be happening.

"Kenya!" Sasha gasps, grabbing for the blankets and covering herself. Her long, straight black hair curtains half her face. Big brown eyes, soft and soulful like her Mexican grandmother, dart to the ground.

"Kenya?"

That voice belongs to my boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend as of now.

Drake pokes his head up from where it had been resting on Sasha's fuchsia-pink pillow. He's sweating a little. I guess he was putting in some work.

His jaw is square. His beard is long, full, and perfectly lined. He's got big brown eyes and a sharp set of cheekbones.

Chocolate perfection.

It hurts.

Damn.

The whites of his eyes threaten to overtake everything else as he stares at me like he wants to climb under a rock.

Pain rattles through my chest.

I can't breathe.

I can't freaking think.

Flight or fight?

The instincts roar inside my head. Should I grab the umbrella and go mad? Should I offer my sister and jerk of an ex-boyfriend a lashing they'll never forget?

"Kenya, I can explain," Sasha says, her voice tight.

All at once, I'm too overwhelmed to keep standing there in a room that smells like sweat and lovemaking.

I need out.

I need air.

I pump my arms and try to run, but my heels catch on the shag rug at the foot of the bed, tripping me up. My arms flail. I wobble in an attempt to keep upright, but I step on a grape instead and it upends me further.

I fall hard, landing on my elbows. My bones rattle and a physical pain jangles my fingers all the way up to my shoulder. I come nose to nose with Sasha's lingerie that was, apparently, discarded right along with Drake's boxers.

Tears fill my eyes, but I forbid myself from crying.

"Kenya, are you okay?"

Wow, my sister sounds like she actually cares.

That's ironic, isn't it? Not only that she's concerned about my fall but that she thinks I could be okay right now?

Who in their right mind would be okay in this scenario?

My sister and boyfriend are screwing each other.

And I just fell hard on my face.

I'm freaking *peachy!*

Scrambling to my hands and knees, I push myself up and throw myself at the door.

"Kenya, wait!" I hear cloth rustling and footsteps pattering the ground behind me.

All of a sudden, this *is* a horror movie.

Except there's no guy in a mask with a chainsaw.

There's no clown peeping at me from the sewage pipes.

There's no possessed doll rising from my collection with an evil sneer.

I'm being chased by my naked sister, a white sheet trailing behind her. She doesn't have a knife. Because she already slammed it straight into my heart.

I'm the one bleeding.

I'm the one fighting to survive.

"Kenya, please! Wait a minute!"

I power through the living room without looking back.

There's a picture of our family on the television stand. There's dad, his shorn hair and dark face beaming at the camera. There's Felice, her tan skin, bright brown eyes and warm smile catching all the light. And then there's me and Sasha.

I've got my arms around her. My hair is kinky curly while hers is long and straight. My skin is dark while hers is a sun-kissed tan.

Different. But the same.

Sisters.

Not by blood but by choice.

I charge down the stairs and crash through the exits.

My mouth is open.

Big gulps.

I'm out in the street and people give me funny looks while I race past them. A dark-skinned teenager sees me running and he takes off too, needing no explanation other than that a fellow sister is on the move.

I want to tell him it's okay.

I'm not running from thugs.

I'm running from family.

Isn't that nice?

A glance over my shoulder reveals Sasha has given up the chase.

My phone rings.

It's Walt from work.

"You need to come in now," Walt says without so much as a greeting.

I stare unseeingly at the horizon, the cell phone to my ear.

My arms hurt.

My head.

My heart.

"Do you hear me, Kenya? Someone very important is visiting today and you need to be here to—"

"I understand."

He makes a choked sound and probably wants to scold me, but I don't give him the chance. I hang up on him and drift to the bus stop, my eyes on the ground and my body extremely numb.

The world passes me by and I don't really register a thing. Somehow, I get on a bus and get off on the right stop.

The moment I walk into Belle's Beauty HQ, I wish I'd just gone home. Walt is standing guard at the front desk, his eyes squinting at me like I ran over his dog.

Not a great addition to my day, but it's too late to whirl around and head home. He's caught me.

Walt frowns. “You’re late, Kenya.”

My nostrils flare. Usually, I wouldn’t say a thing. After so many years of working under annoying bosses, I’ve trained myself to keep my sharp comments at bay. Plus, this job pays much better than when I was working in the store. I’m not in a hurry to lose it.

But the image of my sister and boyfriend together is tattooed behind my eyelids and I’m a little short on patience.

Walt wags a finger in my face. “Do you think you can slack off without repercussions? This isn’t a playground! I expect more from you!”

“You’re the one who told me I could come in an hour later,” I snap.

Walt blinks rapidly, his thick cheeks swelling as he gives me an astonished look.

I glare right back at him.

He turns a bright shade of red. “Check your attitude, young lady. You had our very important guest waiting for an hour and —”

“That’s enough, Walt.”

My eyes lift to the man stalking around the corner.

My heart trips over itself.

Holy Fitzwilliam Darcy.

It’s too horrible a day for a man so *fine* to descend from Mount Olympus.

Over six feet of chiseled muscle strains beneath an Italian suit that probably costs as much as three student loan payments combined.

The sharpness of his chin, divine.

Thick brown hair like a shampoo commercial.

The slashing eyebrows, well-groomed beard, and cut of his cheekbones all whisper he’s as dangerous as his *do anything to annoy me and I will end you* scowl insinuates.

What makes me *almost* forget about my awful morning, though, are those eyes.

Sure, they're hazel, but to call them a 'pretty brown' or 'amber' or even 'unique' would be a gross letdown of the English language.

His golden-toned eyes are sunbursts, thrumming with a cold, lashing energy. Still so riveting, it's impossible not to draw close to the fire even though you know it'll burn and probably even kill you.

His gaze sends an instant thrill down my spine and my whole body tightens. My toes curl inside my rain-drenched ankle boots. I feel like I've just been electrocuted.

He... he has to be the new spokesmodel for the company, right? There were talks of expanding the product line into men's care.

"*This* is the sales associate who attended the workshop?" Hercules frowns. His expression lingers on me, making it hard to keep my balance. One eyebrow arches higher than the other as if I'm expected to curtsy or kiss his hand.

Are all men this obnoxious?

I fold my arms over my chest and meet the jerkface's stare head-on. Running out the door with my tail between my legs is only going to happen once today.

Once.

His regard turns even icier.

If I were a little more like myself, I would have glanced down to check if my zipper were open or if I had something on my face. But I'm not in my right mind at the moment.

I'm delirious with hurt and fury.

And he so happens to be the closest and most deserving target.

"It's impolite to stare," I snap.

Walt's eyes widen.

The stranger shifts his feral gaze away from me and locks it on the chubby manager. “*This is her?*”

Walt bobs his head.

Stroking his chin, the cold stranger returns his glare to me and watches with a clenched jaw.

I frown. “Can I help you?”

Walt stares up at the man like he owes the guy money. “Why don’t you rest in my office, sir? I’ll send Kenya to get you a cup of coffee before we talk.”

My jaw drops and an astonished laugh pops out of it.

I’m a doormat.

A freaking doormat.

It must be tattooed on my forehead.

Total Push-over. Can Screw Boyfriend.

Not that I think Mr. Grumpy Pants would *want* my boyfriend. He strikes me as the type who’s so self-absorbed he’s evolved beyond human dating. I can see him looking into mirrors, sweet-talking an electronic version of himself. The jerk.

Why Walt is working his butt off to please this guy is not my concern. But dragging me into the ridiculous power play in order to stroke an attractive stranger’s ego? Yeah, I’m not going to be a part of that.

Walt makes a slight hand gesture, shooing me away.

I fold my arms over my chest. “Fetching coffee is not in my job description.”

Walt’s eyes widen. “Kenya.”

“You’re going beyond your boundaries, Walt. And I’m not going to take it.”

His jaw drops.

I don’t care. “I’m here early even though you gave me an hour off today. And I didn’t complain about that,” I speak calmly, but I can hear my voice start to climb. “Even though

I've been working all weekend and I *deserve* a full day off, I took the crumbs you threw at me and didn't complain."

Shut up, Kenya. The little voice in my head chirps. *You need this job. You have bills to pay. And now that you're breaking up with Drake, you'll need to find somewhere else to live. You might have to pay more rent. It's not the time to act brave.*

But I keep seeing Drake and Sasha in bed and the acid keeps pouring out of my mouth.

"If you're asking me for a favor, I'll consider it, but bossing me around is not going to fly here."

The hot stranger continues with his grumpy stare-down. It's strange. Tucked behind his frigid stare is an undeniable assessment. And it's aimed at me.

I stare into his annoyingly gorgeous face and dig my fingers into my purse. This time, I'm too nervous to hold my ground. Butterflies take flight in my stomach and make it impossible not to feel flustered.

He holds a big hand up and points it directly at me. "How long has she been working here?"

I grit my teeth, annoyed by the fact that he's talking about me when I'm standing right there.

Walt makes a motion with his hands. "She just started about three months ago? Previously, she was working in a store, but she was responsible for so many sales at the product relaunch that we brought her into HQ on probation."

"Hm." The stranger glances at me again. "She's the one who tripled sales? With this attitude?"

I want to slap his face.

Who does this guy think he is? My father?

He should try getting cheated on and betrayed by his sister. Maybe he'll have a smiley disposition and higher BS tolerance.

You need this job, Kenya.

My mouth doesn't seem to be in agreement with my brain.
"Do you know how disrespectful you're being right now?"

Hot Grump blinks rapidly. "Me?"

Read my lips, Neanderthal. "If you have any questions, you can direct them to me."

"I have nothing to say to you."

My blood boils.

Of course he's a giant prick.

Of course.

Because today seems like the day where men turn out their skins and show their real, worst selves to me.

At least the rose-colored glasses have been stripped from my eyes.

Walt is capering behind the stranger, shaking his head 'no' and motioning for me to zip my lips.

Really? You want me to cram it shut when this guy who doesn't even know me is being mega disrespectful?

With a snort, I stand my ground. If looks could kill, there would be a mushroom cloud where this rude, pretentious, wickedly handsome jerk is standing.

"K-Kenya, why don't you calm down and come with me?"
Walt mumbles.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." I give the jerk a floppy wave. "I'm here to work, so if you'll excuse me..."

"Freeze."

I go still. Not because the stranger's command is that powerful—which it kind of is—but because I can't believe he just said that.

Freeze? As if we're playing cops and robbers and you're the hero who came to save the day? Is this narcissist for real? Does he think he's my boss or something?

Before I can string all the colorful four-letter words in my mind together and fling them at him like an atomic bomb, the

stranger stomps closer to me.

“You’re going to pack up your things and you’re going to HR.” His voice is as delicious as his face, but the words...

I meet his eyes and frown. Can he do that? He can’t, right?

Confusion descends as I try to figure out what’s going on. It’s a challenge to keep my wits about me given how close his stupidly gorgeous face is to mine.

My inquiring gaze shifts to Walt.

He swallows and glances down, shaking his head as if I dug my own coffin and he’s not going to help me out of it.

“Didn’t you hear me?” The stranger growls. The sound is almost barbaric.

I blink, shocked at his tone. It’s only a momentary pause. Anger surges forward again. I still have some choice words lined up for him, but before I can push those suckers out, he folds his arms over his chest and his brows plunge together in a pointy V.

You know... I’m starting to think he didn’t *descend* from Olympus. He was probably kicked out because of his heartless behavior.

“Who are you to tell me where I can and can’t go?” I snap.

He looks astonished again. “How did you get this far being so unlikeable?”

Me? I’m the unlikeable one?

“How dare you,” I scowl. “You don’t know me. I bet you wouldn’t last one day in my shoes. I bet,” I give him a once-over, “you’ve never had to work a day in your life. And with that pretty face, people don’t say no to you. Well, I’ll be the first. I don’t care how important you think you are, I’m not going to bow to you just because you snarl at me.”

“Kenya. Stop it. *Stop* it.” Walt prances to me and grabs my hand like I’m a red-zone Pit bull jerking on the chain.

“Let me go!”

Walt points to the stranger. “This is Holland Alistair.”

“I don’t give a—”

“Our boss.”

“Boss?” All the fight leaves my body at once.

“He’s the owner of Belle’s Beauty.”

Boss.

Colossal Prick is the owner of the beauty label.

That doesn’t make sense. He doesn’t look like someone who cares about organic skin care products. Did he inherit this business? Or is Walt playing a joke on me?

“Why didn’t you just say that?” I hiss, horrified.

Mr. Alistair turns away from me. “Take her to HR.”

“Yes, sir.”

I stare at his back as Alistair walks down the hallway. The view from behind is just as good as the front.

Too bad that knowledge is going to cost me.

Alistair’s tone remains arrogant as he calls over his shoulder. “Ms. Jones, pack up *all* your things.”

I see the full picture in an instant.

And it’s not looking pretty.

Pathetic Girl: 0

Massive Jerkface: 1

Walt gives me a *sucks to be you* look.

I return it with a scowl and then point my glare at the brute. If I had my umbrella with me, I would have let it fly at his back. For sure.

What a wonderful day.

My boyfriend betrayed me, my sister stabbed me in the back and now I’m about to lose my job.

I can’t go any lower than this.

My eyes slide around the room for something I can throw. It would be satisfying to hit him just once. At least I can get free housing and three meals a day in prison.

“I’m sorry, Kenya,” Walt whispers, grabbing my arm.

Sorry? He’s sorry? How does that help me now?

“You heard him, you need to pack your things and report to HR.”

As Walt ushers me off on the walk of shame, I can’t resist tossing a dark look over my shoulder. The prick, Alistair, is turning back too. He’s watching me with an assessing look that I can’t quite interpret.

He doesn’t seem confused or annoyed anymore.

It’s more like he’s... grudgingly intrigued.

Maybe he’s the kind of sadist who gets off on hiding his identity and axing innocent employees when they don’t recognize him.

The most annoying part of this whole thing is, even after his insufferable behavior, he’s still gorgeous. Or maybe I’m just delirious from all the horrible things that have happened today.

I need to go home and lie down. Wait, I don’t have a home to lie down in because I’m moving out of Drake’s apartment.

My steps are heavy when I follow Walt to HR.

I will *not* allow Mr. Giant Ego or Drake or even my sister to keep me down.

I’m going to show them all that I’m stronger than they ever thought I was.

And no amount of betrayal or icy hazel eyes will stop me.



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