



“Sexy, smart, and fiercely feminist.”
—Helen Hoang, author of *The Kiss Quotient*



Ruby Barrett

HOT COPY

RUBY BARRETT



To Lumps. I wish I had the knack
for funny poems like you.
Will you accept these words instead?
I love you.

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Chapter 1: Wesley

This elevator is sweltering. Or maybe it's just the combination of my nerves and this suit that's making me feel like the air is thick enough to choke on. I tug at my tie. After two years of wearing nothing but jeans and T-shirts, the silk feels like a noose. The only piece of clothing I am comfortable in are my socks.

I stand shoulder to shoulder with a guy almost my height, in a similar suit and tie. Though his looks much more expensive and he seems more at home in it. His blond hair and Rolex glare under the fluorescents. The volume on his phone is turned up so loud I can hear his horrible taste in music clearly through the earbuds.

"Hold the elevator!" a woman calls as the doors start to roll closed.

I step forward, pressing my hand to one side of the sliding doors as she darts in. Her head is down, her thumb scrolling quickly across her phone's screen.

"What floor?" I ask, but she doesn't respond, instead tapping the toe of her high-heeled shoe in a metallic rhythm. She sighs audibly, shaking her head at the screen. I shrug and step back again.

"You part of the Hill City internship?" Bad Music Guy pulls an earbud out. The tinny sound of his music fills the small space. What I wouldn't give for the dulcet tones of the Beastie Boys' mid-'90s discography so I could avoid conversation with him. I was such a nervous wreck this morning I forgot my earphones on my bedside table.

I nod and hold out my hand. "Wesley Chambers."

"Mark." He smiles wide, showing all his teeth. Like a chimpanzee. "Who's your mentor?"

My father's friend Richard Skyler is the CEO of Hill City Marketing & PR, one of Boston's premier agencies. Dad considered his paternal duties fulfilled when he got me a spot in this program two years ago. After that, it was back to sporadic emails and missed birthdays. I'm not mad at him, though. My father is just a dick. He can't be fixed.

Luckily, his buddy Richard isn't an incurable phallus.

"Uhhh." I scratch the back of my neck, stalling for time. "I actually interviewed for this internship two years ago and I was going to be working

with Richard? The CEO? But..." I clear my throat. Sneak a peek at Mark. The sharp edge of his smile assures me that I will not explain the past two years of my life to *this* guy.

"But I had to defer it," I say. "So, now I have to work with Corrine Blunt." I can't keep the dismay from my voice.

I'd met Richard Skyler when I was a kid and he'd remained friends with my parents until their divorce. When I interviewed for the program, Richard and I got along like old buds. And when I had to decline his offer of mentorship to take care of my mom, Richard promised me a spot when I was ready. And he kept in touch: emails, even the occasional phone call.

"Honestly, I'd assumed Richard would be my mentor again. But...it didn't work out."

I rock back on my heels, surprised by how disappointed I feel in this moment. The woman is a powerhouse, after all: graduated with an MBA from Boston College at twenty-four. At thirty years old, she's one of the youngest executives at Hill City Marketing & PR and the only woman in the executive suites. She's won countless awards for her marketing campaigns and was Richard's protégé in the first Hill City mentorship program years ago.

Plus, I know I'm not supposed to think about my boss this way, but it's not the worst thing that she's pretty. In her picture on the website she sported a bouncy, dark bob and a bright smile. She seemed happy and welcoming and young, like whatever they mean when they say "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed." I'd felt an affinity with her immediately. I shouldn't complain about having to spend a whole year working with her. In truth, I'm excited, if not mildly intimidated.

I open my mouth to admit that but bite my tongue when Mark says, too loud in this small space, "*Dude*, your mentor is Corrine Blunt?"

I rub my hand over my closed mouth and wince through a nod.

"The lady boss?" Mark laughs, and the cruel sound sends a shiver up the back of my neck. I've been the subject of a laugh like that before.

"You know what they call her, right?"

I stifle a cough and avoid his gaze, staring at my fuzzy reflection in the chrome elevator doors, at the digital numbers counting our ascent. I look anywhere but at this asshole. My eyes finally come to rest on the back of the woman standing in front of me. She stares up at the numbers as well. Her neck is long and elegant. The red temples of her glasses hooked around her

ears are the only pop of color on her otherwise crisp black outfit. The scent of coconut wafts from her long, dark hair, pulled up into an intricate, tight bun, not a single strand out of place. It looks painful, to be honest.

She's wearing a black blazer and the type of skirt that makes a woman's ass look spectacular. And the blazer has that ruffle thing around the waist. "Peplum, Wes," Amy's voice echoes in my head, tinged with frustration at the number of times she's had to repeat an irrelevant fashion-related fact to me.

"Wes, my man, you're in for quite a year," Mark says, as if I haven't ignored him for the past thirty seconds. The elevator dings our arrival on the Hill City floor and the woman walks down the hall, her head lowered over her phone again.

"My frat brother Sean got an internship here and worked with her. He coined her nickname: Blunt the Cu—"

I make a spluttering sound. A combination of *no* and *what* and *stop* that comes out sounding like, "Nuhwst." I don't need him to finish his sentence to know what he was about to say.

"Look, buddy," I say, and a shocked, stilted laugh tumbles out of my mouth before I can close it. Relief that she didn't hear him washes over me. "Can you *not* say that word?" I hiss into the empty hallway.

Mark throws his head back and laughs, the sound booming down the halls, solidifying exactly how much I don't like him. He grabs my shoulder, shaking me roughly. "Oh my god, Chambers. You're precious."

* * *

All the interns gather for a breakfast meet and greet in one of the conference rooms. I lean against a wall with a plate of fruit and a mini chocolate chip muffin, chasing a piece of melon around with my plastic fork. Everyone here seems to know everyone else. They're fresh from the same graduating class and it shows in their excitement, the overlapping convocation stories. After two years, my own graduation is a distant, hazy memory. I've launched a few smiles at some fellow interns, but mostly I eat my complimentary breakfast alone, watching people avoid eye contact with me.

While I've grown into my legs, feet, and hands and gotten better at shooting the shit with the guys, I still feel like the sore thumb in any crowd. Amy calls it Ugly Duckling Syndrome. I call it being lucky a twin is a built-

in best friend.

The piece of melon slips off my plate and bounces off my shoe. I hike up my pants to stoop down to get it and when I rise, Mark stands in front of me.

“Come on, bro. Let’s mingle.”

By mingle, Mark means hit heavily on the only women of color in the room, two interns from Finance. Marisol, a Northeastern grad from Pennsylvania, ignores us for her phone. But the one Mark lays it on thick for is clearly uncomfortable with the attention. With every one of his jokes, Abila’s smiles morph into cringes. Her shoulders inch toward her ears when his hand brushes her arm. He stares at her chest and she pulls her cardigan together. I open my mouth. Close it again. If Amy were here, she’d let fly with some asshole-puckering swear words. If my best friend, Jeremy Chen, were here, he’d find a calm way to explain to Mark why his behavior was inappropriate.

I’m just afraid that if I open my mouth to do either, another nervous laugh will end up escaping, especially if Abila has it in hand. I catch her eye, lifting a brow. She rolls her eyes, shaking her head.

“I’m...going to get another coffee,” she announces, earning a glare from Mark for interrupting his story of “epic drunken debauchery.” “Please don’t follow me,” she says, her voice laced with quiet disdain.

“Christ, uptight much?” he mutters.

Or maybe she didn’t feel like being sexually harassed on her first day, Mark.

Mark’s elbow digs into my ribs, spilling my, luckily, lukewarm coffee. I pat at my hand with a napkin, putting the cup on the conference table behind me.

“Wesley! I see you’ve met my intern, Mark.”

Richard pats my back hard enough that I buckle a little under the pressure and I’m so glad I’m not still holding my coffee because I would have spilled over more than my hand. Mark and I greet Richard, Mark smiling that chimpanzee smile again.

“If you’ll excuse us, Mark. I need to borrow Wes for a moment.”

Something shifts in Mark’s smile as we walk away, his eyes snagging on Richard’s hand on my shoulder. He suddenly seems a little less primate-like and a little more sharklike.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t be there for Laura’s funeral,” Richard says, once we’ve found a private space in the corner of the conference room away from

Mark's dead shark eyes.

At the mention of Mom, my stomach drops.

I really don't want to talk about this today.

"Did you get the flowers I sent?" he asks.

I nod, swallow past my dry throat and dread, and try to get the words to come out. I'm at that point where I think it's okay. I think I'm okay with my mom being gone. But then someone asks about her or how we're doing and my stomach clenches, my tongue ties. I realize I'm not okay. I'm small again, a skinny, scared kid who really, really misses his mom.

"Yes, we got the flowers. Thank you," I manage.

Richard smiles and not for the first time, I wonder how this kind man could ever be a friend to my father. Richard speaks fondly of Mom, repeating stories he's already told me about the three of them—my mom, my dad, and Richard—in college. The longer he talks about her the less my lungs feel like they're being crushed in someone's fist.

"I'm sorry." He smiles ruefully. "I'm sure I've told you all of these before."

He has, and each story hurts like a knife to the gut, but I'm starving for them nonetheless. Memories of Mom where she was the happy, healthy version of herself. Our last few months together, when she was sick and so tired of being sick, are imprinted on my brain. It's a relief to be reminded that she wasn't always that way.

Richard walks me through a maze of hallways, pointing out departments. We pass a large, open concept area he calls the Pit where teams already work together, walking until we reach a sandblasted glass door, the words Marketing Director etched across it. He claps his hand on my shoulder and squeezes, smiling warmly.

"This is Corrine's office. I know the two of you will get along well." He points to me and winks as he walks away. "Pay close attention. You'll learn a lot from her."

I take a moment alone on this side of the door. I check my tie, catch a glimpse of any stains on my suit in the reflection of the glass. But all I see is a blob of brown on top of my head and dark shapes where my glasses sit. Fuzzy and undefined. That feels depressingly on brand.

I adjust the pant leg I'm in an ongoing battle with, but it creeps up my leg again, displaying my lucky socks. Taking a deep breath, I knock.

"Come in," a voice calls from the other side of the door.

I step into an all-white office. It's so bright I squint. So clean, so sterile I want to take off my shoes to not to leave footprints. A small white couch, an armchair with no arms, and a glass coffee table sit in the open space in front of a white desk. Two pocket doors bracket the crisp white wall behind the desk.

And standing across the room, one dark eyebrow arched, her red lips tightly pursed, casting a stark black silhouette in this crisp white space, is the woman from the elevator.

My brain stutters, stalling on the image of her there and now here. Her hair shining under the elevator lights still lingers on the backs of my eyelids. The smell of coconuts doesn't belong here. That scent belongs back in that elevator. But after two good sniffs, here it is still.

I close my eyes tight, like if I turn my brain off and on again it will work better. But when I open them, it's still her, with that severe bun and the peplum top and red glasses. The Corrine Blunt I found on the company's website looked nothing like this woman, who glares at me like she eats bright-eyed and bushy-tailed things for breakfast. Whatever similarities I thought we had have been surgically removed. Every possible reason for why this woman is in Corrine Blunt's office runs through my head. But it keeps returning to the only horrifying explanation:

Corrine Blunt *is* the woman from the elevator.

Chapter 2: Corrine

This. Little. Prick.

It takes far too long for my eyes to travel up his body. My skin prickles at the memory of the way he seemed to loom behind me in the elevator.

So, not little...quite tall.

But still a prick.

I don't know what it says about me, but my first feeling is one of satisfaction, seeing him flustered like this. Watching as he puts the pieces of who I am together. But as the color drains from his face, the disappointment sets like a weight, the embarrassment a sharp pang as it follows close behind. I can't help but mourn the loss of what I'd hoped would be a new partnership.

I walk over to my desk, my shoulders back, my chin high. I'm Teflon; none of his bullshit sticks to me. Leaning against the glass, I fold my arms in front of me. I don't say a word while Wesley Chambers fumbles for one.

He fidgets under my stare, running a hand through his wavy brown hair, readjusting his glasses, flattening his tie. His discomfort travels through him like a tidal wave, from his head to his feet and back again.

Underneath his pants, which are just half an inch too short, bright red-and-blue socks with cartoon baseballs peek out.

My lip curls. They piss me off even more. Because in another world, at another time, I would have found them cute, quirky. The tiny, dorky detail would have endeared him to me immediately. But he's ruined any chance of that.

I wait for that feeling of satisfaction to come back. I want to close my eyes, twist my face up, will it back to me like I used to will my birthday wishes to come true. But it's dead now. Just the hurt is left. And a strange, sucking sense of betrayal.

We'd emailed a few times before his internship started. He'd been so funny, friendly, so effusive. I never got an inkling that he was anything but excited to work with me. But apparently I'm not good enough.

Apparently, I'm not the *illustrious* Richard Skyler.

And Richard. He hasn't shut up about Wesley Chambers. My problems with Richard aside, he's always been a good judge of character. I thought I was a good judge of character, too, but nothing prepared me for a man who

laughs at a joke like that. The fact that he laughed confirms why he was so displeased to be working with me. A sharp pain shoots through my eye into my temple. I'm clenching my jaw so much I'm going to give myself a headache if I'm not careful. I'm just so tired, the bone-deep kind of exhaustion.

I don't want to have to prove myself to people anymore.

Mr. Chambers stumbles forward, holding out his hand to shake mine. It seems he's going to try to just ignore the vulgarly named elephant defecating all over my very white office.

"Hello, Ms. Blunt. I'm Wes. Wesley. You can call me Wes, though."

I follow the angle of his arm to his shoulder, up to his face. His height sort of ruins any authority I'm attempting to establish here. His dark hair falls in waves over his forehead and glasses; freckles sprinkle the bridge of his nose. He's cute with a Nerd Next Door thing going for him. He seems sweet. If he didn't work for me, I might have called him handsome.

He doesn't have the look I'd expect from a man who laughs at jokes made at the expense of women.

But he seems so nervous right now and kind of twitchy, that palm is probably sweaty. Ignoring his outstretched hand, I walk around my desk to sit in my chair. The computer screen comes to life with too many emails in my inbox. Mr. Chambers rubs his palm against his pant leg.

So I was probably right about the sweaty palms.

"I'm, um, very excited to be working with you?"

He says it like a question, which makes it not quite a lie, but still, it rankles that he won't just acknowledge it.

I know what you said. I know that you laughed, I want to hiss.

With my back straight, I swallow those bitter words, the rage sticking in my throat. He stares at a spot on my desk like an astronaut might stare at a black hole.

Look who's laughing now.

"I'm sure you heard what Mark said in the elevator." His words are barely audible around the strain in his voice.

I blink, leaning back in my chair. I took Mr. Chambers for more of a coward.

"I wanted you to know that I..."

Ah, here we go. I narrow my eyes, waiting for whatever excuse he has available.

“I don’t share his opinions about you or...or condone the use of his language...” He trails off as I lean forward, resting my chin on my steepled fingers.

The ache in my chest blooms again. Because, despite this hard shell, I’ll always be the fool, desperate enough for an ally, who wants to believe him.

Mr. Chambers meets my eyes and the crease in his brow, the thin press of his lips does make me believe him. Just a little bit. Until a small, crooked smile creeps up one side of his face. It’s enough to remind me of his laugh.

My insides harden.

I won’t be made a fool again.

“If I was afraid of a little name-calling, Mr. Chambers, I would have washed out a long time ago.”

Like in grad school, where I was oh so affectionately known as Queen of the Bitches.

Original.

He nods slowly.

“I expect hard work,” I say crisply into the quiet room.

That sense of satisfaction blankets me again when I see how quickly his chin bobs. “But if you think for one second that I won’t fire you if I get one whiff of you laughing over those kinds of jokes again...”

His eyes widen, his smile disappears, and he shakes his head so hard I think it might fall off. All of this would be comical. If he hadn’t *laughed* when some feckless intern called me a cunt.

“N-n-nooooo,” he stutters. “I wasn’t—”

My jaw almost cracks and I hold up my hand to keep from snapping at him. “Just because your daddy is friends with the CEO doesn’t make you untouchable.”

He nods, keeping his mouth firmly shut. Maybe his tongue has realized that talking was not helping this situation.

“I’m sure Security wants to take your picture for your pass or something,” I say, turning to my computer screen. My eyes travel over my overflowing inbox but I don’t see a word, only a haze of red. I feel his gaze on the side of my face, heavy and imploring, and it keeps the fire burning inside of me. I count each second until he leaves.

But he doesn’t run scurrying from the room like I expect. He looms, tall and silent, until I turn back to him. He opens his mouth like he’s about to say something more.

“You’re dismissed,” I say, shooin’ him with a wave of my hand before he can get a word out.

For another breath, he doesn’t move but finally he turns and leaves. My spine is one of Pavlov’s dogs. The second it hears the click of my office door, it slumps. I slump. Any of the anger I had left from when I walked out of that elevator has burned off and now I’m just a sad husk of disappointment.

I have a reputation for being a hard-ass. I’m okay with that because I get results. But this is the first time I’ve regretted that reputation, because it seems to have gotten to him before I could.

Chapter 3: Wesley

“And who do you belong to?”

I look around, wondering if the security guard is speaking to someone else.

“I’m sorry?”

The woman behind the camera peeks her head out and peers at me through thick glasses. “Who is your mentor?” she asks slowly.

She ducks back behind the camera as I say, “Corrine Blunt.”

Click.

She straightens again, frowning down at the image on the display. “Oh dear.”

I can’t tell if she means my picture or my mentor. Her fingers click and tap over the computer keys. “Have you met her yet?”

“Yes.” I sigh.

She studies me again. “And?”

“And…”

All the words I wanted to say in Ms. Blunt’s office threaten to choke me and I resist the urge to loosen my tie. “I’m looking forward to learning from her,” I say dutifully.

The security guard snorts, her frizzy, white hair bouncing as she laughs. A printer whirrs, shooting something onto the tray. She attaches it to a lanyard and hands it to me. “Here’s your security pass. Welcome to the building. I’m Wendy, by the way.”

“Thanks, Wendy.” I tug on the pass but she doesn’t let go. “I’m Wes?”

She smiles, glancing down at my crisp new security card. “I know.”

“Oh, right.” I give another experimental tug. “Can I have my—”

“A word of advice.” She smirks. “Count to ten.”

I think I look exactly how I feel. Like I don’t know what she’s talking about.

“When you feel like you’re going to lose it with Ms. Blunt, count to ten. It helps.” She lets go of my security pass.

“Uh, thanks.” My new, official Hill City Marketing & PR security pass gleams as I ride the elevator back up to the office. In the photo, my mouth is open, my eyes half closed.

“Oh dear,” I echo.

The Pit echoes with ringing landlines and resembles a beehive in the way junior associates move in groups. I feel like I'm moving in slow motion to them as I drag my feet back to Ms. Blunt's office. Suffocating in that elevator seems like a way better first-day feeling than this gut-clenching dread.

I stop when I turn the corner to Ms. Blunt's office. A tall, blond, objectively beautiful woman stands at the desk outside Ms. Blunt's closed door. I nod to her as I approach, raising my fist to knock.

"I don't think so, buckaroo."

The woman stands behind the computer chair at the desk, turning it to face me. "Sit your butt down here."

I frown but do as I'm told. She pulls up another chair. "I'm Emily, Richard's assistant."

"I'm Wes. Ms. Blunt's intern."

Emily's smile is a little patronizing. "Actually, you're her assistant. I'm here to train you."

Hill City Marketing & PR boasts two things of their internship program. First, they don't relegate interns to overeducated coffee fetchers. Interns are asked to do real work and make real contributions while being guided by the best in the business. Richard had promised my position here would be to work closely with Ms. Blunt creating innovative digital campaigns, and that I might get the chance to lead an account—under her supervision, of course. Second, even though it's less than I would be making serving at one of Amy's friends' restaurants or coaching baseball, Hill City pays interns, which is better than most. And at least I get to do work I actually went to school for.

I must not do a very good job of hiding my confusion because Emily raises her chin.

"You know, the administrative core is the backbone of any office," she says defensively.

"Oh, yes. Of course." I nod quickly and *fuck*, I've made two people hate me and it's not even lunchtime yet. "I totally believe that as well."

Emily studies me. "Why did you get into marketing, Wes?"

My chair creaks and lists to the side as I sit back. Of course I get the oldest office chair in the building on a day like today. "Honestly, I wanted to do whatever my dad *didn't* want me to do. He's in finance and he wanted me to be an investment banker. I think he's always had a boner for Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*."

Emily laughs, loud and unabashed in this quiet hallway. "Wasn't he the

bad guy?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Anyway, I took a lot of arts classes in school, art history, literature, but majored in business. And then it turned out that I was actually good at...” I shrug. “Marketing stuff.”

I risk a glance at the closed door behind me. Despite the dread festering in my gut, confronting the issue seems preferable to being completely shut out.

“Well...” She sits up straight and points at the phone on the desk that has started to ring. “Maybe you’ll actually be good at assisting, too.”

Chapter 4: Corrine

My brain is fog. The cursor on my screen blinks and blinks but somewhere between my head and my fingers, the message I'm trying to relay gets lost.

Work. Come home. Run. Shower. Dinner. Work some more. My routine is like my security blanket, a seat belt. But nothing about it feels safe today.

It's ruined by the prickle down my spine, the itch I haven't been able to scratch all day. Even a lung-burning run through the Common couldn't fix it.

My neck and back pop as I stand and roll my shoulders. I walk to my kitchen, the white crystallized countertops gleaming in the light from the setting sun, and fill the kettle with water. I could go for another run but the ache in my legs from the five miles I did earlier tells me to rest. I could go to Macy's and browse bridal shower gifts. But I know in my gut that I don't actually plan to attend that bridal shower. The bride is marrying my ex-boyfriend, James. It's not jealousy keeping me away. It's awkwardness. James wanted more than I could give and when we both realized that, the relationship came to its logical and amicable conclusion. Besides, weekends are some of the best days to get work done. I'm not going to waste one eating finger sandwiches and making small talk.

My warped reflection stares back at me from the silver kettle. In it I'm impossibly tall, like the thing that has wrought havoc on my routine. Or rather, the person.

Wesley. Mr. Chambers. My chest constricts at just the thought of him. I don't think I realized how much I needed my anger as a shield until I couldn't muster it anymore. My ego is a bruise in an exposed place. Always bumped and never fully healing.

His preference is based on something I have no control over—my gender—and that's what really makes my chest burn. That I thought he might be different. The bruise blooms bigger every time I hear his stupid little laugh.

I've been the butt of many jokes at Hill City. Folks around the office have called me plenty of names behind my back and under their breath. But after Richard told me about Mr. Chambers's choice to stay home to care for his mother, I'd assumed he'd be different. That he was kind and thoughtful and maybe even empathetic. Maybe he is all of those things. Just not toward me.

My heart cracks in two. But I can only be disappointed in myself. Other

than Emily, the only person I can trust at Hill City is me.

I pull a mug from the cupboard and fill a sachet with loose-leaf tea. Emily would want me to fire him. Since he's my intern I don't need to run it past Richard first. But because Richard recommended him to me personally, I couldn't do it without Richard asking questions. And that's not a conversation I want to have. I don't know what Richard has heard at the office or what he believes but I'd rather not draw attention to what people say about his only female executive.

Even my mother, who counsels leniency and second chances in almost every situation, would tell me to get rid of him.

She really doesn't like curse words.

My chest aches with the desire to talk to her, but she's got enough on her plate without my office melodrama.

I jump as the kettle whistles.

I pour my tea and walk to the small balcony off my living room. Opening the sliding glass door, I walk out onto the windy terrace as the wind whips my loose hair. The sounds of the street are far away and the late summer sun is still low in the sky. I take a deep breath. If I close my eyes and try really hard, I can smell the sea. Even after living here for most of my adult life, this Midwestern girl still can't believe her luck that she gets to be so close to the ocean.

The wind and the sound of the city below calm me. The anger and the hurt don't burn so hot up here. Instead of a white-hot rage, it's more a glowing orange that allows me to think a little clearer.

Tomorrow is a new day and a new opportunity to show Mr. Chambers *exactly* who he is dealing with. If he likes laughing so much, I'll give him something to laugh about. I'm going to make him rue the day he ever decided to be an asshole. Or be so fucking tall.

Chapter 5: Wesley

My sister's red coupe sits at the curb but as I let myself inside, the house is dark and still. My bag lands with a *thunk* at the door and something rolls out onto the floor but I'm already on my way to the kitchen, pulling the first bottle of beer I can find out of the fridge.

I'll clean up the mess of this day later.

The cap pops as I twist it off, lean against the counter in the dark room, and tip the bottle back. It's not so much the alcohol that calms me but the taste, the fizziness on my tongue, that takes me back to summer days, literal years ago, drinking a beer with my sister and Jeremy.

I set the bottle on the counter and let my head fall back. The house is quiet and still. I try to mimic that stillness. I crave it. But my skin crawls with the need to move. I could call Jer right now and ask him to get a beer. We haven't spoken since Mom's funeral—and then it wasn't about much more than condolences—but best friends should be able to pick up right where they left off.

Every excuse I can think of rolls through my head: he's busy; I should make dinner for Amy instead; the toilets need cleaning. My phone is a lead weight in my pocket that I don't reach for.

The last time Jeremy and I really talked he was applying to law school. He was thinking about proposing to Angie. He was even MVP of his rec baseball team, for god's sake. I can't call him up and tell him about my crappy day, my crappy boss, my crappy demotion.

A *thump* comes from overhead, pulling my eyes up. The *thump* comes again. "Amy?" I call.

Something hits the floor above my head, rattling around on the hardwood. It sounds like a cell phone set to vibrate.

"Amy?" I bark. Still no answer. "Fuck." I sigh, setting my bottle down. This isn't the first time Amy has forgotten her phone at home.

I climb the stairs slowly, checking my room at the top, then the bathroom just in case. But the rattling that was definitely coming from Amy's room has stopped and now there are no sounds from behind her door. I pause. My gaze falls on the room at the end of the hall.

The door is closed but I don't need to open it to see clearly the hospital bed

in the center of the room and the support rails on the bathroom walls. Her closet, with her out-of-fashion work clothes pushed to the back, her drawers stacked with pajamas. She's been gone three months but it feels like she's been gone forever and like she just left us, all at once. We haven't done anything with her room yet but the idea of it, empty and lifeless—like her—pulls a rope tight around my lungs.

I spent two years caring for her and I wouldn't change my decision to stay home for anything. But I thought that this internship was going to be a fresh start. A step toward figuring out me, my life, and what I want to do with it. Now it feels like a failure. I spent two years being my mom's nurse. The years before that, I was "Amy's brother," or "loser."

This was my chance to figure out who I want to be.

Now, I'm just Corrine Blunt's assistant.

A scream, a strangled, tortured sound, comes from behind Amy's door, ripping me from my sullen mood.

"Amy?!" I yell, turning the knob and shoving my shoulder into the door.

"*Get out, Wesley!*" My sister screeches but I *can't* move, my body locked in abject horror.

Hovering, her lily-white ass in the air, completely naked, in between the brown legs of another girl—who is also completely naked *oh god*—is my sister. I slam my eyes shut, scrub my fists into the sockets. Maybe if I do it hard enough I'll wipe my eyes clean.

But no, there are some things I can't unsee.

"Ahhhhhh!" I yell, because my nervous system is having a hard time dealing with how exactly to react to seeing my grown sister's bare ass.

"Why? *WHY?*"

"What the fuck, Wes!" she shrieks.

I think a pillow hits me in the face but I don't open my eyes to check. This tableau of my sister's sex life will be burned into my corneas forever.

"I need an eye transplant," I moan, turning in the doorway. Pain slams into my cheek as I stumble into something—the doorframe—in my blind hurry to get out of there and it's kind of a balm. For three seconds I get to worry about whether my cheekbone is broken instead of my sister's...no.

I want to go back to a time when I never considered whether my sister might have privates.

"Oh my fuck, I *hate* living with you!" Amy screeches from behind the now-closed door.

“Ditto,” I yell, taking the stairs two at a time. I can’t get back to my beer fast enough, placing the still-cold bottle to the throbbing spot on my cheek.

Amy comes downstairs a few minutes later. She shoots past the kitchen with her friend in tow. The only glimpse I get of her friend—other than the one she probably never wanted me to see—is a pile of brown and golden dreads twisted up on her head.

I try to close my ears to their whispers at the front door but still hear my sister call her Katie, and the distinct sound of two people kissing. A few moments later, Amy walks into the kitchen with her eyes closed and her hands over her ears.

“Don’t say anything! We are never speaking about this. *Ever*,” she yells. That is abso-fucking-lutely fine with me.

She stumbles toward me with her hands out and her eyes still closed. The goofy smile on her face pulls an identical one from mine, and I push a beer bottle into her hand when she gets close enough. Opening her eyes, she taps the neck of her bottle to mine. Settling back against the counter beside me, she asks, “So, how was your first day?”

All the anger and frustration I felt earlier today somehow pales in comparison to the sheer discomfort I felt at walking in on my sister and her...*girlfriend*? I open my mouth, half turning, to ask her if she’s dating someone before deciding against it. Amy has banned commitment of any kind until her restaurant is up and running.

“Not as bad as what happened up there, actually,” I say, taking another sip. The bottle is still cold but the beer doesn’t have the same effect it had before.

Amy makes a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “I told you we’re never speaking about that again.”

“I know.” I sigh and set down the three-quarters-full bottle. “How’s the restaurant coming?”

Amy shrugs. “We interviewed servers today. Some were better than others.” A slow smirk spreads across her face.

“Amy,” I say slowly. “You can’t sleep with your employees.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, good thing she’s not my employee yet.”

“I...that... Amy...”

“Oh, relax, you priss. We know each other. It’s fine.”

We settle back against the counter, both sipping our beers in awkward silence. The house feels cavernous with just the two of us here. There only used to be one other person but she filled the space with so much more.

“So.” Amy sets her beer down. “We need to talk.”

“Huh?”

Usually when women say that to me they aren’t my sister, so I have the good fortune of being both anxious and confused while Amy turns to face me.

“About the house, Wes. Don’t you think it’s time we thought about...”

“About what?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. Moving on.”

A shudder rolls down my spine. This beer is no longer helping at all.

“Can we not...not today,” I say quickly, when Amy opens her mouth to protest. I can’t discuss moving out of our childhood home, out of Mom’s house, after a day like today. I glance at her from the corner of my eye. Amy spent so much of her time conspicuously Not Here over the last two years. How can she be ready to move so soon? “I need to swing a bat.” The popping sound of the pitching machine might be the only thing that can calm the resentment churning in my gut. “Do you want to come to the cages with me?”

* * *

We hit balls until we’re sweaty and the August sky is dark behind the cage’s spotlights. Until my shoulders no longer creep up to my ears, my chest is lighter, my back isn’t so sore with tension as it was when I left the office. Amy bumps her shoulder to mine as we walk back to her car in the empty parking lot, the only sound the crack of bats on balls and the drone from traffic on the highway. I shift my gym bag, filled with ripped ball gloves and old socks, to my other shoulder so Amy won’t have to smell the perma-stink that wafts from it.

“Wanna talk about it?” she asks.

The engine that normally runs my anxiety operates at a low hum rather than careening out of control. Something that only holding a baseball bat can do for me. I’m calm enough now that even though I still don’t want to share my miserable first day, I know Amy will help me figure out what to do next.

Amy was the one to come up with the idea to stuff my middle-school bullies’ lockers with raw meat on the Friday before a long weekend—I went vegetarian for a year after that. When I forgot I had an essay due on the sea as a character in *Moby Dick* the day after a baseball tournament, my sister wrote it for me. She got a B+. My dad likes to say that the only reason Amy was

born was to be my human vacuum. “*Always cleaning up Wes’s messes!*” he’ll boom, laughing at his own joke, while no one else does.

Because he’s a *dick*.

Amy scoots onto the hood of the car, dropping her keys in my hand and pulling a joint out of her pocket like the magical cannabis fairy she is. I sit beside her, pull my Sox cap low, and tell her everything. How Ms. Blunt overheard my disappointment about not working with Richard. What Mark said, what my boss heard, and how she thinks I was in on it. How my internship is not going to be what I’d hoped it would be.

“Did you report him?” she asks after a long moment.

I blink down at my Nikes for too many heartbeats. “It...it honestly hadn’t occurred to me until just now.”

I scratch the toe of my shoe into the dark pavement as heat burns up the back of my neck. I had Richard’s ear for those few moments before I met Ms. Blunt and I never even mentioned it.

“I’m *such* an idiot. I’ll explain everything tomorrow,” I say. “I’ll tell her I’ll report it and explain exactly what happened.” I nod, resolute. Just having a plan makes me feel a little lighter, looser.

“Still. That sucks, bro. She sounds...” She winces on a deep inhale. “She sounds harsh.” Amy turns to me, wide-eyed. “I bet you she doesn’t even have tear ducts.”

“What? Amy, that’s...really weird? Besides, if anything this is my...wait.” I pluck the joint from her fingers. “What is in that weed? You’re too high to have a conversation right now.”

She waves me away, suddenly lucid despite the size of her pupils. “Talk to Richard. Maybe he can change your mentor partnership?” She takes the joint back and stubs it, picking the cherry out and tucking the remainder away in her wallet.

I don’t answer her until we’re in the car, on the road home. “No. I’m not gonna talk to Richard.”

“But I thought he *loved* you?” she says, her eyes closed, her head back against the headrest. “I bet he’d do it in a heartbeat.”

Amy is right. I think he would do it. But now that I’ve had some separation from it, the perspective that time, space, involuntarily seeing your sister’s bare ass, and hitting a baseball creates—the whole situation doesn’t feel as bad as it did earlier today.

“I think he would but...he seemed excited for Ms. Blunt and I to work

together. And I *am* excited to work with her.” Plus, I want to make it up to her. Show her I’m not the guy she thinks I am. My hand taps a rhythm on the steering wheel as I drive us back home.

“I think I just need to stick it out. Digital marketing at Hill City is still wildly behind the times and that’s my specialty. She’s the only one really advocating for big change there. I need to show her how valuable I can be. It’ll blow over.”

My words sound stronger than the churning in my stomach makes me feel. But if there’s one thing my mother gave me, it’s a sense of optimism in the face of the impossible. I pull up to the curb and put the car in park. Amy still doesn’t answer.

“She’s probably forgotten about it already,” I say, forcing out a laugh that doesn’t sound convincing to even my ears. “It’s not like being an assistant is the worst job in the world or something. I just... I hoped that this would be the start of something, you know? Something new for me. Something where I get to control the narrative on who I am. Now it all feels a little out of control. If I can just get it back on track...”

When she’s still silent I look over. She’s fallen asleep.

Reaching over, I flick her nostril. She doesn’t wake up. But it helps.

Chapter 6: Corrine

A smile threatens at my lips. Since I'm safe in the confines of my empty sports car, I let it out; that's the freedom that comes with being the first person to the office in the morning. My heels are the only sound echoing in the parking garage and the elevator hasn't yet filled with the smell of morning coffees and greasy breakfast sandwiches. By the time I arrive on the Hill City floor, the smile is almost real. Until Emily steps out of the elevator beside mine.

"What are you doing here so early?" I wince at the accusatory tone to my words but it's too late to reel them in. Emily launches a sarcastic smile my way.

"Good morning to you, too."

Her blond hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail and her blazer hangs over her arm. Bags dangle from each elbow and she holds a paper sack wafting breakfast sandwich smell at me in one hand, and a large coffee in the other.

"Do you need help?" I ask. If I must give up the unrestrained joy that is an empty office, I'd rather do it for Emily than anyone else.

"Please," she says, relieved. Emily straightens her arm and unhooks one of her bags and her blazer.

"Why are you here so early?" I ask as she leans forward to jiggle her boobs in front of the door sensor. Her office pass dangles from her blouse. A beep and a click sound and Emily backs into the door to push her way through.

"You don't usually get in until Richard does."

"Two words," Emily spits. "Mark Gutterberg."

"Who?"

"Richard's intern." Emily sounds disgusted. "I wish we had yours instead," she says over her shoulder as I follow her to her desk outside Richard's office.

I'm still confused. "How did an intern make you come in early?"

Emily throws her bag down behind her desk and slumps in her chair, pulling the lid off her coffee cup. "He didn't."

She holds the cup under her nose and sniffs like she's huffing glue.

"He just ran me around all day yesterday, asking for clarification or help whenever Richard wasn't around. He couldn't even fill out his direct deposit

form without my assistance. I came in early so I could finish up a few things from yesterday and get a head start on today.”

She winces as she takes another whiff of coffee.

“Emily, what are you doing to that coffee?”

“It’s too hot to drink,” she says as if this explains it. “So I’m smelling the caffeine.”

“I don’t think it works that way.” I place her bag beside the other one and hang her blazer on the back of her chair behind her, smoothing out the shoulders.

“The steam is burning my nose hairs off,” she whines.

She searches my now-empty hands and smacks her palm to her forehead.

“I should have gotten yours, too.”

Emily is one of the few people who can get my order right.

“Oh.” I pause. “I was going to make Wesley Chambers do it,” I say quietly.

Saying it out loud makes it sound a little bit repugnant and a knot of shame unfurls in my belly. I’m already having second thoughts about the plan I hatched last night.

Emily frowns at me. “Why would you make Wesley do it?” she asks. “And why did you make me train him on admin tasks yesterday? I thought you wanted him to help you with accounts and expand the digital marketing department.”

Technically, that’s true. I wasn’t even going to mentor again this year after my experience with my intern last year. But Richard spoke so highly of him. After he showed me some of Wesley’s mock campaigns from his original internship application, I was sold. Mr. Chambers’s work was exactly the direction I want to take our department and he would fit in with many of the new hires. At least I’d thought he would, before he opened his mouth.

I thought we’d have a relationship similar to the one I’d had with Richard when I was his intern years ago. Before Richard morphed into the man he is now.

I look behind me even though there’s no one here. “I was in the elevator with him and Richard’s intern yesterday.”

Emily nods slowly. “Okay.”

“He didn’t recognize me. We never interviewed personally. Richard wanted to let him off the hook for it since he’d technically already interviewed two years before and his family had a tough time this year. Mr.

Chambers expressed his *extreme distress* at being partnered with me rather than Richard.”

Emily pouts, distracted by her computer screen. “Shitty.”

“I think it had something to do with...” I gesture in the general direction of myself.

She frowns. “Your...blouse? Your pencil skirt!” she shouts like we’re playing charades.

I huff out a breath. “You know...” I raise my brows meaningfully.

She laughs. “I truly do not know.”

“Well, because I’m a woman.”

“Oh.” She makes this flat-mouthed face, very much resembling a frog.

“Ew. Don’t we have enough of those kinds of guys around here?”

I nod. “And, Mark apparently is good friends with my intern from last year, Sean.”

“Oh.” Emily arches an eyebrow and I know I don’t have to say any more. Sean’s behavior was wildly inappropriate when we were in private. So much so that I started making excuses for other people to be in the room with me if I knew he and I would be alone together.

When his thinly veiled, lewd comments weren’t getting the reaction he wanted, he started talking about me to other people in the office. As far as I know, his words never got to Richard or any of the other executives. But I still feel like I’m picking up the pieces of my integrity. He made it easier for people who already didn’t like me to have another excuse not to like me even more.

“What does that have to do with Wesley?” Emily asks.

“Mark made a joke about me. Called me a name.”

Emily nods for me to continue.

“He called me a cunt. Wesley laughed.”

“*What?!*” Emily screeches.

She slams her cup down onto her desk calendar, spilling black coffee all over Tuesday and most of Wednesday.

“He called you the C-word?” she hisses.

I nod.

“Did you say anything?”

I pause before I shake my head. “No.”

“Did you report him to HR?” she asks, shrill.

“No.”

She leans back in her chair. “Corrine.” She says my name flatly. “You run this department single-handedly. You expect excellence from everyone who works for you. You take shit from no one.”

She ticks each point off on her finger.

“But when some fuck boy thinks he can say whatever he wants about you, you do nothing. You never reported Sean and he never listened to you when you asked him to stop. Are you going to let Mark do this, too? And don’t even get me started on Richard—”

“Stop,” I tell her. I hold up my hand to emphasize the point. “I don’t want to talk about Richard.”

She glares at me. “You won’t even acknowledge how inappropriate—”

“I’m not talking about this, Emily.” I straighten my spine. Discussing Richard’s increasingly inappropriate behavior these last few years will only cause me to pop more Tums and force me to give up coffee again.

The frustration in her face melts away. “Just tell me why you won’t do anything when a guy like Mark thinks he can speak about you that way. That’s not the friend I know... Is it because of what happened at that other agency? At Blitz Media?”

“Firing him will only prove to everyone else what they *think* they already know. That I’m too difficult to work with. Maybe instead I should just show them—show him—how difficult I really can be.”

Other than my mother and my brother, Sebastian, I trust Emily the most out of anyone. But I can tell by the way she studies me that she doesn’t believe I’m telling her the whole truth.

“I just feel like if I was a man in this situation it wouldn’t even need addressing. I would ignore it and keep working hard. I’d let my results speak for themselves.”

“Except,” Emily says quietly, “you’re not a man.”

I’m aware of that, thanks, I want to snap at her. But she doesn’t deserve that.

“So, Mark says this about you—not realizing who *you* were in the elevator. And Wesley laughs and now you’re...making him answer phones instead of working on ad copy?”

I nod. “Why? You think it’s petty?” I ask.

“No, no!” Emily shakes her head quickly. “Barring, you know, actually getting Mark fired...” She stares pointedly at me again. “I guess. I’m just surprised.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know him very well and obviously I wasn’t in that elevator and you were but...there was something so...so...” Emily pauses, smiling to herself. “Good, about Wes.”

She wiggles in her chair, a satisfied little smile on her face.

“He seemed a little disappointed when I told him he’d be your assistant, but he shook it off and got invested in the training right away.”

Doubt for my plan creeps up my spine so I shove it back down with the easiest explanation I can think of. “He probably doesn’t want to do a bad job and get himself fired.”

“Well, yes, that, too,” she concedes. “But I don’t know. There’s something about him. I’d call him an overeager puppy if it didn’t make him sound like a total dink. I just never took him to be *that* kind of guy.”

When I frown, she elaborates. “The asshole kind.”

A wave of defensiveness crashes over me. “I know what I heard, Emily.”

She nods, her hands placating. “I’m not saying you didn’t.”

“Well, that’s why I’m making Mr. Chambers get my coffee today,” I say and from the look on Emily’s face she knows that this conversation is over. “But at least my intern is just an asshole and not an idiot, too,” I say pointedly.

She sighs. “Yeah. And he’s kind of cute.”

I press my lips together. “He is objectively attractive. But that’s irrelevant at this point.”

Even saying that feels like too many words in my mouth. Bosses aren’t supposed to find their interns attractive, and considering the bullshit I’ve had to deal with from Richard lately, I mentally scrub any thoughts of Mr. Chambers’s appearance from my brain. It’s best if I only think of him as an asshole, anyway.

She pouts.

“Good morning, girls!” Richard calls from down the hallway. We blink at each other with wide eyes for a beat before turning to him with plastic smiles.

I am thirty and Emily is twenty-seven and we are definitely *not* girls. Richard stops beside me, squeezing my shoulder. His hand lingers like an anchor, weighting me to the ocean floor.

“I see you’ve hooked Phil Grimes for a meeting. Good work.”

I do my best to hide my smile. We’ve been working on landing this new client for weeks and he’s finally said yes to sit down and talk to us.

Regardless of Richard's sometimes questionable behavior, I'll always be happy to make him proud.

He wraps his arm around me tighter.

And there he goes ruining it.

"I'd like to speak to you privately when you have a second, Corrine."

Emily catches my eye again and I duck out from under his palm. I fill my lungs with air now that I'm not pinned down by him. I need to speak with him, too, but I'd rather do it now when Emily is here.

"Actually, I wanted to let you know. My mom is..." My brain stalls on the right word. *Sick* is what she is. My mom is sick but we don't know from what or why yet. The not knowing is terrible. Maybe the only thing worse is saying it out loud. "Her health has not been well lately."

Emily makes a sympathetic sound and her hand wraps around my wrist in a gentle squeeze. Definitely the right decision to do this now.

"There may be a time in the near future that I need to go home to Minnesota. Of course, none of this will affect my work," I say in a rush.

"Corrine, honey." His voice when he says the word is just as sticky. "You have nothing to worry about there. Let me know how I can help."

"Anything, Corrine," Emily echoes. My pulse beats hard enough I feel light-headed. I smile tightly at them both. The quiet sanctuary of my office calls for me.

"Well, you know where to find me. I've got to get to work, Richard."

I throw a smile his way as I make my way down to my office and shudder when I see that his gaze is planted firmly on my ass. Even at a moment like this, he just can't help himself.

Eyes up here, *Dick*.

Chapter 7: Wesley

I get to work early enough that my brain feels fuzzy and my hair is still damp from a shower.

At least, I think I'm early, until I walk into her office and find Ms. Blunt at her desk, already elbow deep in work, her sleeves quite literally rolled up and her red glasses perched on her nose. I place a mug of coffee on her desk and take a step back.

She lifts her eyes slowly from the document she's marking up with red pen. "What is that?"

It seemed like a good idea at the time, stopping in the office kitchen and making her a cup of coffee. But now that I see the look on her face it seems more like sucking up.

"Good morning, Ms. Blunt. I thought I'd bring you a coffee."

Her eyes travel slowly up my body. I feel like a mouse, waiting for the cat to decide if it feels like eating me or not. I try to remember if the socks I put on this morning match when her gaze comes to rest on my face. I *am* six foot four, so it took a while.

"I drink a quadruple venti extra hot double half pump vanilla latte twice a day. If you want to get me a coffee, you can go to the Starbucks on Summer Street and get me one there."

She looks back at the mug, her face contorting until finally landing in sneer territory. I follow her gaze and cringe.

The mug is brown and says, *Coffee makes me poop*. I scratch the back of my head because *who* thought it would be a good idea to bring that mug to work and why couldn't I have read it before I brought it over to her? I resist the urge to wrap my own hand around my throat to strangle the nervous laugh that wants to bubble out of me at this horrible, awkward repeat of a day.

"Wouldn't a double half vanilla shot be the same as a regular single vanilla shot?" I ask, hoping to distract her from the mug.

It works but only so she can turn her sneer on me. "It would not."

Okay. So maybe this isn't going to blow over like I hoped.

So far Day 2 has been almost as bad as Day 1. But no one has said the C-word yet so I'll take that as a win.

By the time I make it to street level and head toward Summer Street,

however, I'm feeling less pathetic and more pissed off. Nothing about getting Corrine Blunt her ridiculous coffee order or answering her phone is real marketing work.

Heat bakes off the redbrick walkway, but some of the trees lining the sidewalks are already starting to change their leaves. There's a lineup at the Dunks across the street and something about seeing it makes me want to turn around and tell her exactly what I think about this "internship." I stop on the corner and crane my neck up at the Hill City building. The sun reflects off the tall glass and I imagine Ms. Blunt, up in her office, looking down on me right now like a germaphobe barely tolerates a staph infection.

Someone bumps me from behind, the smell of pastry wafting from the white box in their hands. Not even the smell of cannoli can pull the burning feeling from my gut. But instead of marching back up there and tanking my career, I take Wendy's advice. I count to ten. Four times. And then I swallow my pride and fetch her coffee.

* * *

Marisol smiles, a little patronizingly, and Mark and another intern, Chris, snicker, as I rush past them with this ridiculous cup of coffee in my hand. The desk phone is ringing as I approach but I ignore it, beelining for my boss's office door. I rap my knuckles across it once before letting myself in. Ms. Blunt sits exactly where I left her, pages of mock-ups spread out around her, a pen sticking out of the bun in her hair, and her glasses still perched on the edge of her nose. Except as I place her fresh—and incredibly hot—coffee cup on her desk she already has a Starbucks cup in her hand.

"I...that...what?"

She blinks up at me slowly. "Are you having a stroke?"

I clench my jaw. One, two, three... *Fuck it.*

"No," I say. "I'm just a little confused, I guess. I thought I was getting you coffee?"

Ms. Blunt picks up her cup, takes a sip, and sets it back down. She turns the cup around on the desk until the green mermaid faces me. Everything on her desk is like this cup. Each object precisely placed and arranged at right angles.

Must control urge to move stapler three inches to the left.

"I thought you were, too," she says with a disappointed sigh. "But you

were taking forever. So I had to get myself one.”

I check my watch to calculate my time. The coffee shop she sent me to was a ten-minute walk away. Plus the wait for the coffee itself put my errand at around thirty minutes total. “How did you get there and back *before* me?”

She may be good at her job but there’s no way she managed to hustle past me in those heels. They’re like red stilts.

Ms. Blunt sighs, pulling the pen from her hair and making a notation in the margin of a mock-up. “I went to the Starbucks on Federal,” she says, sounding bored. “It’s a three-minute walk.”

“Then why did you—” I cut myself off when she looks up at me sharply and the frustration in my tone echoes back at me in this quiet office. I swallow it down, the sour taste of my anger and the unfairness of it all.

“I’m sorry it took so long.”

If there’s a time to apologize for what happened yesterday, it’s now. I stand to my full height, throw my shoulders back, and look her dead in the eye. In this moment, I am thankful for my sister’s Meryl Streep obsession, because it means I can channel Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada* when I say, “Listen, I wanted to apologize—”

“Your phone has been ringing off the hook,” she says abruptly.

Because of you. I glare at her and she glares right back.

“Fine.”

“Take that with you,” she says, pointing to the coffee I brought her.

Swiping it off her desk, I barely keep myself from slamming her office door as I leave. Dropping her absurd coffee in the trash can beside my desk, I count to ten again and I pick up the phone.

Chapter 8: Corrine

At ten o'clock, I slip off my heels and walk the perimeter of my office in my bare feet, letting my toes sink deep into the plush white carpet. When I moved into this office two years ago, I had the old, worn gray carpet pulled up and installed this one out of pocket, so I could do exactly this. I think better, create more creative campaigns, when I can walk, and no one wants to a) walk in high heels or b) walk barefoot on the dank carpet that used to be in here.

We need a new digital marketing strategy for a local chain of car dealerships that's looking to expand into the Northeast. Their digital marketing before Hill City was nonexistent and they're highly suspicious of the strategy I proposed. Before I came on board, Hill City had no digital marketing strategy to speak of and relied solely on what Richard called traditional strategies. I called them outdated. Over the last half decade, I've brought Hill City into the twenty-first century. And made Richard a lot of money doing it.

According to his references, Mr. Chambers created some well-received digital marketing campaigns when he was in school. I'm almost tempted to run the problem by him, because my pacing hasn't helped with my creativity at all this time.

But I can't ask him because I sent him off this afternoon to pick up a bridal shower gift for my ex-boyfriend's bride.

I had decided I wasn't going to send a gift, but then I needed to get him out of this office. It's distracting having him sit out there. Even with my office door closed, the tension radiating off him sneaks under the door in angry waves. He's pissed, indignant. Not thoroughly subdued like I'd hoped he'd be.

I'm willing to admit that maybe I'm wasting his talents out of spite. And *maybe* Emily was right and there was more to that elevator situation than I know.

My heart flips over at the thought.

But where my schedule used to feel like my security blanket, now it's this anger that keeps the bruise on my heart safe. If I can't hold on to this, and it turns out Emily is wrong and Wesley is an asshole, I'll be hurt all over again.

I finish my last lap of the office and sit down at my desk, trying to ignore the doubt at the back of my mind.

* * *

The whisper of the door against the carpet is my only warning when Richard enters my office an hour later. He doesn't even bother to knock. I lift my head from where it's cradled between my palms.

"Richard." I plaster on a smile. "Hi."

Richard frowns, making a show of searching my office, back out the door, and my stomach drops into my lap.

Oh god.

The panic sets in fast.

Oh crap.

He'll want to know where Mr. Chambers is and why he's not here, working. A thousand excuses run through my mind on ticker tape but most of them require at least Mr. Chambers's corroboration and *great*, now I'm going to have to lie to my boss.

"Corrine," he says, his voice soft. "Where is that beautiful smile of yours?"

My stomach continues its fall, but this time all the way to the floor.

"What reason do you have to frown on a beautiful day like this?"

Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply through my nose. The man can't even be bothered to come up with a synonym for *beautiful* when he's being creepy. For the span of this breath, I can't decide what is more off-putting: the unoriginality or the sexual harassment.

I pull my glasses down over my eyes and shuffle the papers in front of me to seem busier than I am. I glance up. Richard's brown eyes assess me. I can still feel them even when I look away.

My skin crawls; the harassment is definitely more off-putting.

I can't pinpoint when he stopped seeing me as his protégé, partner even, and started looking at me differently. It was after my internship, after I'd put in time as a junior associate and had proven myself. It happened so slowly I can't say for sure it was this day or that time. I just know that when he did, it started to *feel* different. Or maybe he'd always looked at me that way and I'd never noticed before, too caught up in my own hero worship.

I know when he's looking at me now. I can feel it like a touch, just not the kind I want.

He pulls out the chair in front of my desk and sits down, crossing his ankle over his knee. His patent leather shoe gleams so bright, it's like it's smiling at me. He's the picture of calm, a king in someone else's kingdom. He leans back and folds his hands over his flat abdomen and crisp white Oxford shirt. His broad shoulders fill out the dark gray suit. He keeps himself in great shape. He easily passes for ten years younger than his midfifties.

"You seem shaken up. Talk to me, Corrine."

I press my lips together—the closest I can get to a smile—and shake my head. Anything not to have to talk about my intern.

"Is it about your mother and her health, Corrine?"

Actually, no. Anything but *that*.

The panic I was feeling before boils over. I shake my head a little harder, press my lips a little tighter.

"I was trying to think of something I could do to help or at least distract you."

The sympathy in his eyes, his tone, ratchets up but it's contrived, his idea of what concern looks like rather than what it really is.

I pry my lips apart. "That's not necessary, Richard. We don't even have the biopsy results yet. There's no point in worrying about it until we know what we're dealing with."

It's a lie. Of course I'm worrying.

I want desperately to be able to deal with my mother's potential cancer diagnosis with the rationality and practicality I deal with everything else, like work. At least then I'd feel some semblance of control over any of this. But I'm not sure that's possible.

"Nonetheless."

He leans forward, reaching across the desk to place his palm over my hand. His skin is like a scratchy old blanket. One you might find in a cheap roadside motel. One you don't want to fall asleep under.

I glance toward the door because in this moment I would give anything for an interruption. Even one from Wesley Chambers.

But the door stays shut.

"I thought, you know what would be a good distraction for our sweet Corrine?"

My nostrils flare as I take a deep breath and try to ignore the casual sexism dripping off of this man. Emily is right (she almost always is). I shouldn't put up with this behavior from Richard. But in every scenario where I put my

foot down, I see his support go up in smoke. I've never gone out of my way to ingratiate myself with most of the team here. I care about results, not what you did on the weekend. And I've never had to care because Richard always had my back. He's banking on that loyalty now because when you owe your career to someone, there's a lot you'll put up with.

"What if you managed the softball team this year?"

He smiles as he says it, his face lighting up as if he's come up with a million-dollar idea. "We're always trying to get you to participate, what with your speed."

For some reason, Richard thinks that because I run marathons, I'm fast. I guess technically I am, but speed over distance doesn't really translate to speed between bases.

"And you're so..." His eyes travel over my body. I wish I had the guts to face him head-on in moments like this. "Nimble."

"Richard," I say slowly, trying to piece together new excuses. "I'm quite busy."

You know, *marketing*.

He waves my words away. "It will be good to get out and enjoy the outdoors. Plus it means we'll get a chance to spend more time together."

Great. Exactly what I've been trying to avoid.

"And if that and this mentorship with Wesley both go well, there might be something more in it for you, too."

"Oh." I lean back in my chair, suspicious, but interested nonetheless. Richard's idea of "something more" could mean oh so many things.

"We've all noticed how hard you've been working and how much it's paying off. You deserve some recognition for that."

No matter how tumultuous this relationship has been, receiving praise from Richard still makes me feel like I did on my first day. Eager for more. "Thank you," I say as a flush crawls up my face.

"How does..." He holds both hands up, like he's framing a billboard. "VP Marketing sound?"

That sounds...like quite a pay raise. I'm already qualified. The MBA I worked nights and weekends to get finally paying off. As the current Director, I lead our team in pitching accounts and landing new clients. But as VP I'd be able to set goals for Hill City's internal marketing strategy, increase brand awareness against our bigger competitors. I'd be in charge of the budget and could shape our team to my exact specifications. My eyes

widen but that's the only tell I allow myself.

"Well?" he prods.

"I'm interested," I say slowly.

Richard laughs. "Don't sound too excited, Corrine."

Keeping my excitement to myself isn't a strategy per se but a defense mechanism. I don't want Richard to know how much I want *anything*. I can't give him any more power over me than he already has.

And that dims the luster on this shiny new offer. As VP of Marketing I'll have to spend more time with Richard, consult with him more closely than I already do. Just the thought of it stands my hair on end.

"What do you need to see?" I ask. "What do you need from me?" Because this is the push-pull of working with Richard Skyler. This is everything that I've been working toward and now that it's within my grasp I'm scared to reach out and grab it.

His smile comes back. The one I hate to see on his face. It makes me sick. "Well, just keep up..." He pauses. "All that good work. I think that some of the executives and I would like to sit in on that presentation with the new client you have coming up."

"The Grimes account?" I can't keep the thread of panic from my voice.

"Yes, we just want to see you in action. We're not evaluating you."

There are too many swear words running through my head to choose the right one for this predicament. Phil Grimes is an overblown egomaniac who sells cars. Or at least, he tries to sell cars. If he actually sold them, he wouldn't have to come to us to help him. Most of the other executives are also overblown egomaniacs. If they're all in the same room while I try to close this deal with Grimes, they'll hijack my meeting.

"Richard, I guess I'm just a little worried that if you're in the room, he won't want to hear from me."

He grins, pleased with himself. If the man had feathers he'd preen. "Don't worry, Corrine. They won't even know we're there. Besides, I'm sure they'll be enamored with you."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It's my only alternative to screaming. I nod. "I can do that."

"And, of course, I want to see how you and Wesley work together. Show me more of those lovely interpersonal skills." His voice takes on a condescending tone and I answer with a brittle smile.

"Speaking of..." Richard says over his shoulder. "Where is Wesley?"

“Lunch,” I say, with a saccharine smile. The lie rolls off my tongue much easier than I’d expected.

Chapter 9: Wesley

The mattress springs creak and pop as I lie back in bed, the moon illuminating only a square of my comforter. Exhaustion weighs down my limbs and aches in my lower back. There are painkillers in the medicine cabinet in our shared bathroom, but this has beaten me. I can't even lug my body out of bed to get them. The past week has murdered my motivation.

The pocket of my coat buzzes and I stifle my groan and roll to one side, digging my phone out.

"Leave me alone, you beautiful monster!" I shout into the quiet of my bedroom.

But it's not Ms. Blunt. It's Amy.

Are you coming out tonight? Everyone is here!

The relief that I've avoided another message from Ms. Blunt lives only for the time it takes to read the text. I put my phone facedown on the bedside table. The constricted feeling in my chest doesn't go away. The last thing I want to do is heave myself out of bed and go meet up with our friends. On a weeknight no less. I haven't seen most of our friends since Mom's funeral. Before that, really.

Once her health started going downhill, I was so focused on her I lost touch with everyone. Plus it's hard to want to go out to a bar and get drunk with your friends when your mom is getting hooked up to IVs at home. Although Amy managed it somehow.

I shake off my animosity as I sink back into the mattress, on top of the covers. Amy and I dealt with things in our own ways.

My fingers ache to wrap my hands around the grip of my bat. The only exercise I've had lately is running around Boston: dropping off dry cleaning, picking *up* dry cleaning, delivering lunches, dinners, contracts, and groceries, detailing a Mercedes-Benz (though the perk is I get to drive it), booking doctor's appointments, hair appointments, waxing appointments, buying specific and difficult-to-source office supplies (that I apparently am not allowed to source from the office supply closet), a bridal shower gift, and coffee. So, so much coffee.

When I'm not running around the city, I'm doing everything else. I can hear that desk phone ring in my sleep. The joints in my fingers ache from hitting the creaky, old keyboard. My eyes burn from the fluorescents that buzz above me late into the night.

My phone rattles over the stained, chipped wood. *Please* don't be her.

"Why don't you just quit?" I snarl at my empty room. I let myself fantasize about walking into her office tomorrow and telling her I'm done. But it doesn't give me the satisfaction I hope for, just like every other time I've dreamed this particular impossible dream. Because then she wins. I'm not leaving Hill City until I show her the kind of man I am.

I got lucky the first time my phone went off. I know I won't be so lucky this time. The phone's vibrations sound more urgent. Like her anger at being ignored is translated in revs per minute. I roll onto my side, my hand a lead weight as I pick the phone off the table.

A new email.

I tap the icon and renewed pain shoots through my shoulders and neck. The sky outside got dark a long time ago, but it's like Corrine Blunt never sleeps. Even after she leaves the office for the day, she sends me emails or texts into the night.

Subject Line: Softball Team

Mr. Chambers,

Every year Hill City participates in a softball tournament with the other companies in the building; this week I was invited to manage the team. You are required to participate. Please send Emily an email with your shirt size so that she may order you a company softball shirt.

I have volunteered you to be the team manager in my place.

Your duties will include things like:

- Arranging team practices
- Practice prep and cleanup
- Setting up the team dugout
- Collecting balls, bats, and gloves

I expect you to continue to juggle both these new duties

and your regular workload. And don't worry, no one expects you to play well.

Good night.

A smile creeps up the side of my face.

Softball.

I'm going to be *paid* to play ball.

I'm so excited I can almost ignore the condescension in the rest of the email.

"No one expects you to play well?" I laugh.

Nothing Ms. Blunt has had me do so far has been too hard or impossible. She's just been running me, never giving me a chance to rest, to excel. My smile stretches my cheeks.

My chest swells. Baseball saved me when I was a kid and Mom got sick the first time. Coaching saved me in college when my dad wouldn't pay the rest of our tuition like he promised and I needed to come up with the extra money. I'll need a refresh of the rules and my softball pitching skills.

But baseball is about to save me again.

"I'm going to blow your mind, Ms. Blunt," I say into my moonlit bedroom.

Chapter 10: Corrine

A documentary about the Second World War is the only interesting thing to watch as I lie on my side, foam-rolling my IT band. My skin is sticky from sweat and I still feel out of breath from my run.

My mother's laughter peals through my apartment, her ringtone drowning out Tom Hanks's voice on the television. I reach blindly behind me, searching for my cell phone on the coffee table. Grabbing it with two fingers, I hit the speaker button right before it goes to voicemail.

"Hi, Mom," I say, a little breathless.

"Hello, my little pot roast."

I laugh. She hasn't called me that in *years*. Probably since I was in middle school and complaining about the social politics of band or the actual politics of mock UN.

"What's up?" I ask, as I switch to my other side to roll out my opposite leg.

She pauses. "Not much. Just wanted to hear your voice." Hers shakes.

I pause. "Is everything—"

"How's work?" she asks over me.

"Fine," I say slowly. The hairs stand up on the back of my neck. This is it, I realize. This is the call.

"How is your intern?"

I'm so caught off guard, I stop, my mouth half open. I don't want to talk about him. But Mom can read the pause for what it's worth. One of the best things about this woman is she knows when you need to be pushed and when you need time. This time she pushes.

"Everything going okay with him?"

I sigh. Mom now knows about the elevator. At the mention of the C-word, she made a twittering sound and got very flustered.

I hum to avoid the real answer: that I think I made an assumption about him and treated him poorly for the last few weeks because of it. That no matter what I throw at Mr. Chambers, he does it without question. He certainly scowls about it. But he hasn't once complained, to me or about me, to anyone.

"What's up, Mom?" I ask, turning the subject back to her. I don't even

want to say the word biopsy, so I go with, “Is everything okay?”

Another pause. “Let me get Daddy.”

She calls for my stepdad, her voice muffled, and a few seconds later, he picks up the extension.

“Hey there, princess.”

I’ve never loved the nickname. But it was my stepdad’s version of affection when I was growing up.

“Hi, Dad.”

There’s silence again. I sit up slowly, turning the television down and moving the foam roller to the side. I stand and start pacing. “What’s going on, you guys?”

Dad clears his throat. “Lindy?”

I imagine my stepdad in his office.

My mom in the kitchen.

They still have landlines, with curled phone cords. She’s looping it through her fingers right now.

“Well, I had the biopsy,” she says slowly.

I walk toward my office. My face is a furnace, my head floats above my shoulders, not quite attached to my body. “Okay.”

“Because you know, I’ve been having some...” She pauses. “Stomach troubles.”

She says this nervously, an uncomfortable little laugh attached that reminds me, in a sudden hot flash, of Mr. Chambers. I shove the vision of his face aside. My mother does not speak about the things that take place in bathrooms.

Setting the phone down on my desk, I poise my fingers above my laptop keyboard, ready to type the diagnosis into Google.

I swallow down the nerves. “So you went to the doctor and...?” My voice sounds as tight as my chest feels.

“It’s cancer.”

She says this so quickly. There’s no preparation. No time to adjust to the idea. It’s just *there*. Cancer. No amount of prep or anticipation can prepare me.

Up until this moment, I thought cunt was the worst C-word anyone had ever said to me.

“What kind of cancer?” I am surprised by how level I sound, because I feel like I’ve been knocked over.

Mom says nothing.

“Well, the mass is on her ovary,” Dad explains.

His voice trembles and this pulls tears from my eyes. Big, bold Daddy. Good Midwestern stock. My stalwart, stoic stepfather trying not to cry.

“Dr. Gimble said not to Google anything.”

Mom throws this out there quickly but it’s too late. Early signs, symptoms, detection, treatment, and causes all come up on my screen.

“They still have more tests to run,” she says.

Her voice is quiet but strong. Mom is trying to be brave, for us. I can be brave for her, too. I put the phone on mute and take one large, gasping breath. I fill my lungs with oxygen until they feel like they’re going to burst. I hold it for three, five, ten seconds. Not until I can feel my heartbeat behind my eyes and my lungs are screaming, do I let it all out. I do it once more. Then I unmute.

I feel less like a balloon floating into the atmosphere and more like myself.

“Have you told the boys?” I ask. I am older than my triplet younger brothers, John, James, and Sebastian, by six years. They are all adults with full-time jobs, but they’ll always be “the boys” to me.

“No. Not yet,” Mom says.

I nod even though she can’t see me. My brothers are momma’s boys. She’d be comforting them more than they’d comfort her. I didn’t realize until this moment, though, how much of a momma’s girl I am.

“I can get a flight out on Saturday evening,” I say, scrolling through the flight options.

“No, no. You stay there. I’d rather not turn it into something bigger than it is,” Mom says quietly.

“This is pretty big, Mom,” I say gently. I’m torn between respecting her wishes and just wanting to be with my mom. My brain, heart, and many more of my internal organs already feel like they’re halfway to Minnesota even if the rest of my body is still in this chair.

“I love you, Mommy.”

I haven’t called her Mommy since the boys were born. When I became a big sister I decided that I was too mature to have a *mommy* anymore.

“Oh, Corrine.” Her voice breaks. “I love you, too.”

Chapter 11: Wesley

I'm a house of cards with two coffee cups stacked on top of each other in my hand, my bag slung over my shoulder, files pinned to my chest. My watch says I'm late and I need to start taking the stairs. They'd probably be faster than this elevator—which, let's face it, has cursed me—that now stops on the eighth floor.

"Ah!" Richard claps his hands as he steps on. "Just the man I was looking for."

For the past few weeks of my internship, every time I see Richard around the office, he seems happy to see me, excited, even. And it used to feel great. If being Richard's intern wasn't possible, I was happy to take being in his good favor.

But now it's just getting weird.

He doesn't ask any of the questions I'd expect him to ask about my internship or the work or the company itself. He wants to know about my personal life—not in a weird way—but he always wants to know more about Amy, how we're doing without Mom, if I've talked to my dad lately. We've talked about baseball and my high school team and a recital he saw Amy perform in when we were sixteen.

If he did this with all the other interns it wouldn't seem so strange. But he doesn't talk to Mark, his own intern, as much as he talks to me, and it makes me suspicious, like when the conversation quiets the second I walk into a room and everyone does their best to avoid eye contact with me.

"Hi, Mr. Skyler."

"Call me Dick."

I'm...not going to do that.

"How's it going?" I ask instead.

"I'm well, son." He smiles at my stack of coffee cups and my tenuous grasp on the files. "Coffee fan?"

That's another thing about Richard: for a CEO and all-around brilliant marketer, he's a little clueless.

I glance down at them. "One is for Ms. Blunt," I say slowly.

"Right," he says. A sad little frown creases his forehead. "Is she getting on all right? Does she need any help preparing for her presentation?"

He jingles the change in his pocket and the sound confuses me as much as his question does. The tinkling is so out of place partnered with his concern.

I pause to stop the confused stutter from escaping. “I think she’s getting on fine?”

He turns his frown toward me. “Well, you know,” he says. “What with her mother’s cancer and all.”

Blood rushes through my ears so I don’t quite hear what he says next. His eyes glint, like he’s sharing a tasty morsel of gossip rather than the news of someone’s potential death sentence. He shakes his head in that way people have—feigned regret—his mouth still moving but all I can hear is the beep, beep, beep of my mom’s heart monitor.

My head spins as we step onto our floor. Richard walks to the Hill City lobby doors but I’m still trying to catch up with his news. And the fact that he thought he should be the one who gets to tell me.

“Are you going to be okay, son?”

I’m not your son, I almost snap.

I’m not anyone’s, really. Not anymore.

“Why...why wouldn’t I be okay?” I ask, my mouth barely forming the words past the dryness in my throat.

“Didn’t I say?” He leans back, his hands in his pockets, still jingling that change, like an unconscious tic. “She has ovarian cancer, too.”

In the silence afterward, Richard blinks. Takes a step away. I’m scowling at him, I realize. My face contorted into a gargoyle’s version of itself.

I shake my head to clear the expression, but it does nothing to extinguish the sudden urge I have to throw all the crap in my hands to the floor and deck Richard Skyler right in the mouth.

“If you need to take any time, just let me know.”

“I think I’m late,” I say, turning away. My feet feel like they move faster than the rest of my body but I still can’t get away from that conversation fast enough. Not until I’m in the hallway, standing in front of my desk outside Ms. Blunt’s office, do I let myself stop.

The pounding heart is replaced by a tightness in my chest that might be heart failure. I shake my head trying to keep the images from behind my eyes. But it all comes back.

The grayish color to her skin, the sound of her labored breathing, the smell in her bedroom. Feeling alone once she was gone and still feeling that way now, months later.

Everything in my body wants to stay out of that room. Walking in there would be reliving it all again, from the beginning. But I have to go in. And not just because I'm late for our meeting.

Corrine Blunt doesn't like me and her reasons for that might be misguided but right now I might be the only person in this building who knows exactly what she's thinking.

The files start to fall as I push open her office door.

"I know. I'm late. I'm sorry," I say, grabbing and pulling at the papers so they don't fall all over the floor. I grapple there, in pointed silence, until all of the files are straightened.

As I stand up again, I stitch myself together. My stomach climbs up my legs, my rib cage uncrushes itself, my throat no longer burns. I expect to find her at her desk with her ass parked on the edge of it, her arms crossed, her scowl firmly in place because I was supposed to be here ten minutes ago.

My gaze trips over her slouched form on the white sofa, staring at her phone. She doesn't even acknowledge me. I creep forward slowly, placing the files on the table, her coffee in front of her.

"Ms. Blunt?"

Her eyes are red, her cheeks blotchy. She quickly looks away.

"Is..." I swallow past the lump in my throat. My twin sister is my best friend and also the most dramatic person I've ever met. In other words, I'm used to—and comfortable with—women crying.

But seeing Ms. Blunt cry is different. Seeing Ms. Blunt cry is like acknowledging the truth I'd tried to let myself forget: that she is not only a human being but one who can be hurt. One who *has* been hurt, even unintentionally, by me.

Also I need to text Amy immediately to tell her that Ms. Blunt does, in fact, have tear ducts.

"Are you all right?"

The question feels like a lie. I already know that she isn't. Fuck Richard for playing fast and loose with something like this.

Devastating news should only be shared by the people it devastates.

"My mom," she warbles. Quickly, she swipes her palm across her face. "She has ovarian cancer. We found out last night." She takes a shuddering breath. "I just told my brother."

Hearing it again doesn't get any better. I feel off-kilter. My knees weak.

I have something to tell you, my mom said when we got home from school.

She'd made cookies and set out milk, like she used to when we were kids. But my dad sat at the kitchen table and he was never home that early on a Wednesday. That's when I knew my life was about to change. I sat down, relieved because I'd thought my parents were going to tell us they were finally getting a divorce.

My body thuds into the armchair with no arms, a delayed response to when Richard first broke the news. "I, uh. I'm sorry." My voice still sounds like someone's hand is wrapped around my throat.

She nods, once. Sniffles.

"Do you need to go see her or something?"

My hands started shaking at some point so I clench them into fists. I can't fuck this up. I can't make this worse for her. "I can cancel your presentation and—"

"No." She shakes her head. "No. They're in Minnesota. She doesn't want me to come. Not yet."

I nod, slowly.

Your mom is sick. She has cancer, my dad said. He started crying.

"What's her name?" I ask.

I say the words louder than I intend, trying to keep the memory of my father's sobs out of my head. I'd had no idea he cared that much.

Ms. Blunt startles.

"Your mom," I say again. "What's her name?"

She studies me. Long enough that I think she won't answer. "Linda," she says in a choked whisper.

The air in my lungs leaves me in one great gust. I smile, even though I really want to cry. I look away when I feel a prickle in my eyes.

"My mom's name was Laura." They're not the same, of course, but right now they're close enough that my stomach hurts.

This is the sickest *déjà vu* I've ever had. Why the *fuck* would the universe think I need to relive this?

She blinks once, twice. "Oh god. I'm so sorry. Oh god." She drops her head into her hands. "Your mom was sick, too."

When my mother was diagnosed, our family rallied around her. Amy and I were in our senior year of high school and Dad was working sixty-hour weeks. But he cut back to take her to all her appointments, drive me to baseball practice and Amy to ballet. And when Mom received a clean bill of health, only a year and a half later, he took us all on vacation to Hawaii.

When she was diagnosed a second time, my father split. It turned out that the whole time, since her very first doctor's appointment, he'd been having an affair.

I felt so betrayed the day he moved out. I sat on the front steps, remembering the way he used to lift me up over his head, rubbing his beard into my neck just to hear me laugh when I was a kid. The pride that would fill my chest when he'd refer to us as his "little miracles."

I called him a pig. Hurling the word at him as he folded himself into his car, the back seat filled with boxes of his clothes. He sighed at me, loud enough that I could hear it from the front steps. "Aren't I allowed to be happy, Wesley?" he asked.

So I called him a pig again, a *fascist pig*, even though he's been a registered Democrat since he was eighteen, and went back in the house.

"It's fine," I assure her but I still don't feel quite right; the same not quite right I felt the day my mom told us. I think I'll feel like this for the rest of the day. Maybe the rest of my life.

Tears fill her eyes again. I don't think I've ever sat close enough to her before to notice her eyes. They're like autumn. Gold and orange and red and yellow. They're so pretty and something in them makes me reach out, clasp her hand in mine, and squeeze.

"Everything will be okay, Ms. Blunt."

She laughs sadly, quietly. Her hand feels cold. "You can't possibly know that."

I shrug. "I can hope it, though."

This time, when she looks at me, she *looks* at me. She studies my face. I feel her gaze over my brow, down the bridge of my nose. I feel it touch my lips, move away, then touch my lips again.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Ms. Blunt? To help?"

She doesn't answer right away. Her eyes linger on mine and for the first time since I've met her, I don't want to shrink away from her. I don't want to fidget with my hair or adjust my socks. My first instinct isn't to fold in on myself and make myself smaller. It's the ninth inning and I'm squaring off against the best batter in the league and this time I've got nothing to hide.

So I don't.

I let her see *me*. Let her see that there are no tricks up my sleeve, and that I'm not who she thought I was.

At the moment when my chest is cracking in two, I feel strong, stronger

than I've felt in months. Strong enough for the both of us.

She sits up taller, mirroring me, like she's feeling a little stronger, too. She picks up her coffee cup, flicking open the file on top of the stack in front of her, pulling her mock-ups into her lap. She transforms in front of my eyes, a metamorphosis into a badass butterfly.

"Yes, Mr. Chambers." She takes a sip of her drink and scowls down at the cup. It's probably cold by now. "You can get back to work."

Everything will be okay, Wesley, my mom said.

You can't possibly know that. I wiped at my face. I didn't want my dad to know I was crying, too. My mom smiled and said, *I can hope it, though.*

Chapter 12: Corrine

The ding of the elevator reverberates through my skull. I wince and a wave of nausea rolls over me so that I have to lean my shoulder against the wall until it passes, while the echo of that sound ricochets around my brain. The doors close again and I only stop them by swinging my bag into the quickly shrinking gap. Something crunches inside as the elevator tries to crush it.

My migraines usually sync up with the hormone drop that comes with my cycle. But stress and fatigue—like finding out my mother has cancer, telling our family for her yesterday—bring them on, too.

I walk forward slowly, silently praying that no one speaks to me, no one needs my help, no one so much as looks at me. Even if they did approach me, I'm not sure I would see them coming. I can barely keep my eyes open. The light filtering through my sunglasses pulses. Waves of pain move through my skull in time with the beat of my heart. Sheer muscle memory gets me past the Pit, down the hall, and around the corner toward my office. Wesley is on the phone as I approach, watching me like one might observe a dying animal on safari.

“Okay. Thanks, Marisol. I have to go. I'll call you back,” he says, his eyes still on me. He hangs up and rises from his chair, meeting me halfway.

My whole body is a clenched fist. My hair could only manage an anemic ponytail because my usual high and tight updo hurt too much. My shoulders draw up to my ears and no amount of deep breathing can bring them down. My brow furrows no matter how many fingertip massages I give it as I try to calm my nervous system.

I take a sip from my coffee cup and immediately regret it. The smell, the taste, even the temperature of the drink cause a wave of nausea and pain to move through me.

“Good morning,” he says and somehow, blessedly, he knows to say it quietly, softly. The pain only rolls through my head rather than stabbing.

I swallow down the vomit in my throat and manage a small, crooked smile back at him. Gently, he takes the coffee from my hand. My grip tightens around the cup for a moment before the muscles give up, shaking. I'm not sure when the shaking started.

“I'm not sure how to say this without sounding rude but...”

He gives me a rueful smile.

“You look terrible.”

I want to muster up the energy for a dirty look. Throwing out a “mind your own business” seems appropriate. But the most I can do is totter past him without losing my balance. Wesley shuffles around behind me and follows me in. I don’t bother turning on the lights, that would just be self-flagellation. Melting into my desk chair, I prop my head up in my hands, wave him closer, and nod for him to tell me about my day.

“Well, you have a meeting in...” He checks his watch. “Thirteen minutes.”

Shaking my head, I say, “I cancelled that. This morning.” Even my voice sounds deeper and rough. It hurts my own ears.

“Oh.” He frowns. “I didn’t get that email.”

My mouth flattens. “I’m sure I cc’d you.”

I search for my phone to find the email I sent as I lay in bed this morning. He puts his palm over my hand, stopping my feeble patting at my desk. The warmth of his hand travels up my arm, slow and molten. It’s maybe the first pleasurable feeling I’ve had so far today. Still, I pull my hand out from underneath his. The fact that he’s touching me at all feels less inappropriate than the way it makes me feel.

“It’s okay. I’m sure I must have missed it.”

From the look on his face, though, I am sure he did not just miss it and I forgot to cc him. His kindness feels like his hand on mine—both today and yesterday when he comforted me about Mom—thoroughly unprofessional.

And definitely undeserved.

“Do you have a headache? Do you think you’re coming down with something?”

He pauses, waiting for an answer.

“Can I get you anything? I bet Emily has a small hospital in her desk.”

I lean to the side and pull open a desk drawer. “I have my prescription here...”

But I trail off as I rummage through the drawer, picking up an empty orange prescription bottle, shaking it, before throwing it back down and continuing my search.

My panic only serves to make everything feel worse. The tension in my shoulders, the throbbing behind my eyes, increase as I slowly realize that I never picked up my prescription. I sit back in my chair, sliding the drawer closed with a quiet click. My eyelids are so heavy. The pain crushes me. I

might implode on myself like a dying star. I kind of want to. At least then I wouldn't hurt like this.

"Ms. Blunt," he whispers. At some point he made his way around my desk. His presence beside my chair feels like a huge tree. One I can lean up against, that would take my weight for me for a few hours. "Why don't you go home?"

I take a deep breath and shake my head. "I can do this."

"You can barely sit up," he counters. "And you haven't given me any shit for saying you look terrible or taking your coffee from you."

He sets the cup on the desk in front of me.

"It's just a headache," I croak. The lie tastes like bile in my mouth. Or maybe that's actual bile.

"It's clearly a migraine."

"I'll be fine," I whisper. "I never miss work."

My throat closes, saliva fills my mouth.

"Are you going to barf?"

The word is a trigger.

My stomach sinks all the way down to my feet, then slingshots back up my throat. I stand and pinball off the wall, my chair, and push open the door to my small office bathroom. I don't even get the door closed before I wrench into the sink, then stumble to my knees in front of the toilet. The only advantage to feeling too nauseated to eat is there's nothing to throw up.

I grip the sides of the toilet—something I would normally never touch without rubber gloves—to keep myself upright as I dry heave, again and again. The coolness of the porcelain travels up my arms, a balm to the hot sweat that's broken out over my body.

When the last wave passes, I stand, facing myself in the mirror, just to confirm that Wesley was right: I do look terrible. My skin is pasty and colorless. My eyes are bloodshot. My sunglasses must have fallen off somewhere between my desk and the toilet. I peer down into the bowl but they're not in there. That's all the energy for searching I can muster at this moment. Sweat prickles my skin so I splash some water on my face, my neck, and take a sip in my cupped hands.

Wesley holds my prescription bottle as I leave the bathroom. I stumble around like a newborn foal in these heels. My thighs could collapse at any moment.

"Rizatriptan?" he asks.

“It’s a migraine medication. I forgot it here the last time I had one and I guess... I never picked up my next prescription.”

I try to calculate the days since my last migraine but the numbers swirl together. All I know is that forgetting something like *this* isn’t like me. I have to stay on top of these drugs to prevent this very thing from happening.

I eye Wesley as he studies the empty pill bottle. I think I know exactly what distracted me: punishing Wesley Chambers. I’ve been horrible to him and he’s being so kind to me. The thought of it makes me want to cry. I stomp my foot and shake my head, trying to physically will away the tears. But all I do is make Wesley jump and send another bolt of pain through my head.

“Ms. Blunt, you need to go home.”

I prop myself up against the desk and nod. Asking for help hurts nearly as much as the drill behind my eyes.

“Would you be willing to drive me home?” I wince. “I need to stop at the pharmacy on the way and refill my prescription.”

He pauses, pulling at the collar of his shirt, twisting his tie around his fingers. “Sure,” he says slowly. “You have that presentation tomorrow...”

I close my eyes, trying to picture my schedule in my head, but it slides by like the credits of a movie.

“The Grimes presentation,” he prompts.

Shit.

“I’ll... I’ll finish it up after I’ve had a little rest.”

I start to sweat at the amount of work I still have ahead of me. If I’d enlisted his help earlier I wouldn’t be here right now. Tears threaten at the corners of my eyes. *Again.* I turn away. He already knows I barfed. I can’t let him see me cry, too.

“I can...” He pauses. “I can take care of it. If you want.”

“No.” The word is out of my mouth faster than my brain can keep up.

“Why not?” he asks. Instead of pissing me off, the challenge in his tone makes me proud. He makes me want to trust him. This migraine is turning me soft.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I ask.

He looks down. I follow his gaze. Overlapping pride flags on his socks peek out from underneath his pant leg and something inside of me folds over.

“I just...” He pauses again.

I want to open his mouth and pull the words out so I don’t have to wait.

“I know what it feels like to hear that your mom is sick and I...” He clears his throat. “I know what it’s like, okay? I want to help. If I can. And I want to show you that I’m not the person you think I am.”

Now I look away. “Listen, it was a misunderstanding.”

And I realize as I say it that I do actually believe it. I know I heard him laugh that day but I also know that he’s a good person. So maybe I don’t have all the facts.

Pain like a railroad spike through my eye hits my frontal lobe. Another wave of nausea passes over me and I list toward the desk. He takes a step toward me, concern furrowing his brow, but I hold my hand palm up to stop him. “We can talk about this later. Right now, I just need to go home, sleep it off, and get started on that presentation.”

His mouth twists and he fidgets with his cuff, like he’s fighting the urge to say more.

“Yes, Ms. Blunt.”

His formality rings like a bell in the room. I realize I haven’t called him Mr. Chambers once this morning. Maybe it’s the extreme vulnerability I feel at barfing in front of my intern. Or it’s just the pain, in my head, or in my heart, making me foolish. But right now, I really wish he’d call me Corrine.

Chapter 13: Wesley

Trying to be Corrine Blunt is not easy. When the head of an entire department takes a sick day, it's like throwing a grenade into a chicken coop. Without the authority to make any decisions, the most I can do is rearrange schedules and collect ruffled feathers.

By the time I raise my head from ongoing calendar rearrangement, the only light in the hallway is the orange glow from the sun low in the sky. The only sound is the high whine of a vacuum somewhere else on the floor. I lean back in my chair and loosen my tie. Slowly I roll my shoulders down from where they've been hunched around my ears for hours.

My stomach makes the kind of gurgling sound that would be embarrassing in front of another person. I pat my belly and close my eyes. "Sorry, buddy."

The shrill sound of my sister's ringtone pierces the peaceful quiet.

When I answer, she doesn't say hello. Just, "Come out tonight. We're trying a bunch of the new recipes before the launch and the head bartender is making all the cocktails for us to sample."

My stomach gurgles again. Amy's chef is a genius. "Okay. Just let me finish up here."

Amy makes a happy, squeal-y sound. "I feel like I haven't seen you in so long between opening the restaurant and your hours."

"Yeah." I sigh as another email comes in. "Sorry about that. I just have one more email and then I'm on my way."

"Great. I'll save you a seat."

I put my phone facedown on the desk and open the email from Arjan, a designer in the graphics department. He stayed late, too. Anticipating an email from Ms. Blunt with instructions for her presentation. She has a ton of print and digital mock-ups, an app she's pitching. But he hasn't received the designs yet.

Crap.

I open the shared file for Ms. Blunt's presentation. The last changes were saved yesterday.

Double crap.

Sliding my phone off my desk, I send her a text about the presentation. The sun sinks lower in the window, the light gets dimmer as I wait for her

response. I send her one more, a gentle prompt so it won't sound like I'm checking up on her.

Arjan was wondering if you have anything for him to design tonight?

The power button on my computer screen calls to me, like the Ring calls to Frodo. It tells me to shut down and go eat good food and drink good cocktails at Amy's new restaurant.

"She didn't want your help anyway," I mutter.

I open the presentation again, scrolling through the pages. There's still a few hours of work to be done.

The phone rings and I jump in my chair.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Arjan. Do you need me to stay?"

"Uhhh..." I scratch my head. In that elevator a couple weeks ago, I didn't do the right thing. I didn't go to HR or tell Richard what Mark said. I didn't have her back.

Amy is going to be so pissed.

"Yeah," I say. "I need you to stay."

Chapter 14: Corrine

The problem with trying to simultaneously thank and bribe the man I have taken no time to get to know is that I haven't a clue how he likes this coffee I bought for him. But I know no other way to say thank you for your kindness and also *help me* than with caffeine.

"I'm sorry. I'd like to start over and—"

My practice apology dies on my lips as I turn the corner.

Wesley is already at his desk. But he's bent over it.

"Mr. Chambers?" As I get closer, I realize he's not bent over his desk, he's lying on it.

"Wesley," I half screech, half whisper. He doesn't move. Reaching out, I shake his shoulder.

"Wake. Up," I say between gritted teeth. He mumbles something that sounds like *later, Mom*, and *oh* a fault line cracks through my chest.

I shake him a little more gently this time.

"Wesley." I crouch down beside him, sliding the coffee cup onto his desk. "You *need* to wake up. This is an emergency."

His whole body goes rigid, then relaxes. Slowly, Wesley lifts his head from the pillow he's made of his arms and turns to me. His face seems naked without his glasses.

But still handsome. *Shut up about his face. You are this man's boss.*

His hair stands straight up in the front, messy and tousled, like he's been reading too many YA novels.

Wesley smiles at me. A full, dimple-pressing, teeth-showing, eye-crinkling smile. One that looks happy to see me. I've never seen him smile at me like this before.

I open my mouth but every word I'd planned on saying is gone, kicked out of my brain. It's impossible not to think about his stupid face when he smiles at me like that.

"Good morning, Ms. Blunt." His voice rumbles, deeper than usual. He sits up, rubs his eyes, then stands and stretches. "Are you feeling better?"

Right. Migraine. Sleep. Presentation. I'm screwed.

I pull myself up using the edge of the desk, the panic rising with me.

I rub at my forehead even though the pain is blessedly gone. "How I feel

isn't the issue. I...made a mistake yesterday.

"I was sicker than I gave myself credit for and the medication put me down just as hard as the headache did."

I take a deep breath, preparing myself to admit to this failure. "I didn't get to finish the presentation."

An eager smile crosses his face and surprise makes me blink fast. But I shouldn't be surprised. Of course he'd want to see me fail.

"I have..." I check my watch again. "Three hours until the clients and our executive team start filling up that boardroom and I'm not sure that will be enough time but...I need your help."

"Okay. Don't be mad," he says.

"If someone tells me not to be mad, I'm immediately going to be a little mad," I inform him.

His eyes widen and he sits down in his chair. "Okay. Well, don't be a lot mad but..." He starts opening files on his desktop, slides, mock-ups. His nose almost touches the screen, he's leaning so absurdly close, and he squints to the point that I can barely see his eyes.

I nudge his glasses across the desk to him.

He grins with one side of his mouth. On anyone else I would say he was intentionally trying to charm me. But again, I think this is just Wesley's face. The one he gives when his guard is down.

Sliding the glasses on his face pulls him together. Nothing else has changed, his hair is still a mess, and now I notice his wrinkled clothes—his tie is nowhere to be seen—but his glasses are like a tube of red lipstick for me. Armor.

"So, yesterday you said that you didn't want my help and I get that." He smiles up at me. "You like to quality control the product."

My mouth hangs open. That's *exactly* what I like to do. How, in between all the errands I sent him on, did he have time to notice that?

"But Arjan mentioned that he hadn't got any design notes from you last night and I thought maybe you still weren't feeling well."

He stands, inviting me to take his seat.

"If there's anything you don't like, we can change it. In fact, if you hate it all we can just start again. But..." He holds his hands out. "I did the presentation for you. Just in case."

My body moves in slow motion as I sit in the chair. My blinks happen too slowly, too, like there's sand behind my lids.

I click through the slides and they...don't suck. They're good, in fact. Good enough that I could take this presentation to the meeting right now and not completely embarrass myself.

"This...is some hot copy, Wesley." I look up at him. "I can work with this."

He seems to grow a little taller as he stands there. A slow smile spreads across his face. "So you're not mad?"

"I am going to make some changes," I add.

He nods quickly. "Of course. Whatever you want," he assures me. "But...this was okay, right?"

My stomach sinks a little in my lap, that this is the reaction he'd expect of me. "I'm not mad, Wesley. I mean, Mr. Chambers."

I inject as much sincerity into my voice as I can. I need him to believe me. "I'm appreciative. You helped me. You didn't have to do that. In fact, I wouldn't have been surprised at all if—after the way I've treated you—you actively tried to sabotage me."

He sticks his hands in his pockets and glances at the desktop. "That little retribution thing? I barely noticed."

The silence that falls between us feels oppressive, a heavy blanket. Because what can I possibly say to him now? Other than I'm sorry. I fill my lungs with a big gulp of air, swallowing my pride with it, to do just that. But he starts to tap a fast rhythm on his desk with his index fingers. Maybe the silence was only oppressive to me.

"I'm exhausted," he says, rubbing a hand down his face and skewing his glasses. His messy hair and rumpled clothes fit together like puzzle pieces. He slept at his desk last night to get this done. I can't count the number of times that I've fallen asleep at my desk from staying late and working hard. But to know he did that—for me—something inside me turns over again, like yesterday, and as it settles it feels alarmingly like I *like* Wesley Chambers.

"So I'll go get us some coffee and you can make some revision notes and when I get back we can get to work on polishing this up."

I nod.

"The usual?" he asks.

I frown. "Umm. Obviously?"

He laughs softly through his nose. "I was...joking."

Warmth fills my chest, not embarrassment, but happiness. The urge to smile back at him, laugh with him, pulls one corner of my mouth up but I tamp it down. All of this is so new, foreign to me. It's the relationship I

wished to have with him from the beginning. Working together, enjoying it. Feeling comfortable enough to joke, to laugh.

But now so much has happened, it feels impossible and fleeting, as fragile as a baby bird in the palm of my hand. The fear that I will wake up tomorrow and we'll be back to what we were before—not quite enemies, but not like this—a team. It hurts to think of it.

He pulls his security ID out of a drawer and starts down the hallway. His day-old shirt isn't as wrinkled from the back and I suppress the urge to offer to pay for his dry cleaning. Wesley glances over his shoulder before he turns the corner and smiles at me.

“Oh!” I say. I hold up his apology coffee. “This is for you.”

His smile crinkles and he turns back to me.

“I don't know how you take it...” I hold the cup out to him. It's lukewarm now. “It's cold. But...I was trying to say thank you.”

He passes my own—also cold—coffee to me. “Cheers.”

I take a sip of my cold drink.

But that warm feeling in my chest is still there.

* * *

With each click of Wesley's pen my shoulders rise a little higher. He always seems to be in a perpetual state of motion but after the stress of this morning, he's more fidgety than usual as he follows me to the conference room. I swallow my annoyance. He saved my butt today, after all.

Plus, if I had a pen in my hand, I'd probably be clicking it, too.

I stop just outside the conference room and as I turn, I catch him. His gaze falls from the top of my head, down over my blazer, my waist, and resting on my ass, which I slowly remove from his view.

He pulls his eyes up fast but his eyes widen. He knows he's caught. Now would be a good time to throw out a sarcastic, *Catch a good look?* or *Like what you see?*

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. I can't even remember what I wanted to say to him. I wait for the grimy feeling that comes with Richard's leer to hit me now. But it's conspicuously absent.

That can't be good.

Brushing a hair off my forehead, I feel his eyes follow the curve of my neck down to my collarbone where my silk blouse brushes against my skin.

“Oh,” he says. “Red, white, and blue. You’re like the Fourth of July.”

I blink at him as embarrassment prickles my neck. Wesley wasn’t checking me out. He’s associating me with the least sexy holiday.

Flattening my palms down the front of my skirt and straightening my jacket, I pull myself back together and say, “Red is assertive. Blue is calming. I like to appear both in charge and...approachable.”

“You do,” he says quickly. “Very much so.”

His tone sounds like he might be lying a little bit. Or maybe he just stopped seeing me as “in charge” after I threw up in front of him.

“Are you ready?” I ask. A swarm of butterflies migrates from my lower intestine to my xiphoid process. We edited the presentation together in my office all morning; him with a chair pulled up beside mine, his knees brushing the cabinet under my desk. It’s as good as it could be and exactly what we need to land this client. I can handle Grimes the way he needs to be handled all while telling him I can handle him the way he thinks he wants. But Richard is an unknown quantity in this meeting and that’s where these butterflies are coming from. He’s never asked to sit in on a client meeting before. If this is the kind of micromanagement I can expect, I’m not sure that the promotion is worth it.

Wesley pauses, like he’s assessing if he is, in fact, ready.

“Yes.” He nods once. Wesley studies me; the butterflies turn into wasps. He looks like he wants to ask me if I’m ready, too.

I don’t want to have to lie.

He nods again. “You’re ready.”

I blink at him as he steps past me, a crooked smile on his face, and opens the meeting room door. “After you, Ms. Blunt.”

I take a deep breath. Let the wasps stay. I’ll use them on Richard.

* * *

The meeting goes about as well as expected. Like a group of uncles and grandfathers indulging a granddaughter as she plays make-believe. But Grimes is satisfied at least.

“Well done, Corrine!” Richard’s voice booms as everyone else files out. The room is too warm and dim. All the furniture is dark brown and overtly masculine.

A grimy feeling slicks my skin, a reaction triggered by Richard’s voice and

the inevitable touching that will happen. Wesley pauses as he chats with Thomas, the COO. I hold his eyes for a few moments. *Stay. Please stay.*

In the span of twenty-four hours this man has become my ally. Or maybe he was all along and I never saw it.

Richard speaks too loudly for how close he stands but I don't hear what he says. My attention keeps flickering over his shoulder to where Wesley leans against the wall.

"You know," Richard says, his voice softening in what I think is meant to be a seductive tone. There it is—he lifts his hand, cupping my elbow. "We could talk about this more over dinner tonight."

I look at my shoes to hide the flush on my skin. It never matters how wrong I know he is, there's always a part of me that thinks I did or said something to lead him on, to make him think I am interested, that any of this is okay.

But it's not okay. None of his behavior is. And now not only has he invaded my personal space, talked down to me, touched me without my permission, he's asked me out—in front of my intern—like I'm some woman in a bar and not a person who has helped to make his company a lot of money.

Adrenaline hardens my spine as I meet Richard's steel-gray eyes. *Fuck him.*

"I'm sorry, Richard. That won't be possible."

Richard frowns. I don't think he hears no often enough.

"Mr. Chambers," I say, catching his eye. "We have a lot of work to do."

Richard turns, realizing, I think, that Wesley is still here. He pales as Wesley stands straighter. Richard steps back and I can breathe again.

"Of course," he mutters. "Of course."

Richard regains himself as he strides out of the room in long steps. "Well done, Wesley."

Wesley doesn't say anything back. He looks at me. I pretend to collect the papers on the table for an excuse not to meet his eyes.

"Is everything...okay?" he asks.

"It's fine," I mutter. The only thing worse than experiencing that moment with Richard would be talking about it with Wesley right now.

"Did he just..." He pauses, his mouth puckering like he doesn't like the taste of the word in his mouth. "Was he asking..."

"I said, it's fine, Mr. Chambers," I snap.

“It didn’t seem *fine*, Ms. Blunt,” he snaps back.

My head cocks to the side because I’m not quite sure I heard him correctly. Wesley Chambers isn’t only loyal and hardworking and kind. He has a spine.

A shiver runs down my own.

“It just seemed like maybe you were uncomfortable and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I gather the last of my things, staring down at the shiny black finish. “He’s just being friendly. It doesn’t mean anything.”

I don’t know why I’m defending Richard. The words feel so rote, I can’t stop them.

“But thank you,” I say and I mean it. “For wanting to make sure.”

He nods.

“You’d better go soon,” I tell him.

“I...uh...what?”

I make a show of checking my watch. “Our first softball practice is tonight, Mr. Manager.”

“Oh.”

His eyes get wide in panic. “I have to go change. I have to go *stretch*.”

He walks out, his hair brushing the top of the doorframe. Warmth, like hot honey, fills my chest. I’m in trouble.

Chapter 15: Wesley

All dugouts smell the same. Like sweat, and soil, and a little bit of metal. The sounds of dugouts change, though. Some sound like the crunch of gravel under my cleats and the ringing of chain-link fences for walls. The dugout at the field we're renting for our team practice is a cavernous cement hole that echoes and feels damp and cold even in the heat. Which is fine. It's the smell that makes it feel like home.

The dugout ceiling is low enough that as I stand I have to hunch a little. "So...should we get started?"

No one acknowledges me. I clear my throat to try again.

"It's...our first team practice."

Maybe I should have clapped to get their attention. I raise my hands but let them drop. The idea of their attention makes my mouth a little dry. Part of me almost wishes I were back in that conference room this afternoon, watching Ms. Blunt kill it in front of all those execs. At least there, no one was paying attention to me.

"Wes, those pants are adorable," Marisol says, throwing her bag down beside mine. "Where did you find them?"

I glance down at my tight pants, my socks pulled up and the matching jersey. "I, uh, still fit into my high school team uniform."

"Of course you do," she says, reaching up to pat my head. We both fall silent as Mark tries to give Emily pointers on her batting stance. She seems only mildly annoyed until he comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around hers and holding the bat on either side of her hands. His hips press in close to hers and her face turns red. I leap the steps out of the dugout and clap my hands together.

"Can everyone gather up over here for a team meeting?"

Emily pushes Mark off her and says something to him I can't hear. But from the scowl on his face I hope it had something to do with fucking himself.

Everyone stands around in various athletic wear. Only a few have brought their own gloves.

"If you need gloves, I brought extras." I point to the equipment bag at my feet. Dust kicks up as everyone rushes it. "But most are on loan so please

return them to me as you found them,” I say over the din of people fighting for the best gloves.

“Who put you in charge, Chambers?” Mark sneers.

“I did.”

Ms. Blunt stands at the edge of the group. This is the first time I’ve seen her outside of the office. She seems smaller in the outdoors. Or maybe that’s just because she’s wearing running shoes instead of heels. She holds a shiny new glove in her hand. The tag still dangles from the web.

“Does anyone have any questions?” she asks in that way she has, like any questions would be a great inconvenience to her.

Mark scowls down at his glove.

“Does anyone have any experience playing softball or baseball?” I ask.

A couple people raise their hands and the group laughs nervously.

“Well, don’t worry. I’ve played baseball my whole life,” I say, looking at Ms. Blunt as I do. She bites the inside of her lip. It feels like confirmation that she assigned this to me because she didn’t know I was born with a ball in my hand.

But the feeling in my gut isn’t smugness at her mistake, just excitement to show her what I can do.

“I’ve been coaching kids’ teams since I was eighteen, so I think we probably won’t completely embarrass ourselves in front the rest of the building.”

* * *

Almost three hours later, my throat is sore from yelling instructions across the diamond and the supreme confidence I felt coaching this team has floated away like diamond dust. Half the team could barely catch the ball with their gloves on, and only three people hit the ball in a semi-forward direction. At least when I coach children, they assume I have some sort of authority. This team would barely listen to me. Everyone stands in groups, sipping from water bottles and laughing. I feel like a pimple. Big and a little sore and totally obvious on an otherwise unblemished face. No matter how bad I want to, I don’t know how to get up from this bench and join a group.

Abila makes eye contact with me across the dugout. I stretch out my neck and shoulders and check my phone in an effort not to look at her. There’s a text from Amy reminding me of dinner tonight with our dad.

Thanks for the reminder, I text back. I don't think I'm going to make it tho...have work to do once I get home from practice. :S.

The text dots appear in our chat window, then Amy texts back a sad face and:

If you're not going then I'm NOT going.

I'll call him, I assure her. I can't deal with a pissed-off Amy today and if anything is going to piss her off it's going to be our father.

I pull up my dad's contact.

"Yeah," is how he answers his phone.

"Hey, Dad, how's it going?" He grunts a non-answer and when he doesn't say any more I push on. "I'm going to have to cancel our dinner tonight."

There's a pause and I wave goodbye to a few people in the silence. I check my phone screen to see if the call dropped. "Dad?"

"What dinner?" he barks.

"Amy and I were supposed to meet you for dinner tonight, Dad." I try to keep the impatience from my voice.

"Okay. Fine."

I drop my head into my free hand. "Dad, wait... I'm saying we *can't* meet you. Can we reschedule?"

"Why?" he asks contemptuously. "Does she have to waitress?"

I sigh, not bothering to muffle the sound. "Amy's opening her own restaurant, Dad. She's not a server anymore." I pause. "And even if she was, why does it matter?"

He ignores my question. "Well, then why the fuck are you cancelling last minute?"

Forget the fact that he didn't even remember we were supposed to have dinner together thirty seconds ago.

"I have to work," I say bluntly. "I'll email you about next time."

I end the call and text Amy: Dinner is cancelled.

Good, she writes. And then, I have a surprise for you when you get home. Make sure it's at an actually reasonable time. And don't bail.

My neck flushes at the reminder that I bailed on her dinner last night. She left an encyclopedia of messages on my phone, ranging from angry to

worried, this morning. I guess I should just be happy she's even talking to me.

Amy, I have so much work to do.

You better be home.

Amy is a doer. She has an idea and she *does* it. She makes it happen. But sometimes she doesn't always care who she has to bowl over to get there.

And usually the person she has to bowl over is me.

Fine. I'll do my best. What's the surprise? I ask.

She just sends back a poop emoji.

"That was a little embarrassing."

I fumble with my phone to black out the screen and hide the shit.

Ms. Blunt sits down beside me on the dugout bench.

"Yeah." I shift to face her. "I guess I kind of oversold my expertise."

She shakes her head. "I meant..." She gestures to the last dregs of our ragtag team. "I'm sure it just takes time. It's like that with any team."

"That seems wise."

I wave to Emily over Ms. Blunt's shoulder as she gets into her car. I still have to collect the bases and put all of the gloves and bats away because no one has stayed to help.

Except for Ms. Blunt.

I take my cap off and scratch my head with the bill. I don't have an itch. I just need something to do with my hands when she sits this close to me. Smelling like coconut while I'm sure I smell like sweat and dirt, dugout. I feel the need to apologize but I'm not sure exactly what for, the smell of me or maybe the way I snapped at her earlier.

I resist the urge to check out her legs in the yoga pants, again. I feel fairly positively about them—the shape of her thighs, the curve of her calves, hell, even her ankles are nice. I should probably apologize for that, too, but I'd have to admit it to her first.

That's never fucking happening.

"You don't have to stay and help clean up or anything. I don't mind doing it."

My chest tightens at the idea of going home too soon. Cleanup might actually be my savior.

“I wanted to say...” She looks out over the empty field. “Thank you. For your help today...or last night.” She waves her hand around in the air. “Anyway, also I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

Nothing she’s done recently has required an apology. She frowns at me and it clicks.

“Oh. That.”

The way she’s treated me up until recently. I would rather just pretend we already had this conversation than hash it out.

“It’s fine,” I say, waving my hand to emphasize the point. My glove flies out of my grasp and hits the chain-link fence. I don’t go after it. Maybe if I ignore it, it will be like that never happened. Corrine waits until the fence stops jingling before she speaks again.

“It’s not, though. Your first day, I heard what you said, it sounded like you preferred Richard. And what Mark said about me. But I didn’t hear your response. I just heard you laugh.”

“No—”

She holds up her hand to silence me. “I assumed you didn’t want me as your mentor because I was a woman, and from your laugh I thought you were in on the joke. I was disappointed, especially because Richard spoke so highly of you.”

She swallows visibly, staring straight ahead. “I was embarrassed and angry and I wanted to punish you. So, I did.

“I’m sorry for how I treated you in the past.” She swallows again, her pride, I think. “I’d like the chance to do better in the future.”

As much as I’d love to stare coolly back at her, like I’m sure she’d do to me if the tables were turned, I think my eagerness is written all over my face.

So, I say, “I’d like that, too.”

I make a fist against my thigh. “But I want to make something clear once and for all and then if you don’t want to, we never have to speak about it again. Or...you know, we can. Whatever you like.

“I never wished for a different mentor because you’re a woman. Richard was—is—a familiar face for me when I was trying to find my feet again, that’s all. Honestly, I was excited to work with you. And intimidated because you’re...” I gesture toward her. “You. Frankly, I’m still excited to work with you. And intimidated.”

She frowns and I want to smooth my thumb to the V over her forehead.

“And I’m sorry for what happened between Mark and I on my first day.”

I turn to her, but there are only a few inches of space between us, so I turn away.

“I should have done more that day.”

Her eyes search my face. “You laughed. Why?”

I laugh again, that same stilted, awkward chuckle. “I laugh when I’m…” I shake my head. “Nervous, scared, worried, uncomfortable. Pick a card, any card.”

I shrug, trying to brush the memory away and the shame that comes with it. “I laughed the first time I had to give my mom a sponge bath.” To be fair, Mom laughed, too, after a bit. “And at her chemo treatments.”

I nod at her wince. “I even laughed at her funeral. It’s like my brain is deflecting, or protecting me, from things that make me uncomfortable. I don’t know. I wish I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Her gaze feels heavy on my face. More than that. It feels important.

“The point is, I should have handled it differently. The second it happened I should have marched straight into HR. I can still do that if you want me to. And if it ever happens again, I will.”

I wish there was something I could do to make her believe me. But all I can do is show her. That day in the elevator plays back in an awkward, endless loop in my mind and the residual embarrassment makes me flush. That or the way her eyes keep tripping to my lips. Like when I accidentally make direct eye contact with someone’s crotch when I’m sitting down and they’re standing.

“Okay,” she says, and her voice makes me realize that we’ve been silent for a few long moments.

“Okay.” I nod. “I can go into the office and file the report right now.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “It’s fine.”

“Ms. Blunt, what Mark said was—”

“I know,” she says quietly. “But I like to handle it my own way.”

A swell of undeserved pride fills my chest. Not that she doesn’t deserve it but it’s not as if I’ve done anything to earn feeling it for her. But I feel it nonetheless.

She eats guys like Mark Gutterberg for breakfast. She works harder than anyone despite her boss sexually harassing her. Corrine Blunt is brave and strong and I want to be more like her.

I nod. “Okay. Totally up to you, Corrine.”

Birds make quiet twittering sounds in the tree next to the dugout and a dog barks somewhere nearby in the park. But otherwise it is quiet and the silence lends itself to feeling completely alone with her here. Like we're the last two ball players on earth.

The smell of coconuts overtakes the familiar dugout smell, drawing my nose, my eyes, toward her. Her hair is in another high ponytail like on that horrible day, my first day, though a few wisps of hair fall loose, framing her face and the back of her neck. Despite the entire length of the bench, she's so close and in these close quarters I notice things about a woman I'd never have taken the time to notice before.

Like how her eyelashes look like they're reaching for her forehead. Or how delicate her nose is. It never occurred to me before that a nose could even seem delicate. I track a flush as it crawls up her jawline into her cheeks, realizing too late that she's flushing because she knows I'm staring at her. I blink away, studying the diamond with intense interest.

I swallow against the collar of my jersey. I lied to Marisol before, I don't exactly still fit. The jersey is a little tight in the shoulders, the pants in the thighs. But I wanted to wear it today because I wanted them to take me seriously. I wanted Corrine to take me seriously, even if it was only for softball.

"You called me Corrine," she says quietly.

"I did?"

She nods. "Just now."

"Oh..."

"You should call me that from now on."

Something about her words, the surety in them and the quality of her voice, sends them from my ears and straight to my dick. I shift on the bench and the metal pops beneath us. Louder than anything else.

Answering phones, writing emails, working my ass off on remedial tasks, delivering coffee, lunch, and sometimes dinner all seems a little more worth it. Because each small task got me to here: earning her approval and acceptance.

I've never been this close to her before. The air around her is electric. The scent of her is overwhelming. But not so overwhelming that it distracts me from the fact that her eyes flicker to my mouth, again and again. Not so overwhelming that I can't see the flush on her cheeks, feel the heat of her sitting so close.

I lean forward, in her orbit. “I...”

I can't remember what I was about to say because all I can think about is how close I am to Corrine Blunt's body. She has freckles on her nose and they're endearing and girlish. My fingers ache with the sudden urge to slip down the slope of it, down to her lips. There's something different about her mouth; there's no color to her lips for practice, no deep wine red or satiny pink. Her lips are dark rose, no embellishment but a light sheen. They look soft.

“I...” I start again but still, I've got nothing because what I really want to say is: *I'm reading this wrong, right?* Because I think I might want to kiss Corrine right now. And I *think* she might want me to kiss her, too.

So, I cup her elbow, the silk of her skin soft in my palm. Soft like I imagine the rest of her skin might be. “I'm sorry,” I say, studying her rose-pink mouth.

Her lips form the word *why*.

“Because... I'm going to kiss you now.”

I close the few inches between us and lean down. Whatever is about to happen I don't think I can stop it. I don't think I want to. Her eyes flicker shut, her mouth looks delectable.

Like her lips are waiting. For me. But when I feel her breath on my own, I chicken out.

My mouth moves down the column of her throat to the juncture of her neck and shoulder and I place a single, open-mouthed kiss there. She releases this sound, like surprise—like relief—and it echoes through me, through my chest, all the way down to my toes. Because it sounds so much like how I feel right now.

Very surprised but also relieved at how surprised I feel.

Her skin is so soft but my heart is beating so hard. I've never had this kind of physical reaction to kissing a woman's neck before. I feel high, like I might float away and the only thing keeping me on the earth are my hands wrapped around her elbows and her hands, clenched on my forearms. Every point that her body touches mine is hot. Hotter than this autumn evening, or an oven, or the sun.

I want to burn up underneath her hands.

I kiss her again, a bit higher up where her pulse pounds against my tongue, loose strands of her hair tickling my face. I moan at the taste of her, salt and heat and sweet coconut.

Our bodies are electric, magnetized. Her hands slide up my arms to my biceps, pulling me into her in an iron grip. My lips trail over the curve of her jaw; she tilts her chin up for me until finally, my mouth presses against hers, our lips and eyes open. It had never occurred to me before that I could touch this woman, that I would want to. But now that I'm doing it, I never want to stop. Her taste, the sight of her... She's devastating, in the best way possible.

I touch my tongue gently against hers and her eyes flutter shut again. She tastes goddamn incredible, like cherry-flavored lip balm.

My boss wears cherry-flavored lip balm.

I am *kissing* my boss.

I pull back, my eyes wide, my pulse frantic.

My dick is not happy that I have stopped kissing the beautiful woman with the cherry-flavored lip balm. My brain is horrified that I ever started. Corrine watches me, her chest heaving, two shaking fingers against her mouth.

Her mouth closes and the shaking in her hands stops.

My knees could learn something from this woman.

"I am so, so sorry," I gasp.

She blinks, once, twice, until it seems she *sees* me.

She jumps up, her face horrified.

"Oh my," is all she says.

I want to stand, too, but I don't. I'm too tall in this already small space and she looks afraid. Maybe of me.

"I... I..." Corrine stutters. That's my shtick.

"I'm so sorry," she says. She turns and runs.

Here's something I didn't know: Corrine Blunt is really, really fast.

Chapter 16: Corrine

My apartment door opens with a subtle creak. My keys clatter where they land on the kitchen counter. My shoes end up somewhere in the living room. Not bothering to take off my sweaty clothes, I open a bottle of wine, reefing on the corkscrew until the cork pops out. Pouring the red wine into a short glass, I take a long sip.

Despite the external mess, each of my thoughts is calm, processed. My heart beats at a steady rhythm. But my arms and legs tingle. My lips burn like his breath is still hot on them. I think I'm in shock.

"This can never happen again," I say to no one.

Whatever I thought I felt about Wesley Chambers, it has to stop. I'm still not sure I can identify the feelings. Images of Wesley in his baseball uniform whisper at the edge of my mind. My eyes had travelled down his body. His long, long body. And I'd wondered, what was underneath that jersey. What was underneath those pants. What would that belt sound like if I pulled the leather from the buckle?

"Get over it," I say to my reflection in the dark windows across from me. I have more important things to worry about than Wesley Chambers.

My mother. My job.

And besides, I've never gotten involved with a man from work. Especially a man who reports to me. What am I thinking? Assuming he'd be interested in getting involved with me—his boss—after what I've done to him. Laughable. I take another sip of my wine. But it's sour, acidic on my tongue despite being new. I should go for a run or go to the gym. Burn off these ridiculous feelings, sweat until the only panic I can feel is for my next breath and not the grenade I just launched into both our careers.

What I should do is think about damage control. I *kissed* my intern. With my *mouth*.

Could he be interested?

"No."

My face is stern in the reflection in the glass.

I don't do this, fall headfirst into misguided attraction.

Still, I wait for the panic to set in. But my brain doesn't belong in my body anymore. If it wasn't for the fact that I can see myself in the window's

reflection, see my feet on the floor of my condo, I'd think I was floating away. I am untethered. A string, slowly pulled from the hem of a sweater. Soon I'll just be a pile on the ground.

My mouth is warm. My neck still tingles, where his lips brushed my skin. A shiver rolls down my spine and I close my eyes. My pulse trips against my throat.

I see him sleeping on his desk after an all-nighter, his face resigned as I dished every imaginable task at him; the way he stepped forward today with Richard, his shoulders back, his face harder than I've ever seen it. I've never asked for help before, but just knowing he was there, a safe place to fall back on—my heart feels on fire.

I open my eyes.

Jesus.

What have I done?

Chapter 17: Wesley

There are extra pairs of shoes in my foyer. Heels higher than anything Amy would ever wear, two sets of sneakers, a worn pair of red high tops, and old Birkenstocks that can only belong to one person. I blink at them for a beat before I remember: Amy's surprise.

"Chen?" I call.

From the living room he yells, "*Chambers!*"

Toeing my shoes off and throwing my bag down, I rush to the living room. Jeremy meets me in the hallway and grabs me by my shoulders, shaking me while simultaneously reeling me in for a back-slapper. My head spins as I'm engulfed. Amy had a cat in elementary school that she'd carry around the house. Her love for him sometimes overwhelmed her, to the point that she'd squeeze him, perhaps a little too hard. I feel like that cat, my eyes bulging, my rib cage constricted by this guy I've known almost as long as I've known my sister.

"How's it going, man?" His voice is muffled as he speaks into my shoulder. Jeremy has always been an affectionate guy.

I pull away a little too fast. I can still smell the coconut on me, mixed with sweat and outdoors. Kissing her feels written on my skin for him to read. Her fingerprints the ink.

"Good. Busy."

Jeremy smiles—because that's what Jer does. I try to think of something to say. But the only words my brain can conjure are:

I JUST KISSED MY BOSS.

On repeat, brain static. In another time, that now feels like another life, that's something I would have told him right away, before hellos were ever uttered. But not anymore.

Other than Amy, Jeremy is my closest friend. But right now, when he's standing in front of me, he feels like a stranger. Something has changed. And it takes me this awkward silence to realize it's me.

I've changed.

Jer's smile fades. He puts his arm around my shoulder, nodding toward the living room. "Everyone's here," he says quietly. "They can't wait to see you."

We round the corner into the living room and a cheer goes up from my friends who have strewn themselves across the living room, watching a baseball game. Amy pops up from the couch. “I invited everyone over to celebrate *not* having to eat dinner with our father. There’s pizza in the kitchen. Surprise.”

She does jazz hands.

I shake my head. “I already ate,” I lie.

I’m not sure I can keep food down.

Amy rolls her eyes and lets out this little huff of annoyance. I clench my molars together and take a deep breath in through my nose.

“Can I speak to you?” I ask her. “In the kitchen?”

What I really want is to lie down on my bed and inspect what just happened between Corrine and me. I want to hold the moment in my hand and appraise it like a jeweller with a new diamond. I can still hear that sound she made when I kissed her.

But also...I just kissed my boss. My palms get clammy.

I am getting fucking fired tomorrow.

I cross the hall, not waiting for her reply. Amy follows me in with her plate in hand and starts loading up on slices, like she’d always meant to come in here anyway. My fingers find plastic cutlery to fiddle with. My chest feels tight from anxiety but so do my pants just thinking about Corrine. The combination feels like that awkward stage of puberty where an erection could pop up at any moment, leaving me feeling like a lightning rod with an anxiety disorder.

Plus, “arousal” is not a feeling I want to have in front of my sister, especially in baseball pants.

“A little warning would have been nice,” I say. “About this so-called surprise.”

Amy looks up from where she’s peeling tomato slices off her pizza.

“I did warn you.”

I close my eyes, rubbing the spot where my glasses rest on the bridge of my nose. The urge to flee is less of a pull and more of a push, a need. Sweat dots my brow and the back of my neck. I think I’ve just totally fucked up my life.

“Why do you need to be warned that our friends—who you haven’t seen in ages—are coming over?” she asks through her food. “I thought you’d be happy.”

She says it in this way she has. Like she's done me a favor and I'm not grateful enough for it.

"What am I supposed to talk to them about, Amy?" I snap. "Our dead mom? Our shitty dad? My boss who—" I almost say, *who hates me?* But now I don't know if that's accurate or not. Or if it's *especially* accurate.

My voice echoes in the kitchen and the murmuring from the other room has stopped. *Great.*

"Fuck," I mutter and rub my hand down my face.

"I didn't think you'd be this upset about reconnecting with some of our friends."

To be honest I didn't think I'd be this upset either. But knowing they're all out there, probably waiting to ask me a whole bunch of questions about *How I've been?* and *What's new?* only highlights how much of a failure I am. That I'm just starting an internship when they've been out working for two years.

That I might have just ruined everything because of a moment of misplaced attraction.

"I just..." I look away. "There's too much between us. Too much space. And time." I turn back to her. "You know?"

She shakes her head. Of course she doesn't know. Everything has always been so much easier for Amy.

"I don't think there's as much space as you think." Amy picks up her plate. "They care about you, Wesley. Give them a chance."

I eat a piece of pizza alone in the kitchen, even though I'm not hungry. Just so I can tell Amy I did. It tastes like sawdust and oregano. I go back to the living room and lean against the couch. Jeremy gets up to stand beside me.

"So..." I say after moment. "What's new?"

Trying to have a conversation with one of my oldest friends feels like the social equivalent of trying to make conversation during a prostate exam.

"Not much." Jeremy scratches his chin. "I'm starting law school in the fall."

"Dude, that's great."

Jer and I played on the same baseball team in high school and went to the same university. He's wanted to be a lawyer since he was fifteen. He's the least argumentative person I know. He's just really good at remembering facts.

"Where's Angie?" I ask.

He winces. "We...uhhh...we're 'on a break,'" he says with finger quotes.

I flush, staring into the TV screen so he doesn't see how embarrassed I am that I missed something so big in my friend's life. Yet he's still here, wanting to be my friend, despite my abandonment. I want to reel him in for his own eye-bulging hug. But I settle for, "Oh. Sorry."

He shrugs and we both fall silent again. Our friends chat around us but there's a stilted air to it all. Amy, usually the loudest person in any room, is strangely quiet. Jeremy shifts on his feet beside me.

I became a little reclusive after our mom got really sick, but our friends didn't do much to close the gap. And I get it. Dealing with sickness and death is never fun. Especially when you've just finished college and are ready to start a life of your own. But now there's this gap between us all that becomes a chasm as the awkward silence stretches.

"Listen," Jeremy says, quietly. "I know we haven't seen much of each other the last year..."

Jeremy studies his hands for a moment. "I'm really sorry about Laura. I miss her." He smiles at me. "I miss you, too," he says quietly.

I glance down at the back of Amy's dark head. She hasn't turned around but I know she's listening. The thing is, no, my friends didn't do much to close the gap, but a phone works two ways. I could have called. I could have texted.

Jeremy would have come over and sat with me on the couch while my mom napped. He would have joined me while I waited for her in a doctor's office waiting room. My mom *loved* Jeremy. He would have made her laugh until she cried.

Jeremy would have sat with me while *I* cried after she was gone. He would have come over and played endless hours of video games with me while I tried to deal with my grief.

He would have commiserated with me when I wanted to vent about Ms. Blunt.

I just never gave him the chance.

"Dang." Amy pops up over the back of the couch. "I should have bought some pizza pockets."

Jeremy laughs. "Yes. Laura was always good for a pocket."

Everyone makes a noise of agreement and turns back to their conversations.

I elbow Jeremy. "I miss you, too...man," I say.

Jeremy pretends to wipe away a tear. "Don't be a stranger, Chambers."

I won't, I promise myself.

“What are you guys doing for your birthday?” Rebecca, the owner of the high heels, asks.

I hadn't even thought about our birthday. The idea of celebrating my twenty-fifth birthday without my mom singing a terribly off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday,” the homemade cake a tiny bonfire with all twenty-five candles blazing, brings a sudden sting to my eyes.

“Dinner. All of us. Then drinks. This Friday.” Amy rattles off the birthday plans like we've had them for months.

I open my mouth to say no but close it again when she turns to me.

“You'd better leave work this time.”

Chapter 18: Corrine

Morning sunlight crawls across my bedroom ceiling. I've never lain in bed this late as an adult woman but I can't bring myself to get up yet. If I get out of bed, make breakfast, and go to work, it will be like today is a normal day. But it's not normal.

I roll over, my back to my bedroom window. I brush my fingertips over my lips. I can still taste him.

I've officially surpassed Richard in the hierarchy of inappropriate things Hill City executives do to their subordinates. I pull a pillow over my face, groaning aloud to my empty, cold room.

I kissed my *intern*.

I am a walking cliché. I might as well set him up with his own apartment and an account at Calvin Klein for men's underwear. Getting out of bed and going about a normal day would be like...accepting it. Accepting my gross misconduct, accepting that I've put my career in the hands—the mouth—of another and that I haven't ruined *everything* I've worked so hard to build. Everything that he's just creating the foundations for.

My future unfolds like a movie on the inside of my eyelids. I'll go into work and Wesley will have already reported me to HR because I've used my power over him as his superior to seduce him. I'll be fired, escorted out of the building. Most likely he will, too. Everyone will shake their heads and whisper in the office kitchen that they'd always known the rumors Sean had started were true.

I keep my head underneath my pillow and roll away from the windows again. I'm not ready to get out of bed yet. Because of the shame, yes, but more because despite everything, I still can't bring myself to regret it.

* * *

I get to the office at half past nine. Wesley is here, his blazer slung over the back of his chair, a coffee cup on his desk, but he's nowhere to be seen.

I open my office door and there, sitting in the center of my desk, is another coffee cup. I walk over slowly, like maybe it's booby-trapped and HR will jump out at any moment. But it's not. It's a normal coffee. *My* normal coffee.

It's even hot enough. He must have just delivered it. Something unclenches in my stomach.

Fifteen minutes later, Wesley knocks on my office door, poking his head in and asking, "Do you have a minute?"

"Yes. Come in," I say, peering at him through my glasses where they've crept down my nose.

"These contracts need your signature."

He strides over, bending down beside me at my desk, pointing out each place I need to sign.

"You don't need to do this," I say, under my breath but still loud enough for him to hear. "I can see the flags." I flick at the sticky notes he's attached to each page to make my point.

"You missed this one the last time," he says quietly, pointing to the next spot.

My pen pauses over the signature block. "Oh."

The silence thickens as I sign three more pages. Twice I take a deep breath, ready to apologize for what happened last night. But both times, the words escape me. I don't know where to begin and the fact that he hasn't thrown me, in my rightful place, under a proverbial bus has sent me off-kilter.

I can feel him staring at me and like an arsonist playing with matches, I tuck a piece of hair that has fallen loose from my bun behind my ear. I look up at him as I do it, watching him watch the strand of hair.

Somehow this quiet, close moment feels more intimate than that kiss. My heart pulverizes my insides. Wesley pushes his fist against the contract on my desk.

"Do you..." He concentrates on the file like it holds the secrets to the Sox winning the World Series. "Want to talk about it?"

I sit up a little straighter.

"I'm sorry," we both say.

He scowls at my desk. "What do you have to be sorry for? What I did was... I never should have touched you. Let alone..."

"I'm your boss." My voice catches on the last word. "I shouldn't have let it happen."

"But that's what I'm saying, you didn't let anything happen."

I hold up a hand. "I think it's safe to say that we're both sorry for our inappropriate behavior. And that..."

Now it's my turn to look away. "You did not feel taken advantage of...?"

He nods. “I really, *really* didn’t.”

The relief is more than a weight off my shoulders, it’s a world.

“We had just—” He gestures between us. “And you smelled...” His eyes go big. “And you’re just so...” His brow crinkles, his lips pursed like he’s tasting a word but it’s a bit off. *I’m just so what?* It’s good, right? It has to be good. The need to know what I am so claws at my insides like hunger.

“So then I...” He sighs. “Kissed you. I was terrified that I had made you uncomfortable and I need you to know that if I did, if you felt even an ounce of discomfort or fear, how sorry I am.”

“I didn’t,” I say quietly at the still-warm copy paper in front of me. How can he stand so tall, be so sure, in a moment like this. I can’t look at him and think at the same time. I can’t say out loud that how little discomfort I felt is what makes my behavior so wholly inappropriate.

He smiles and it’s crooked and shy. I want to smooth it out with my thumb. I slam my eyes closed at the thought, like I’m slamming down a garage door on all the inappropriate thoughts I’ve started having about my intern.

When I open my eyes, he’s staring at me.

“Regardless, you are well within your rights to go to human resources. If...if you did feel taken advantage of. I wouldn’t try to stop you.”

He pushes his glasses up his nose. He studies me until my neck and cheeks feel warm and I fight the urge to look away.

“So...” He speaks slowly, choosing each word carefully. “It’s not going to happen again?”

My eyes feel bigger than my face and I take a stuttering breath.

“It *can’t* happen again.”

He watches me again, silent. The frown in his eyes, on his mouth, smooths out. His Adam’s apple bobs.

“Well, for what it’s worth.” He knocks his fist twice on my desk. “I wouldn’t mind if it did.”

He walks out, the contracts tucked under his arm. I stare in silence at the closed door for five minutes after he leaves, my chest full of butterflies, my stomach in knots.

Chapter 19: Wesley

Ms. Blunt closes her office door at quarter to six. She idles behind me, locking up, putting her coat on, rummaging through her bag. Finally, she takes the step to stand beside me.

She places a brown envelope on my desk. “Can you take this to Richard’s office, please?”

“Sure.” I stand and it brings me within inches of her and all I smell is coconut and baseball diamond. My skin is too tight, hot, like every cell remembers her. Meanwhile, I can’t remember what I was about to ask her. She’s so close I can feel her breath as she exhales on the exposed skin of my throat.

She blinks away, taking a step back. “It can wait until tomorrow, though. You can probably head home now.”

“Oh. Yes.”

Her dismissal triggers my memory. “Actually, it’s my birthday tomorrow,” I say, gathering my blazer and messenger bag. “I was wondering if it would be okay if I got out of here...” I stop. Because she’s staring at me. But not at my face.

Lower.

I brush my hand across my chest. “Is there a stain?” I mutter, thinking of the copious amounts of mustard the lunch lady put on my Reuben sandwich.

Her eyes move lower and I panic. *Is my fly down?*

“What?” I nearly yell in a panic and she jumps back.

“Nothing.” She steps away, studies the ceiling. “What were you saying?”

“Uh, it’s my birthday tomorrow. Would it be okay if I left early?”

“Do you have plans?” she asks.

I push my glasses up my nose. “Yeah. A dinner. My sister organized it.” I try not to sound too inconvenienced by my sister organizing a party for us.

She nods. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Really?” I was half hoping she’d say we had some new project we’d have to work on the whole night.

She frowns and a flicker of something else passes over her features. Something that looks like hurt. “Yes. *Really*. Did you think I’d say no? For your birthday?”

Shit. “No.” I shake my head. “I didn’t mean...”

“Tomorrow is fine,” she says, her voice a little tight and her jaw rigid. It’s like a flashback to the old Corrine and it makes me kind of sick now that I know what it’s like to see her smile at me, to hear her voice catch.

Saying nothing else, she starts to walk away and I follow her down the quiet hallway.

“Thank you,” I tell her as we wait for the elevator. “Do you have any plans tonight?” I ask. I pat at my shirt, still trying to find what she was looking at.

“No. Just catching up on a little work at home.”

She takes a deep breath, like she’s about to say something else. But the elevator arrives and her lips make a firm line. We both try to get on at the same time and I end up body checking her into the door.

“Holy shit!” I grab her by her elbow, my other arm coming around her shoulders as she pinballs between me and the doors. “I’m so sorry, Cor—Ms. Blunt.”

She straightens, taking a small step into the car. “It’s fine.”

Her voice does not sound like it is fine.

“No, really.” I scratch my head. “Ladies first and all that,” I say with a chuckle.

A V forms between her brows.

“I just mean I should have followed that rule. And you’re just so...” I stop myself right before I call her *little*. To her *face*. Like she’s a *child*. “I mean I’m such a...”

The V is deeper now. I let my words die in my mouth.

After a beat of awkward silence, she turns to the control panel. “Ground floor?”

I nod. “Yup.”

We stand together in this awkward silence. And I realize my real mistake.

I’ve just locked myself in a metal box with my boss. The same boss that I kissed yesterday. The same metal box where the boss that I kissed thought I revealed myself to be a sexist asshole. My words and Mark’s obnoxiously loud voice seem to echo in here, ping-ponging off the metal walls, repeating themselves over and over again.

I cringe just thinking about it.

Maybe she can hear it, too, because Ms. Blunt shifts beside me, staring at the numbers ticking our descent. She doesn’t want that kiss to happen again and I understand why, of course, but I still feel the need to explain to her that

I don't want to go to that party tomorrow. That she's not the reason for my surprise.

"I'm—"

"It's your floor."

More words die on my tongue. My mouth is a graveyard. "W-what?"

She points to the doors, open. The lobby lights seem blinding and it takes me a moment to adjust. "Your floor," she says again.

"Oh. Right. Yeah." I take a few steps forward until I'm standing on one side of the doors and she's standing on the other.

"Good night, Mr. Chambers." She holds eye contact until the doors slice between us.

When I walk outside, I can still smell the coconut.

Chapter 20: Corrine

My stomach grumbles at noon. I glance at my closed office door and back to my computer screen. Asking Wesley to fetch my lunch or pick up my dry cleaning has felt awkward since...*since*. Since the migraine, the kiss. Since he lit a fire inside me, one I can only tend in secret, when he told me he wouldn't mind if it happened again. Because I cannot. Of course I cannot and neither can he. So *since* sending him on ridiculous revenge errands just couldn't continue—since they probably never should have started—I have to find the time again to get my own meals. I was fetching my own lunches before Wesley. I'm sure I'll be able to do it again. After I finish all this work. My eyes glaze over as the third email in an hour from Phil Grimes pops up on my screen. He is going to be high maintenance.

"Ms. Blunt?" Wesley calls from the other side of the door. A hesitant knock follows.

"Come in."

"Hi." He grins as he pokes his head in, opening the door just enough to squeeze the rest of his body through. "Whoopsie."

He stops, his body curling over the door handle as he fiddles with it.

That nervous laugh erupts from him, pink staining his cheeks. "My belt loop got caught on the door."

He closes the door behind him, a brown paper bag clutched in his hands.

"Um. So. Two things."

He pauses.

"This feels like a good news/bad news situation," I say.

His smile crinkles. "The good news is I brought you lunch."

He lifts the brown paper bag and places it on my desk. The smell of my favorite chicken salad teases me from inside the bag.

"Oh." My face warms. "You didn't have to do that."

He shrugs.

"And the bad news?"

"Richard just called me," he says, his face already apologetic.

"Okay."

"He asked me to tell you to come down to his office tonight. After five." The knot tightens. After five on a Friday. Almost everyone else in the office

will be gone.

“Why is that bad news?” I ask, feigning nonchalance, but my voice is too tight for it to work.

Wesley pauses and I stare a hole into his forehead, hoping he’ll get the message. *Please don’t bring up the conference room.* “He didn’t sound...like himself.”

I nod once, eyeing the paper bag. Suddenly I’m not so hungry anymore.

“Do you want me to come?” Wesley asks.

“I...” Strangely, the idea of his presence calms the frantic beat of my heart. “I do. But I don’t know how long this will go. Don’t you need to leave early?”

He shrugs, looking down at my carpet. “It’s my party, right?”

Right. It’s his birthday. I should have told Emily. She would have helped me get a cake with too much sugary frosting and wrangle a few coworkers to sing an off-key “Happy Birthday” during the lunch hour. Instead he got stuck on lunch duty.

“That would be great. Thank you, Wesley.”

I try to imbue my gratitude in those few words but it doesn’t feel sufficient enough. Wesley’s presence at this meeting is exactly the buffer I need to feel like I can breathe under Richard’s gaze.

Thank you doesn’t feel like enough.

“Wesley,” I blurt before he closes the door behind him.

He turns, his hand on the door handle that held him up.

I run marathons, lead a department. But I can’t speak to my intern right now. After an interminably long pause in which my throat constricts around thank-yous and apologies and admissions of truths I can never reveal, I say, “Happy birthday.”

A dimple appears on his cheek. “Thanks. You, too.”

* * *

Everyone takes their breath for granted; we’re alive so we breathe oxygen. That’s it. But when I’m at the end of a race, my body screaming, my legs wanting nothing more than to stop, my breathing saves me. Preparing for this meeting with Richard feels like the end of a race. I can’t breathe and I just want it to be over.

Slowly, I take a deep breath in, let it fill the four corners of my chest. I grip

the door handle and my heart pounds. Mostly because of nerves over this meeting with Richard, but maybe a little bit because Wesley is on the other side of this door.

And I feel smitten.

He's not the man I thought he was. Not at all. He's kind, he's sweet. He wears socks with skunks on them.

He surprises me, and I thought I was done feeling surprised by anyone.

When I open the door, Wesley is already turned to me, his computer screen dark. He leans back in his chair, his legs stretched out in front of him, one ankle crossed over the other. His hands rest on his stomach, just above his belt. He smiles up at me in that easy way he's had this last week. Is this how he smiles at all the women he's kissed?

"Ready?" he asks.

I should be asking that. I nod and he stands, holding his hand out for me to lead the way. He follows two steps behind, like he did on our way to the meeting. I feel like the queen. But it gives me space to think, to prep, to breathe.

I stop at Richard's closed door. Emily is gone and there are a few murmured voices from behind the offices around us. Even more so now, Richard's request seems strategic and icky. Standing here I feel strangely vulnerable and exposed, that I was summoned by my boss, that I was scared to come, that I felt relief at Wesley's offer to chaperone.

I spin on my heel, ready to tell him to just go, but he holds up a pen and notepad. "Don't worry. I'll remember to take notes."

He says it like I've chided him before, for not taking notes, but I can't remember ever doing that. Wesley blinks at me but I don't move. I use this pause to remember to breathe, to remind myself that he is not my chaperone. He will not protect me from Richard because I don't need protection.

He's my support. I protect myself.

With a cursory knock, I open the door. Richard keeps reading something on his phone as we walk in, as Wesley closes the door behind us, as we stand in front of his desk. When he deigns to look up, his eyebrows jump as he takes in Wesley.

Richard glances back and forth between us. "I'm sorry. I should have stated this was a private meeting."

Wesley shifts beside me.

"I asked him to come to take notes," I lie. I send a silent apology to

Wesley.

Richard rests his arms on the desk, leaning toward me. He drops his voice, as if Wesley won't be able to hear him. "I think this is better left private, Corrine."

I stand taller. "I'd like him to stay."

He shakes his head. "Suit yourself," he says, and a note of disappointment mixes with his trademark condescension.

"Corrine."

He sits back in his chair, face impassive. Master of his own domain. King of his castle.

"You won't be getting the promotion."

My brain blanks, filled with static. "I...what?"

"You won't be getting the promotion," he repeats, as if hearing is what I'm having trouble with.

"But...the Grimes account?" I sound defensive, petulant. I can't help it. I worked my ass off for that account. I glance over at Wesley. We both did.

He sits in one of the chairs in front of Richard's desk, his hand poised over the pad of paper but not a single note taken. *Good*. I don't need a record of this moment.

"Richard, I aced that presentation and we both know it. How could you come to this decision?"

He releases a belabored sigh.

"Wesley," he says, turning to my intern. "Can you excuse us? I think this is a conversation better had in private."

The look on his face is so smug, so superior. My molars crack trying to keep the rage-induced scream from escaping. I close my eyes for a breath, waiting for the scrape of Wesley's chair, but when it doesn't come I open them again. Wesley sits half turned in his seat, staring expectantly up at me. It takes me another beat to realize he's waiting to hear what I have to say.

"It's okay." I gesture to the door. I just hope he doesn't go too far.

"Shut the door behind you, please," Richard calls as Wesley reaches the door. I used to spend hours, late into the night, in this room, with that door closed while we brainstormed new ideas. Sometimes there would be other associates or executives. Sometimes just us.

I don't think that will ever happen again.

With the click of the latch the air feels closer, the smell of Richard's cologne overwhelming. The room has shrunk by at least a few feet.

“Why, Richard?” I ask, more for something to do, a way to take control of this situation than because I actually want to know. Any answer he gives will only make me angrier.

“Oh, Corrine.”

Deep breaths, Corrine. Deep, deep breaths.

“You’re just not ready.”

“How could you possibly—”

He holds up a hand. “Yes, your presentation was adequate—”

“Adequate?” Is this really happening? I might be losing my hold on reality. “Were we in the same room? We landed the account. With a client who has been suspicious of our process from the start.”

My cheeks heat and my tone is not one I would ever accept from a subordinate, but I can’t stop.

He *tsks*. “This is what I mean.” He gestures to me. “You’re too emotional to take feedback right now.”

I grab hold of the back of a chair as my blood pressure skyrockets.

I quit.

I can hear myself saying the words in my mind, feel my lips form them. I can taste them in my mouth and they are so, so sweet. I almost let them free and let loose on this man, who I can’t even recognize anymore. He’s not the man who mentored me. And yet, I owe my career to him.

“What about the mentorship?” I ask, and already it sounds like the fight has left my voice. “You said you’d be taking this mentorship into account.”

He waves my words away, like they mean nothing. “Speaking of mentorship, I think you could benefit from some more one-on-one time with me.”

Richard barely finds the time to mentor his own intern. “You want to mentor me?”

“Yes.” He leans forward. “You need to be...” He purses his lips. “Molded into the VP we need.”

Maybe it was that pause, the prickling along my spine, or the way he said *molded* but suddenly it all clicks. This is a punishment. Because I wouldn’t have dinner with him. Because I’ve rebuffed his advances. An elaborate excuse to force me to spend more time with him.

The thought is absurd. Completely ludicrous. But as I examine his narrow, calculating eyes, it’s entirely plausible.

My hands shake. I no longer know what feels real and what feels

fabricated by my boss for his own personal gain. “No,” I hear myself say.
“No.”

“Pardon me?” The razor-sharp edge of his voice pulls me back to reality.

I take a deep breath, set my shoulders, and look him straight in the face.

“Maybe you’re right.”

The words hurt, physically, in my chest, to say.

“Maybe I’m not ready. Even for a mentorship.”

I just want to get out of this room.

“I need more time.”

I don’t recognize myself, the sound of my voice. It’s flat, like me.

I don’t know when I turned around and walked to the door but when my hand turns the handle, he says, “Think it over, Corrine.”

I turn and he’s already putting on his coat, ready to leave. Like dropping a bomb on the middle of my career goals was nothing to him.

“What happened?”

I jump as I shut the door behind me and Wesley stands there. He’s waited here this whole time. I gasp for air to keep from crying. When did this man become my ally, while the one in the office behind me became my enemy?

“Let’s go,” I say, striding back to my office on the other side of the building. My whole body trembles, adrenaline and frustration pulsing hot and hard beneath my skin. I crave the mind-numbing pain that comes from running for hours. The harsh gasps for breath, the weakness in my legs, the body buzz that serves as the perfect distraction for internal screaming on a loop in my brain. All of the offices are dark now and the Pit is empty. Maybe it was a good thing that Richard sent for me so late. No one can witness this walk of shame. No one except...

“I didn’t know you were up for a promotion,” Wesley says quietly.

“I never was.”

Chapter 21: Wesley

The only sound in the whole office is Corrine's shoes on the tan hardwood floor. Their soft click, click, click seems like the heartbeat of this place. Corrine lets herself into her office while my phone vibrates on my desk. I pause there, watching as she disappears into her dimly lit space.

There are five messages. One from Amy asking where I am. The other four are from Jeremy. The first three say, in progressively urgent case:

dude.

Dude.

DUDE.

And the last one is classic Jeremy: **Happy Birthday! Love you!**

My desk drawer creaks as it opens and I drop my phone onto a stack of sticky notes. I drop my guilt in there, too, at not answering their texts. I try to tell myself that work is more important. But I'm not thinking of work right now. I'm thinking of her.

Taking the two steps to her door, I knock and step into the doorway.

"Corrine?" I ask. She leans on her hands over her desk, her head bowed. Somewhere between the door and her desk she's taken her hair out of its bun and it falls over one shoulder.

"Corrine?"

She picks up the file sitting in front of her and slams it back down. A frustrated grunt escapes her, the sound so unlike anything I've ever heard come from her mouth and yet the only noise I could imagine her making in this moment. The cup of pens, the computer monitor shudder.

Stepping fully inside the room, I close the door behind me. The office seemed empty as we walked through it but just in case, no one should get to witness this. I can't tell if she's going to laugh or scream. From the look on her face, she doesn't know either; it could be both.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," she says, a little breathless.

I shake my head, unsure whether she means her anger here in her office or

the bits and pieces of her meeting with Richard. Watching it left me with an unpleasant taste in my mouth, an uncomfortable feeling in my gut, and the notion that once again there was something more I should have done but didn't.

"It's fine," I say, taking a few more steps into her office. "You don't have to apologize."

"Do you ever feel like no matter how hard you try you just..." She shakes her head, looking around the room like words will be written on the walls for her. "Can't. You can't win, you can't get ahead?"

I can't tell if she's making fun of me and the dynamic we had up until recently. "Yes," I say slowly. "I'm familiar with the feeling."

She watches me silently, a look on her face that could be regret. She walks around the desk, stopping a few feet in front of me with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Did you ever just want to give up?"

"Yeah, sometimes I just wanted to walk out but..."

She takes a step closer, dropping her arms. She's close enough to touch now, if I wanted. If *she* wanted. I could reach out and hold her hand. I could cover her hip with my palm; I could put it higher. *Lower*.

"But." I meet her eyes. "But I know who I am. And I didn't want to leave here without you knowing who I am either."

She lifts her hand, hesitates. My whole body leans toward that hand.

She drops it, fisted back down at her side. But now here I am, a listing Italian tower, doing everything I can to not fall harder toward this woman.

"I'm glad I got to know who you are, too."

Warmth, like pride, fills me. I check the lean.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" she asks. "Your birthday party?"

I shake my head. Who the fuck cares how old I am?

"I can stay." I stop to clear the gravel from my voice. "If you need me?" Air has never felt so thick before. Another person's breath on my lips has never tasted so sweet.

"What...what would I need you for?" she whispers.

The A/C starts up with a low hum, the only other sound in the room. She is somehow the only person I've ever met who's this beautiful under fluorescent lighting.

"Anything." I shake my head. I shrug, swallow. My heart batters my ribs. "Anything," I say again.

She lifts her hand and now it's like she's done it one thousand times before. Wrapping her fingers one digit at a time, around my tie, she pulls me forward.

"I need you to do it again," she whispers. Her gaze darts wildly between mine. Her pupils all black, leaving no room for her fiery, golden gaze. "If...if you want to."

I swallow hard enough to be audible. "Do what?" I ask right before it comes back to me, the moment in the dugout, the taste of her skin on my lips, the smell of her on my clothes. "Oh. Kiss you?"

"No." She blinks, tightens her fist. "Wesley. *Fuck* me," she whispers.

A switch is flipped in my brain. I no longer hear the voice in my head blaring *Warning*, begging, *Cease and desist: you cannot stand this close to your boss*.

All I can hear is the pleading tone in her voice when she asks me to *fuck her*. I don't think I'll ever forget it.

My body clicks into autopilot, like somehow my arms and legs know what to do while I watch in amazement from the bleachers. Bending my knees, I lift her to my mouth. It's probably the adrenaline talking but my arms have never felt stronger than with her in them. Her arms coil around my neck and we stumble forward until her ass meets the desk. I push her skirt up her legs and step between them, catching a glimpse of white lace. Her thighs are soft silk. She makes a shaky sound. My hands can't stay in one place for long. I have to touch her all over, everywhere. I want all of her. Now.

She pushes at the lapels of my suit jacket and I rip it off, flinging it somewhere behind me. I pull at the buttons on her shirt but my fingers shake too much to get it open.

"Rip it?" she whispers in a shuddering, unsure gasp.

My fingers still and I meet her eyes. They're huge and beautiful. "What?" I ask, even though I heard her perfectly.

"Rip it," she says, surer now.

So I do.

The first button pops off and I stop at the sound of it pinging somewhere around the room. It is somehow the most erotic sound I've ever heard, sending a pulse through my cock. *Pop, pop, pop*, I pull until every button is gone and all that is left between me and the expanse of her smooth skin is a white silk bra. She tugs roughly at my belt as I rip down the cups. Her breasts are small and fucking perfect.

I want them in my mouth.

Her moan fills my ears as I tongue her nipple and fireworks explode in my brain at the taste of her skin on my lips. She reaches her hand into my boxers, pulling me out, and I gasp against her skin as she rubs her thumb along the tip of my cock, softly pulling my foreskin back. Her delicate hands make me feel fucking huge.

I make a fist in the crotch of her panties, already wet and slick, and pull them down her legs. She kicks them off the rest of the way and I watch as they flutter to the ground, landing half on my shoe, half on the floor.

My whole body stills. Except for my heart, which feels like its beats per minute are faster than a car. Corrine naked might be more than I can handle.

“Don’t stop, Wesley,” she says with just the slightest bit of desperation.

The room, this night, feels still, paused and unreal. “Are you sure?”

She nods, her eyes still too big in her face. The exposed parts of my body pucker with goose bumps; this is a horrible time for office AC.

I press my thumb to the corner of her mouth. “Corrine,” I say. The weight of what we’re about to do settles over me, making my limbs too heavy.

She blinks and for that moment I think she will be the reasonable one, the one to stop all this. But instead she leans forward, a smile curling up one side of her mouth, her breath tickling my collarbone. “I hope you fuck better than you order coffee,” she says, her voice teasing and light like I’ve never heard it before, and bites my neck.

She is a kaleidoscope. Constantly showing me a new version of herself, and each one blows my mind.

She can insult my coffee-ordering skills for the rest of my life as long as she bites me again. She licks the spot she bit, dragging her tongue to the stubble at my jaw.

My arousal pulses everywhere, in my cock, my thighs. In the straining of my abdomen, the tension in my back. My arousal lives in my fucking teeth. I press my hand to the center of her chest, pushing her back onto the desk, spreading her legs farther apart.

“Say it again,” I say hoarsely. “I need you to say it again.”

Her eyes dart between mine. “I want you to fuck me, Wesley. Now.”

I take myself in hand, and push into her. She arches, gasps. My heart slows to a singular thud. I might die. I’d be okay with that.

I’ve never felt anything like this before, this acute heat. Her body pulls at me, sucks me in.

Her lips, glistening and swollen, stretch around me. I want to make her feel what I'm feeling. So taut she can't speak at all for fear of coming. Her hands tighten on my biceps as she kisses me, her tongue tracing the seam of my mouth, her teeth biting.

I pull away, thrusting slower and then hard again. "Good enough?" I growl.

But I really want to know: am I good enough for her? Good enough she'll let me do this again and again?

Her hands scratch beneath my shirt. She feels so good it's painful. I clench my teeth against the orgasm that tingles at the base of my spine.

I have never fucked like this before. This rough. This raw. I am wild for her, my heart close to stopping, my skin straining for hers. I know I need to slow down, *calm down*, make it good for her. So far I think she's gotten by on the thrill, of something new and secret, something left unfinished.

But if I come before she does I can never show my face here again. I'll have to quit my job. I'll have to leave Boston.

It's as if she's *trying* to make me come faster than the speed of light. Her sounds, the way her tits bounce every single time I hit the end of her, the hunger in her eyes, the heat in her palm against my chest. Holding back physically hurts but my god, I never want it to stop.

I rub her clit in tight circles. Leave small biting kisses around her nipples. Gripping her thigh. I don't want to leave my fingerprints behind on her skin but I can't let go.

I can't.

She wraps her legs around my ass. "Harder," she commands, just loud enough to be heard over the sound of the rhythmic slap of our bodies.

I cup her cheek in my hand, holding my finger over her mouth. For a heartbeat, I'm distracted by how soft, how plump her lower lip is against the pad of my thumb.

She moans again, and I whisper, my heart in my throat, "Someone might hear."

Her eyes widen. The acknowledgment that we might not be alone, that we could get caught, feels like a fuse lit inside her. She tightens around me, her clit pulsing against my fingers. Her nails bite into my skin as she cries out against my hand.

I try to ride out her orgasm but I can't hold myself back anymore.

There is only her warmth, her softness, the sound her pussy makes when I

move within her, her nails in my skin. She wrings me dry as I empty myself inside of her.

I think I need a glass of water.

I breathe her in, my open mouth against the skin of her throat. Her dark hair halos her face. Her eyes droop into exhaustion. Her lips are pink and flushed from my mouth and stubble. *Because of me.*

I did that to her.

The side of my mouth lifts as I press my lips to hers in a soft kiss, my breath blowing the hair off her face. She holds my cheek, keeping me there for a second longer. Her smile grows against my mouth. My whole body buzzes with the kind of exhaustion that only comes from being well used, and my heart won't slow down yet but if she said we could fall asleep right here, I just might. I rest my forehead against hers and close my eyes.

Don't say something stupid, I remind myself. Don't.

"Wow."

Damnit.

"I... I..." I want to kiss her again.

"Wesley," she whispers.

I smile, lazily. When she calls me by my first name a fire lights in my chest. But I can't bring myself to put together the words to tell her that yet. My hands run restlessly over her soft, soft skin. I press my mouth to that softness because I can't stop. Because it's all I can think about: how incredibly right this feels.

She pushes against me. Everything is sweaty and sticky wherever our skin touches.

"Wesley." Her voice is different now. "Get off," she hisses.

I meet her eyes, trying to reconcile the impatience in her tone, the sudden stiffness in her body, with what we just did. But she won't meet my gaze. Her jaw clenches and unclenches in that familiar way.

Pushing up on my hands, I pull out of her, feel my come wet my skin, stain the front of my pants; hear the wet splatter on the floor, my shoes.

Fuck.

I stare down at my dick, hanging out of my pants as horror rises up in me.

"I... I've never had sex without a condom," I mumble. I am cold and unsteady for a completely different reason from only minutes before. A sickening sense of panic weighs down my postorgasmic euphoria. Corrine stands, pulling the two halves of her shirt together, wrapping her arms around

herself. She looks at the floor and I follow her gaze. We stare at her panties, still lying on my shoe.

“Neither have I,” she says, barely above a whisper.

“Are you okay?” I ask, putting my dick away and pulling my own shirt together.

She lifts her head, scowling. “Yes. No. I don’t know.”

I rub my index finger back and forth over my brow. “It’s just that, that was...amazing. And then, now, you know.” I shrug. Now she’s freaking out.

“I’m on the pill. And I’m clean,” she says, almost defensively.

I nod, quickly. “Me, too,” I say. “I mean, I’m clean. I’m not on the pill. Obviously.”

She won’t look at me. With each passing second the silence pushes her further away, leaving me more and more alone. But I can’t bring myself to speak and I certainly can’t make myself walk out that door. This isn’t how I do things. This isn’t *me*. My hand tingles with the need to reach out to her, touch her skin, her hair. Offer her some sort of comfort. But maybe I just need the contact to comfort myself. I’m not sure she can give that to me.

“This was a mistake,” she says. The air leaves my chest in a rush. She could have just punched me in the chest instead.

Pressing her hand to her throat, where my lips were seconds ago, she swallows. “I regret... It was...inappropriate. I’m sorry.”

I hope my cheeks aren’t as red as they feel. Too many thoughts compete in my brain for precedence so I stand here, unspooled in her office. Doing nothing. Like the loser I’ve always known myself to be. Like a mistake.

“Mr. Chambers,” she says. Her voice is sharp and I blink up to her. “You’re dismissed.”

I can’t keep the flinch off my face. But her words do their job and get me moving. She opens her mouth but I shake my head. I can’t hear anything else she has to say right now. I don’t want this moment tainted any more than it has been.

I walk to the door, stopping with my hand on the stainless steel handle. The metal is cold and wrapping my hand around it freezes something inside of me. I turn back to her. Her face has changed, less remote, more scared.

“I don’t regret you, Corrine.”

Her face falls farther but I straighten. I won’t slouch or make myself smaller when I say this.

“And I’m not a mistake.”

* * *

My sister probably ordered the cake herself and got those ridiculously huge number balloons to announce our age to the general public. But I can't bring myself to go see any of it. Even if I haven't seen most of my friends for months, they're still the people who know me best.

Especially Amy.

She'll take one look at me and know that something is wrong, that I've done something I can't take back.

I forgo my usual walk and take a cab home, going straight to the shower from the front door. My phone vibrates almost constantly in my pocket, filled with a mixture of **Happy Birthday!** and **Dude, where are you?** messages as my pants pool around my feet. I ignore them all as I turn on the hot water and take stock in the quickly fogging mirror, inventory the scratch marks down my chest, the bite mark on my collarbone. I can't even remember when she did these things to me. I just know they felt good when they happened.

I rub my hand over a particularly red scratch across my nipple. I wonder if it could scar. I want it to. I want proof that this happened.

I step into the shower. Press my forehead against the tile and let the water wash over me, wash away her fingerprints, erase any evidence of her on my skin. But the water won't let me forget her sounds, her sigh of *relief*, when I pushed into her. Even though I just finished fucking *my boss* half an hour ago and my head is a mess, my heart torn apart, I take myself in my hand and remember the feeling of my tongue on her skin, the taste of her, how her hair tickled, and her sweet, wet warmth.

When I come I'm still not satisfied.

Chapter 22: Corrine

No one is at the office because it's Sunday and only people who make bad choices—like fucking their intern—would consider coming in to work over eating brunch. Usually, I love the office on weekends. All the lights are off, the only illumination from the sun streaking in through office windows. Quiet, clean, I can work with my door open and talk to myself without anyone hearing me.

I hesitate outside my office door. The cleaning staff will have vacuumed, wiped down the bathroom, emptied the garbage can. There should be no sign of him in there, in my space, but nonetheless I'm scared to enter.

With a sinking feeling, I realize this place will never be the same again.

I push the door open. My office looks exactly like it always does. Neat, clean. The whole office is so quiet, and the street below is, too, I could hear a pin drop.

Or a button pop. The sound of my blouse buttons pinging off my desk, the wall, that vase in the corner echoes in my head. I hold the front of my cardigan together in a protective reflex.

Walking up to my desk, I rest my hand on the glass. No one would be able to tell that my bare ass sat on that desk two nights ago. I can almost feel the heat our bodies left there. A chill runs up my spine. The good kind.

When I close my eyes, I can feel him here, smell him, his deodorant, shampoo. His skin, that something that is uniquely him but unidentifiable. If I took a step backward I'm positive he'd be there to wrap his arms around me, slipping his fingertips past the cup of my bra to pinch my nipple between two fingers, pulling aside the fabric of my shirt to kiss me there.

He's invaded my space, my most sacred place, but I'm too turned on to be mad about it right now. I open my eyes and shake out my hands. I'm fantasizing about my intern when, for all I know, my career might be over come Monday morning.

It becomes a little hard to breathe, my chest crushed in a giant's fist. Dizziness, like no matter how hard I try the room won't stop spinning around me and I can't latch onto anything to keep me upright. I've worked so hard for everything I have, I have taken so much shit from the people at this company, from Richard, and in one moment of frustration and hormonal lust,

I lost control of my professional life.

I do the only thing I can think of to calm myself down. I repeat the words Wesley said to me last week.

Everything will be okay.

I say it again, out loud, “Everything will be okay.” And again and again. I say it until the words stop making sense.

My phone chimes a notification and the desperate, confused woman inside me wants it to be him. But it’s a reminder that my ex’s new bride’s shower—starting at eleven—is today. Smashing my fingers on the screen, I delete the notification and the event from my calendar.

“I hope you’re very happy together,” I growl to no one.

A glint of gold catches my attention when I open my eyes and I get down on my hands and knees, crawling under my desk.

“Shit.”

It’s a gold button from the blouse I wore on Friday. I spend the next three hours combing through every fiber in my carpet, under each piece of furniture, and in every corner. I don’t find any more buttons, but the slow, methodical task calms me. It’s like walking around the room with my shoes off. By eleven o’clock, I realize with each pass of my hand over the carpet that I’ve made a mistake. But my mistake wasn’t Wesley, like I so callously let him believe. It was Richard. Putting my trust in him and ignoring his behavior because of a misplaced sense of loyalty.

I sit on my heels as sunlight streams into my office. The button is warm from how I’ve clutched it tightly in my palm, and the sharp edges bite into my skin. But the pain is a reminder of what happened last night and more importantly why...

Because I *like* Wesley Chambers. I like the way he works hard no matter what job I throw at him. He’s more loyal than almost anyone else in this office. Kinder, too. He doesn’t do anything with an expectation that I’ll do something for him in return. Despite how much it must hurt him to talk about, he’s been nothing but supportive and forthcoming about his mother.

And he kisses me like I’m a dream.

He can’t be a mistake when it’s his words, his voice that pulled me out of my panic.

I stand, placing the button on my desk. I know what I need to do.

Chapter 23: Wesley

The sound of footsteps outside my door wakes me. Then the footsteps are inside my room and I'm awake. The curtains make a ringing, metallic sound pulled over the rod. The mattress dips under her weight as she sits on the edge of my bed, placing her hand over my forearm.

"Wesley," she says in a half whisper, half singsong. A melodic sound that I didn't know I'd missed until I heard it again. "Time to get up, little bug. You have Little League today."

She gently shakes my arm. "Up, sweetie. Up."

"Mom?" I turn away from the feeling of the sun on my face and toward the sound of her voice.

But when I open my eyes, she's not there, perched on the side of my bed like she had been so many weekend mornings. I stretch my arm toward where she was, where I was *sure* I'd felt the bed dip. But all I find in my hand is the sheet, balled up in my fist. I turn my face into the pillow to wipe the wetness away from my skin.

My insides are a mosh pit. Have been since Friday. And while I would never, in a million years, tell my mother about what I did with my boss on her desk, my need for her is an aching hole. I want her to put her arms around me, squeeze me like she did, even after I grew taller than her. Tell me she's proud of me. Right now, just hearing the sound of her voice, telling me she loves me might help me figure out what the hell I'm going to do about it. The absence of her is a sharp pain right through my heart.

I should have known it was a dream, though. I haven't fit into my Little League uniform for over a decade.

* * *

Amy has made an extra bacon-and-egg sandwich when I pull myself out of bed, so she can't still be *that* mad at me for missing our birthday party.

"Thank you," I say.

She doesn't respond.

"Did you want to go out for dinner tonight?" I ask around a bite of sandwich. "My treat. For our birthday."

Her back is to me but I can practically feel her eyes rolling. “We have the same birthday, idiot. You can’t treat me to *our* birthday.”

The kitchen echoes with slammed cupboards and drawers. She turns the music up too loud but she’s playing Beastie Boys so I’m not sure why she thinks that would bother me.

“Shamey,” I sigh. Her shoulders rise to her ears. She hates that nickname. But the urge to needle her anyway is a compulsion. Part of it is us—we’ve bugged each other our whole lives. But there’s a small corner of my mind that thinks it’s maybe something more. A festering little knot of anger. One I can’t quite explain but, I realize, has been there, growing larger and larger for the last few months.

“I’m sorry about Friday. It was shitty of me.”

Despite not really wanting to go to any birthday party, I should have shown up. Or at least answered her texts.

She turns around, pinning me with a look of admonishment that was originally perfected by our mother. Amy looks like our mom. I look like our mom, too, but since Amy’s a girl she’s the one who can really pull it off. I used to come home from school and yell a greeting into the house and wouldn’t be able to tell who’d returned the hello until I saw who it was because the two of them sound the same, too. And the way she’s leaning up against the counter now, her feet and arms crossed, her hair braided over one shoulder, she looks so much like Mom. My heart hurts, the throbbing ache returned.

I come around the island, lean down, and wrap my arms around her. She keeps her arms crossed but giggles when I lift her off her feet, jiggling her a few times. I set her back down and kiss the top of her head. “Love you, Amy.”

She pushes me with both fists. “You have to tell me what’s wrong.”

Hopping back onto my stool, I say around a bite of sandwich, “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Liar.” She points a spatula at me and scrambled eggs go flying. “You’ve been acting weird. You’ve been ditching me.” She sets the spatula down. “I’m your sister. I need to know who to beat up for you.”

Amy hasn’t had to beat anyone up for me since middle school, but I still appreciate the sentiment. I sit back—remember that this stool has no back and grab onto the counter at the last second. She pats my shoulder as she walks behind me and climbs onto her own stool.

“Idiot,” she mutters lovingly. “Chen was sad, you know. He wanted to hang out with you. I think he misses you. A lot.”

I shrug. My friendship with Jeremy feels like it happened to another me, those moments old, over. And yet, I ache to have them back, and new versions of them. But reestablishing a friendship like ours feels about as easy as wearing Yankees gear to a Red Sox game.

“Are you stressed?” she asks. “Because of the house?”

I gesture around at the house in question. “The house? What’s wrong with it?”

She shrugs, taking a bite of her breakfast. “We need to consider selling it soon,” she says around her food.

The way she can talk about getting rid of this home, so flippantly, feels like a betrayal.

It shocks me so much I can’t help throwing her a scowl, but she doesn’t notice.

“I don’t know. Maybe moving, selling, isn’t the best thing. We’ve got a lot on our plates right now and...”

“Wesley, the house might be paid off but we can barely afford the property tax on this place. And...” Her voice catches. “I don’t know how much longer I can stay here. This house? It’s full of Mom.”

Amy never talks about Mom like this, like her loss hurts. In fact, she generally doesn’t talk about Mom at all. She’s right, at least about the fact that this house is full of our mother. It still smells like her, for god’s sake. Sometimes I walk into a room and expect her to be there and then she’s not. It’s dizzying, the loss of her all over again. To know that Amy feels this way, to know that she feels like our mother is still here inside these walls, makes me want to leave them even less.

I want to hold on to her here. This house feels like the only thing I can hold on to right now.

I drop my head back, staring up at the ceiling. I can’t meet my sister’s eyes and tell her no. “Let’s not think about it now. There’s still time.”

“I dunno, Wes—”

“Okay,” I say, cutting her off before she can steamroll me into making the decision to sell this house. Flattening my palms on the cool countertop, I say, “I’ll tell you what’s been going on with me. But you can’t tell anyone.”

“Obviously,” she says, annoyed. “Twin Code.”

I sip my coffee. Clean my lenses. “I slept with my boss.”

The screech I was expecting, the one that I closed my eyes for and leaned away from, never comes. I peek over at her, opening first one then the other eye. Amy chews on a piece of toast, staring at the hood fan across from us.

“It’s not as bad as I thought it was going to be,” she muses. “On the one hand.” She tips her head to the side. “I’m going to have to hear about your sex life, which is gross.”

She turns her head to the other side. “On the other hand.” She throws her toast down, missing her plate, and spins the stool to face me. “That is the craziest thing you have ever done in your entire life *ohmygod* what were you thinking?!” she yells, her voice quickly reaching screech levels.

“Amy.” I place my hands on her shoulders. “My ears.”

She throws her hands in the air. “Who cares! I thought you hated her? I thought she hated you? Are you going to get fired? Is she?”

I hook my index finger around her coffee mug, pulling it out of reach of her flailing arms. “I’ll tell you everything but you need to *listen*.”

She takes a deep breath, pulls her mug back toward her, and leans against the counter. “Fine. I’ll listen.” She holds her hand out to me. “Tell me.”

I gloss over the details but tell her about the kiss and then what happened on Friday night: Richard’s behavior and the way Corrine seemed unwound and how we both ended up undressed, partly.

My sister’s mouth hangs open. “Are you in *love* with her?”

“What? No!” I yell. A voice, which does not belong to me nor do I know where it came from, whispers in my ear, *but maybe?*

“No,” I say again, as much to Amy as myself. It would be just like me to fall for a woman as unattainable and complicated as Corrine Blunt. I poke a tomato slice back into my sandwich. “She said...she said she regrets it. That it was a mistake.”

The hurt is mostly gone. I’m resigned to it now. Even if I wanted to do something about it, what could I do? Beg? Not a great look. She’s already a wildly successful executive and I’m an intern with little to no experience. She’d be risking her career for me. We both would.

Amy makes a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “Well, *she’s* a mistake. You’re not a mistake, Wes. You need to tell her that.”

Her words—and the expectation that I hadn’t already said exactly that—send me sitting back on my stool again. “I did tell her that, Amy,” I say quietly.

“Look at you, little bro.” She hops off the stool, taking her plate to the

sink. Her sandwich is untouched. “Standing up for yourself.”

I’m sure she means it to be a compliment, but I’ve been standing up for myself for a while now. Maybe I’m not a crusader like Amy, willing to tell anyone and everyone exactly what she thinks, but going into work every day felt like standing up for myself, and confronting Amy over pizza last week felt like it, too.

The words to say just that—to stand up for myself once more—ram against the back of my teeth. Amy’s shoulders are still tight as she scrapes her sandwich into the garbage, her smile a thin line when she turns back to me. Amy and I have been on the same page our whole lives but right now it feels like we’re writing completely different books.

Instead I say, “Stop calling me your little bro. You’re only older than me by two minutes.”

The edges of her smile relax a little bit. She comes around the island, wrapping her arms around my chest and squeezing. I give a tug on her wrist.

“Stop being so tall. God,” she says with mock outrage. I smile into my coffee mug.

“How did our poor mother house you for nine months? I’m surprised you didn’t absorb me for my resources,” she says. “I’ve got to clean upstairs.” She spins toward me. “Have you seen my phone?”

“It’s in the bathroom. Thanks for breakfast.” I smile. “Love you, Shamey.”

“Don’t call me that!” she yells, her feet pounding up the stairs.

My phone dings a message in my pocket but I clean up the kitchen first, taking the time to wipe down all the counters with Mom’s favorite lemon-scented cleaner and fill up the dishwasher. Leaning against the counter, I stop with my mug of now-cold coffee halfway to my mouth when I see who the text is from.

Corrine: Wesley. If it’s not too forward of me would it be possible for us to meet up at some point today? If you don’t feel comfortable I understand.

Then, only a minute later: I’m sorry. You’re probably busy.

There’s nothing terribly anxious about the tone of her messages but I can feel her worry through the screen.

My thumbs hover over the screen, stalled by the millions of things I want to say. Like *come over, right now* and *I’ll meet you anywhere* but also, *you*

hurt me that night and I'm not interested if you're going to tell me that I'm a mistake again. But the thing is this: if Corrine wants to talk to me, even if there's a chance she could hurt me again, I want to hear what she has to say.

You could come to my house. If you want. No I'm not busy right now.

There. Now the ball is very firmly in her court. Plus, regardless of what she wants to say to me, it will probably be easier to hear it at home rather than waiting until tomorrow morning.

It takes her many long minutes to formulate a response, the text bubble appearing and disappearing before she writes back: **Sure. Where do you live?**

I send her my address and she says that she'll be here in half an hour.

Corrine Blunt will be *here*. In thirty minutes. Three-zero. I survey the living room, where unpaired socks lie waiting to be put in the laundry and old fast-food beverage cups litter the coffee table. The rug hasn't been vacuumed in weeks at a minimum.

"We're slob," I murmur in terror.

I launch myself into cleaning mode while Amy blasts her disco tunes upstairs. For a moment I consider cleaning my own room but no.

Best not to get too ahead of myself.

After twenty-five minutes, I sit on the couch with the TV off, waiting for her knock. At thirty minutes, I move to the bench by the front door. After forty, I check through the peephole, my insides a flutter of nervous and excited butterflies.

After sixty minutes, I realize I never even bothered to tell Amy that my boss who I had *intercourse* with was coming here but now it seems like maybe I won't have to. I check my phone but there are no new messages.

I'm not going to text her.

I put the phone in the kitchen.

I am *not* going to text her.

Throwing myself on the couch with another cup of coffee, I turn on the television. The pipes groan as Amy turns on the shower. A small part of me worries that maybe something happened to Corrine on her way here. But a voice that sounds suspiciously like Amy's reminds me that she's probably just freaking out. Because of the intercourse.

I peel off my T-shirt—Amy insists on keeping the thermostat set at Hell On Earth—and pull my headset on and turn on my gaming console.

This is me, being “chill.”

This is a normal weekend.

This is me, not texting her. Not waiting for Corrine to come to my front door with arguably the best sex of my life and also my career in her hands.

The chatter from my headphones invades my brain until Amy stomps past in nothing but a towel, her hair still wet.

“My eyes!” I yell. “Put some clothes on.”

She yells something back but I can’t hear her through the voices of the players chattering in my headphones. A cool blast of air comes from the front hallway. I set the controller down, sliding the headphones off. I hear Amy’s voice and then another woman answering.

It’s like my brain glitches because I recognize the voice but hearing it makes me realize just how much I’d convinced myself she wouldn’t show. And now she’s here at my front door and it takes many long seconds before I stand up, pick up my T-shirt, trip over the coffee table on my way to the front hall. I get to the small vestibule at the front of our house in time to see Corrine’s dark head bobbing down the front steps.

“Ms. Blunt!” I yell, shouldering past my sister. She doesn’t stop, picking up her pace as she runs down my street. “Ms. Blunt!” I yell again, pulling my T-shirt over my head as I run down the front steps. “Ms. Blunt! *Corrine!*”

But she is already around the corner. I stop and look back at my house. Amy stands in the doorway pulling the towel tightly around her, mostly contrite but also a little angry. Right now is not a great time for Amy to pull the overprotective card. She lifts her chin, her jaw set.

I chase after Corrine but I don’t have to go very far. She sits on the concrete steps of a house just a few feet around the corner. I slow to a walk and stand in front of her. Boston is just starting to cool off and my skin prickles at the contrast of our hot house with the cool air. A gust of wind blows a few leaves and empty coffee cups between us.

Her eyes are downcast and she plays with the hair at the end of her ponytail with one hand. A lit cigarette dangles from the other one. Her shoulders are tipped forward and even though she is petite, this is the first time she has ever seemed *small*.

There are so many versions of Corrine Blunt. Strong, in charge, a leader, mostly. Beautiful and sweet. And now I know that when she comes she is this

vulnerable, flushed, wide-eyed version of herself that makes me want to make her come again and again. But I've never seen anything like this version of Corrine: embarrassed, alone.

I hate it.

"What..." I take a moment to catch my breath. "I didn't know you smoke?"

She tips her head back, lifting a hand to shield her eyes from the sun as she takes a drag.

"I quit," she says.

I motion toward her cancer stick. "Well, I'm not sure if you know this, but you started again."

Corrine won't meet my eyes, so I sit beside her, reach out slowly to drag my palm down her forearm to her fingers. I pull the cigarette from her fingertips and snuff it out. There's no garbage can nearby so I place it on the stair beside me with a silent promise to the homeowner that I'll come back to throw it away later. Then I place my hand in hers, palm to palm.

"What are you doing here, Corrine?" I ask the question I was too chicken to ask before. "What did you want to talk about?"

She pulls her hand from mine, dropping her head into both hands with a groan. "I don't know. I was thinking about..." She sighs.

Lifting her face to mine, she says, "I was thinking about you. I needed to see you. There's so much I need to say to you." She sounds breathless. "Starting with I'm sorry but that's not even close to enough. I couldn't decide if I should come here or if I'm allowing myself to cross even more lines and I bought myself a pack of cigarettes while I was deciding and then I did come here and that woman answered the door," she rambles.

My chest tightens with how much I love to hear her flustered. "Amy," I tell her. "My twin sister."

She swallows and her face relaxes into a look of relief. "Right."

"You told me *how* you got here. Not why," I say, still waiting, my heart beating in what I realize is anticipation. I want to hear her say it. I want her to tell me that she wanted to see *me*. I need her to tell me that, after I laid everything on the line. Despite standing up for myself, telling her I wasn't a mistake still left me feeling exposed. Because it meant that what happened between us meant more to me than it did to her.

She turns to me, her eyes sparking amber in the sunlight. "I'm here because I want... I want..." She stops, searches my face. "I *want*, Wesley."

Fireworks explode in my head, in my chest, lower. She wants, potentially,

me.

Slowly, I nod. "I want, too."

She exhales. Her eyes drop to my mouth. "You do?"

I nod faster. "A *lot*..."

Her voice, adamant that our kiss could never happen again, saying she regretted it, that what we did was a mistake, that I was a mistake, loops in my brain.

"Wait..."

Rejection from a woman is nothing new to me. Rejection from Corrine, even if it was justified, even if it made sense, left a bruise.

"What, exactly, do you want?" I ask.

She closes her eyes. "You. To feel good. The way you make me feel. Everything."

Her fingers grip mine so tightly they look like they'll leave indents in my skin. No matter how much her words hurt, kissing her felt right. Touching does, too. Making her feel good feels like it should be my life's work. I don't care how desperate it might make me. If she wants me, of course I want her back.

When she opens her eyes again, I'm nodding.

"My god, yes."

Her mouth twitches.

"Wesley, *no one* can know," she insists. Her face falls as soon as she says the words. "I can't believe I said that to you. This is..." Her eyes widen.

"Unprofessional is just the beginning of what this is."

Lifting my hand, I cup her cheek. "Come back to my house with me."

She shakes her head. "But..."

"Come. Back. With. Me."

She leans into my palm as she says, "I can't... We need to talk about this."

"We will. I promise." Leaning into her, I rub the tip of my nose against hers, and she lets me. "Please," I whisper, as her breath ghosts across my lips, my chin, my neck. I lean back to see her face. Biting her lower lip, she nods.

* * *

Corrine holds her hand out to Amy—who has put on clothes, thank god—when we get back.

"I'm so sorry about earlier," she says, pumping my sister's hand like she's

a potential client. “I knew Wesley had a sister, I just didn’t realize *you* were Wesley’s sister.”

Amy smirks at me, waves the apology away. “No worries.”

She walks into the kitchen and Corrine wraps her arms around her middle. I’m not exactly sure what’s happening here but I think I need to facilitate this interaction in some way.

“Hey.” I turn her toward me, watching her chew on the inside of her cheek. “Do you want to get out of here?” I ask. “Would you feel more comfortable at your place?”

She nods quickly, an apology in her eyes.

“Kay.” I smile. “Give me two seconds.”

I run upstairs and grab a sweater and my Sox cap, and pull on my worn sneakers. Grabbing Corrine’s hand, I call to Amy, “We’re leaving!”

My sister pokes her head out of the kitchen. “Where are you going?”

“We’re...going to eat out!” I tell her the first lie I can come up with.

“Okay.” Amy narrows her eyes at me. “Remember: The only way to do great work is to do what you love.”

Corrine turns to me as I shut the door behind us, a confused look on her face. “Did she just quote Steve Jobs?”

I pull my ball cap down lower, avoiding her eyes as I jog down the steps. “Oh, yeah. She did,” I say.

“Why?”

I sigh. “It’s what she always says when she gives cunnilingus advice.”

Chapter 24: Corrine

As we walk through my front door, I realize I haven't had a man in this apartment since James. The first time I brought James here he'd compared everything. Yes, my building has a concierge but he lived in the penthouse. Yes, my home office was large but he had a second bedroom *and* an office. He had a better view than I did. His appliances were newer.

I'm suddenly relieved I'm not the one marrying that tiresome man.

Wesley follows behind me, stepping down into the living room. He takes in the white walls, the floating glass fireplace, the marble island, all with a happy smile on his face. It's like...he actually wants to be here or something.

He points to a large blue pennant with "B STRONG" in the universally recognized Boston Red Sox font.

"You like the Sox?" he asks, excitedly.

"I like Boston."

I place my keys on the counter, pulling off my cardigan, and turn to face him. "Do you want something to drink?"

He shakes his head, pulling off his ball cap and holding it in front of him with both hands.

"Should I take off my shoes...?" He peers down at my stocking feet and the pristine white-and-gold color scheme.

"It's fine," I say. But he toes them off anyway.

This man is unbelievably sexy right now.

He puts his hat down beside my keys. "So."

He snaps his fingers and I realize, he's waiting for me to take the lead on this.

But I don't know what to do. None of this is normal for me.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to perform," I practically yell at him.

"Whoa." He shakes his head, smiling.

I wring my hands together. What the hell am I doing? This will end horribly.

"Do you think I came here with you because I had to?" he asks, scratching his temple. "I mean, I guess that could be kind of a kinky role-play thing..."

"Wesley." My eyes feel huge in my face. My mouth a flat line. "This is

serious.”

I press my palms to my cheeks to cool them. “I feel like I’m going crazy. I know I shouldn’t want this but I can’t…”

I reach out, but I don’t touch him. And I don’t want to make him feel like he has to touch me. No matter what happens right now, I’ll always be his boss again come Monday morning. I place my fists at the base of my throat, tucking them under my chin to keep them from straying too close to him. “We need to discuss this. Now.”

He nods. “You’re right.” He points to one side of my kitchen island. “You stand there.” He parks himself on the other side.

“What are you doing?” I ask, skeptical.

“We work together.” He shrugs. “Maybe it’s not such a bad idea to treat this like…business.”

Slowly, I nod, taking my assigned spot across from him. He leans his elbows on the counter, his long body bent and his legs stretched out behind him. I fold one hand over the other.

“We need to set some rules, Wesley, for how we approach a personal and professional relationship.” As the words flow, my shoulders loosen. This is like a contract negotiation, and those I can handle with my eyes closed.

The wanting is still there, a low-level throb beneath my skin that keeps me warm and wet. But I can set it aside for now, for the good of us both.

“I think it’s fair to say that after the team practice and then this past Friday, we’re having difficulty keeping our…” I search for the most delicate phrasing.

“Hands off each other?” he supplies.

I nod. “I also acknowledge that I misjudged you in the past and have discovered that the person you truly are is a person that I…” I clear my throat.

“Like to kiss?”

I sigh, giving him a stern look.

He lifts his chin for me to continue. His dimple peeks out from his cheek.

“As I was saying, we need ground rules for our personal and professional relationships to coexist. I want you to know that I acknowledge that I have a lot of power over you in our professional relationship. I promise to never hold something that happens in our personal life against you at work. Even if that something is that you no longer want to continue this…” I point between us. “We need to promise to be honest with each other and most importantly…”

I swallow. The words taste sour but they need to be said.

“We can’t tell anyone about this, Wesley.” I want to reach across the countertop to take his hand in mine. “If anyone were to find out, they would question *all* of the work you’ve done at Hill City. They would question the work we did together and we would both be fired. Is there anything you’d like to add to our...negotiations?”

I study him but for once Wesley is a vault. “What are you thinking?” I whisper.

“I’m trying to come up with another stipulation, but I’m blanking.”

Now I do reach across for his hand. He slides his palm to mine, his skin warm against the cold counter.

“The most important thing to me is that you are comfortable. That you are coming to this with...” I shake my head. “Fucking *enthusiastic* consent. I’ve been in uncomfortable workplace situations before.” I don’t bother going into detail about what’s been happening with Richard. It’s too embarrassing. “I never want this—” I squeeze his hand “—to be uncomfortable for you.”

He squeezes back. “Thank you. I appreciate that and I promise you—” a slow grin spreads across his face “—I don’t feel that way. And... I want you to feel comfortable, too. If *you* ever want to end this, I don’t want you to be afraid to.”

I smile and make a silent promise: I’ll check in. With him and myself. I never want to be the Richard in this situation. Pushing myself on him when the feelings aren’t reciprocated.

“Does this conclude negotiations?” he asks.

“Unless you have anything to add, I can’t see why we can’t conclude negotiations for the moment.”

He moves around the island, stopping on my side. “If I think up any amendments, I’ll be sure to bring them to your attention.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chambers.” My formality brings another smile to his face.

“Should we sign something or...?”

I frown. “I think it would be best if we didn’t leave a paper trail, don’t you?”

“Corrine?” He laughs, wrapping his hands around my wrists and pulling me toward him. “I was joking.”

Oh.

“Actually, I was thinking we could conclude negotiations with something a bit more interesting.”

I knead his pectorals and drag my eyes to meet his. “Like with you fucking me again, Wesley?”

His heart beats harder beneath my hands, his chest expanding on a deep inhale. “Straight to the point,” he says. “I’ve always liked that about you.”

He has to curl his body into a question mark to reach my lips. I lift up onto the tips of my toes to meet him, pressing my mouth to his in a soft, hesitant kiss.

“Your bed?” he asks against my lips.

I nod, moving backward, pulling him with me by the front of his shirt. The light dims as we move down the hallway, the feeling of the floor changing under my feet as I step from cool hardwood to soft carpet. But mostly I just feel him against me, his warmth, growing harder by the second as we stumble past my office.

We’re a flurry of moving body parts and clothing. My top gets stuck when I try to pull it off. He trips on his jeans when I push them down his legs. He drops his glasses on the floor when he tries to put them on the table beside my bed. The only sound in the world is the sound of each individual tooth on the zipper of my jeans, coming apart as he slowly pulls the tab down.

My skin cools as it’s exposed and all of the things I couldn’t see or hear or feel because I was too engrossed in him hit me. I’m about to be naked with Wesley, my intern, in my bed, for the first time.

This isn’t some moment of passion that we can explain away with muddled emotions. We came into this with clear heads. We know what we’re doing.

We’re starting an affair.

He rests his hands on my shoulders, over the straps of my bra. I cover his with my own.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sitting back on his heels. “Is this okay?”

Of course he would think he’s moving too fast and I’m breaking out into mental hives.

I nod. “Just...this feels weird me asking you this but: please don’t think less of me,” I whisper.

“Less of you? For what?”

“For this.” I use one hand to show that I include us, this bed, my room, in what I mean. “For this decision.”

“Are you nuts?” He smiles and I bite my lip at how cute he looks right now. “I think you’re unbelievable.”

He buries his face in my chest, as if to prove it. “You feel unbelievable.”

Kissing down my stomach, he nibbles the skin above my panties, rubs his nose into the fabric above my pussy. I close my eyes at the intimacy of this moment.

He's too much. And I can't get enough.

"You smell unbelievable," he whispers.

He crawls back up my body and lies on his side, propping his head up in his hand. "Are you sure you want this?"

"It's all I've been able to think about since...probably since we kissed," I admit. Saying it is like dropping a weight I didn't know I was carrying.

"Because, like." He places his hand gently on my belly. "You seem a little...closed off. I mean, you're generally kind of closed off. But I thought after..."

He shrugs.

"After we kissed in a dugout?"

He huffs out a laugh. "Yeah. I thought maybe I had unlocked a new, secret level to you.

"Not that I think you're a video game or a challenge to be overcome. I just..." He pauses long enough for my initial offense to wear off.

"I can never tell what you're thinking," he says in a desperate kind of tone.

I glance from the bedroom door to my closet, to my pink toenails, trying to hide my smile. "Well, you did the right thing then, when you asked me. If you ever want to know, just ask."

He nods, a deep trench in his brow, like all his thinking derives from that one spot. "Are you sure?" he asks. "Do you want to do this?"

Wesley's hair falls over his forehead in a carefree way. His eyelashes are as thick as a bottlebrush. His hands are gentle and reverent wherever he touches me. He's kinder and braver than I ever gave him credit for.

But none of that will excuse what we're about to do. What we've already done. "I feel like...as much as I want this, as much as I want *you*, and we've set boundaries, this is wrong. I'm your boss and I'm taking advantage of you."

"What if I promised you that not a single part of me feels taken advantage of? And if I did, I would tell you—and then probably encourage you to do it again?"

I scratch my nails through his stubble. He closes his eyes. "It's so much more complicated than that."

"I know," he says. "It doesn't make it not true, though." Leaning down, he

kisses me slowly. “What do you want me to do to you, Corrine?” he whispers.

There’s only longing in his eyes. Somehow, he can put aside any worries, all the concerns that come with this decision, and just *be here*. I want to just *be here* so badly. I want to flip a switch and just feel.

His hands roam restlessly over the curve of my hip. And maybe it’s just that easy, to turn it all off, to forget about the risks. To forget about everything happening outside of this room, like my mother and Richard. Maybe for right now, there’s nothing outside of the two of us.

I close my eyes and I decide. I’m going to do this with Wesley. For the next however many hours, I’m going to immerse myself in him. I’m going to choose him. And choose myself. I’m going to let myself feel good.

I wrap his hair around my fingers, slip my tongue between his teeth, sucking on his upper lip. Pushing his head away and down my body, I say, “Do what you said you were going to do. Eat out, Wesley.”

I pull the straps of my bra down. He stops there first, licking each nipple, sucking and toying with my breasts until my legs writhe beneath his.

“Now,” I whisper. “Please,” I add as an afterthought.

He grinds his cock into my hip before moving down my body and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he likes it when I get a little bossy.

Smiling against my chest, rising over me, and hooking his fingers in my panties, he pulls them down slowly. He spreads me wide open with his hands on my thighs. Wiping his hand over his mouth, he consumes my body with his eyes in a way neither of us had a chance to last time, when we were too busy pulling and biting and tearing at each other. I’m so hot already, like his eyes are enough to get me off. He ducks to place a single kiss between my legs. I bend my knees and cry out.

“What do you want?” he asks, his mouth still against my skin, his voice vibrating through me. I am embarrassingly wet.

“More of that. Tease me.” I sound like I’m begging but he doesn’t make me wait.

He kisses and bites my thighs. Circles his tongue around my clit but never touches it. Every time I lift my hips, seeking more contact, he hums this pleased, satisfied sound. My fists claw at the duvet. Every breath he sends across my center feels like it could blow me away. He’s driving me crazy and I fucking love it.

I twine my fingers in his hair, guiding his head to my center. “No more

teasing,” I gasp and finally he’s there. Tasting me, licking up one side of my lips and down the other. Sucking on me and pushing his fingers into my body until my hips buck against his face and the only sounds I can make are *More* and *Yes* and *Please, Wesley. Please*. He’s sloppy and wild but nothing has ever felt hotter than this.

He curls his fingers inside me and the pressure breaks. I might be crushing him between my legs but I’m too busy moaning against my fist to care. His tongue moves with every pulse of my body, pulling out every last bit of my orgasm. My heart wants to beat its way out of my rib cage. The only place I have a pulse is in my clit, the points of my nipples.

Slowly he rises up, wiping his forearm across his mouth, and reaches over the side of the bed, fumbling with his pants. I sift my hands through his hair. His skin is warm against my palm. I lock my arms around his waist to keep him from sliding off.

“What are you doing?” I giggle as he heaves himself up, holding a condom between his fingers like a trophy.

“Prophylactics,” he says, in an absurdly nerdy voice, pushing his finger up the bridge of his nose. “I just remembered I’m not wearing my glasses.”

God, he’s cute.

He kneels beside me, his face serious.

“I didn’t want to assume,” he says, shrugging. “Just because we did it without one the last time.”

Protection had not even entered my mind. I hold my hand over my eyes, blink into the darkness behind my open palm.

“I completely forgot,” I say quietly. My stomach does that flip, the one I feel when I miss a step going down stairs. That’s what this feels like and I can’t tell if it’s a good or bad thing. But I also don’t want it to stop.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. I do.”

He smiles. “I trust you, too.”

I can’t look at him right now. “This feels so weird.” My voice is muffled from beneath my hands.

He leans away. “Nothing kills a boner better than a woman saying sex with you feels weird. Do I make some face I don’t know about or...?”

A girlish laugh bursts out of me. “No. No, it’s not you, I promise. I just...” I glance around the room like maybe I’ll find the words written on my walls. “I *never* forget to use condoms. I *never* text a man to meet up at his house. I *never*...”

Have sex with my intern on my desk, I leave unsaid. But I think we both hear it.

“Well, lucky for you, I and every other human male has kept a condom—or five—in his wallet since he knew what sex was. So, if you forget, I’ll remember.” He holds it up again. “Do you want me to put it on?”

My chest warms with affection and appreciation for this man. “Yes.”

He tears it open and rolls the rubber down his shaft. His hands shake a little and I wonder if it’s because I’m watching him or because he feels as excited as I do to discover what else sex with each other can feel like.

“Once...” He pauses. “I shot the condom into my eye like an elastic band.”

“I...uh...oh.” I suck in my lips and bite them to keep myself from laughing.

“I wasn’t even having sex. I was just trying on a condom for the first time when I was like fourteen.” He pulls at the reservoir tip, a flush on his cheeks that might be from arousal or embarrassment. “But I didn’t this time,” he says quietly.

Leaning over me, he kisses my cheek.

“Thank Big Papi for small miracles,” I whisper and he huffs a laugh against my neck.

“Yes. Thank you Big Papi and all the Boston Red Sox.”

My hands settle over his hips again in the descending silence. His grin slowly fades, his lips brush mine and he slides his tongue into my mouth in a quiet, soft kiss. My whole body thrills at these touches, at the knowledge that—in every situation—Wesley is the same man, gentle, humble, kind. Arousal pools low in my belly. I want to press my thighs together but I can’t because his own block me, so I settle for rubbing the coarse hair on his legs against my inner thighs.

“Can we do something a little different?” he whispers. “It’s not anything weird,” he says quickly. “It’s just... I like it...on your stomach?”

“O-okay.” When I don’t move, he cups my hip, slowly turning me onto my side, placing one arm under my head and bending my knee so I am not fully on my stomach. Normally I don’t mind a little bit of manhandling, but this is nice, too. Every touch feels reverential. He hovers, half behind and half over top of me, stroking my stomach in slow circles. With each pass, he gets closer and closer to my core. My body is open, exposed to him. But the sheets are crushed in his fist, for me. I am so wet and so powerful. Even with my body heavy and shivery from my orgasm, I still want every inch of him.

“Is this okay?” He breathes the words into the nape of my neck.

I try to catch my breath and look over my shoulder at him. “You like this?”

He nods, his eyes bright. Taking himself in hand, he rubs the head of his cock on me, like he is soaking me up. I rest my forehead into my arm, arching my back into him. When he pushes inside, I release the breath I was holding.

He feels exactly as I remember. He feels better than that. He leaves room for nothing else but him. No other thought but him. This is the feeling I want. The feeling I chased him for.

I moan as he slowly pulls out and presses back in. It’s a debased sound, lecherous. If someone were to ask me what sex should feel like this would be the sound I’d make as I tell them, it feels like this: Wesley Chambers fucking me from behind.

My breasts bounce, my nipples brushing against the sheet with every thrust.

“Let me,” he whispers against the sweat at my temple as I reach between my legs.

“Don’t stop.” I sound desperate for it. “Harder.”

He plants his hands on either side of my head and fucks me in earnest. Every time his thighs slap my ass, he grunts. I want to hear that sound in my sleep; each one pushes me closer and closer to the edge as I play with myself.

“Oh.” He gasps, the sound reverential. “Fuck yes. Touch yourself.” His voice is a harsh whisper.

Liquid heat rolls down my spine. I’m shuddering, moaning, holding my breath, as I come. My body can’t let him go.

With a final thrust he comes, his cock kicking inside me. Wesley rests his forehead against my shoulder, catching his breath. His breath leaves goose bumps along my skin.

He brushes my hair back. He squints a little, like without his glasses—or perhaps with the postorgasmic haze—he can’t see.

“Good?” he asks.

In this moment, I wish I had said no to the condom so I could feel everything. I want to catalogue all of him, the feel of him, his come on the inside of my thighs after he pulls out.

“Good.”

So fucking good.

Chapter 25: Wesley

We lie in her bed, sleepily rubbing skin against skin when Corrine's phone rings. She takes the call in her office. After lying alone, my feet hanging over the end of the bed, for ten minutes I get up for a glass of water. I check out the view of the Common from her living room. Her windows are so clean I could have easily ended up an embarrassing internet meme from walking into them. The color scheme in her home reflects the one in her office. Crisp and white, clean lines and modern art and appliances. The pride she takes in her home is apparent in every detail: the gold trays under the TV, the black-and-white prints on the wall. I browse the bookshelf, filled mostly with books on business, marketing, a few on feminism, a history of salt, and most surprising, *The Baby-Sitters Club*. I pull the first book in the series off the shelf and sit on the couch in my boxers. The spine is well worn and the pages dog-eared. I smile; I always took Corrine for a bookmark kind of woman.

She's still not out of her office by the time I'm finished with the first chapter. I set the book down on the table beside the sofa, next to a framed picture of a family of six, in which a blond woman with gray in her hair and a balding giant of a man flank four younger family members. Two tall, broad, blond teen boys, identical twins, with their arms around each other, another husky teenage boy who looks similar to the twins but isn't quite their exact copy, and a smiling, younger version of Corrine. This Corrine looks more like the one in her company photo, with shorter hair and a bright toothy smile.

They stand on a beach under an overcast sky. They all wear University of Minnesota sweaters in various colors and the wind whips their hair.

"Sorry," Corrine says, standing at the end of the couch wearing my T-shirt. It looks better on her than it ever could on me.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Just putting out a fire with a client."

"Anything I can help with?"

She shakes her head, sitting beside me. I lean toward her, point to the picture. "That's you."

She nods.

"And who are they?"

She points at the woman. “My mom.” Her fingers move over the glass. “My dad, my brothers. They’re triplets. John and James are identical and Sebastian is fraternal.”

“Whoa. What are the chances of that happening?”

She shrugs. “About one in one hundred twenty thousand.”

“That...is a much higher chance than I was expecting.”

A private smile tugs her lips but other than that she doesn’t respond.

I study the photo, her small stature and dark hair contrasting starkly between the tall, blond, and thickly built boys. Her mom’s nose is a little big—Amy would probably call it *aquiline*—while Corrine’s is pert, the tip of it begging to be kissed...in a completely respectful and non-patronizing way. The only resemblance I can see between them is her mouth. Corrine, like her mother, has full lips, their smiles conservative.

Her father is a beast of a human. In the photograph he looks like he could take a hit from an NFL linebacker easy. Most of it is in his height—he’s definitely over six feet—but for an older guy he has a lot of muscle. I search for a resemblance between her and her brothers but still I come up with nothing. They’re a mixture of their mother’s features and their father’s size.

Like she’s read my thoughts, after a minute she says, “He’s not my biological father.”

I meet her eyes, blushing a little. “Oh.”

Busted.

“I never met my birth father.”

She looks down at her hands in her lap and I’m temporarily distracted by the smooth skin of her thighs beneath her palms.

“My mom had me young. She met my dad—” she motions to the man in the photograph “—when she was still pregnant with me. They got married before I was one and then had my brothers a few years later. They’re big and loud and I’ve always been the odd one out of the family.” She shrugs. “But we all fit together. In our own little way.”

I want to ask her more about her family, but she beats me to the plate. “They’re your age, I think. The boys.”

“Twenty-five?” I ask.

“Twenty-four.”

I nod and place the frame back on the table. “How’s your mom doing, by the way?”

“She’s coping,” she says. “Sebastian and I will probably go visit at

Thanksgiving.”

“Does he live in Boston?”

“He’s in law school in Philly. John and James live down the street from each other, the next town over from my parents. They teach at the same high school.” She smiles. “John teaches chemistry and math and James runs the drama department.”

“You know a lot of twins, then,” I say. She frowns, and I point to my chest. “Amy and I are twins.”

“Oh. Right... Does Amy know who I am?” she asks.

I tuck her hair behind her ear, move closer. “Yes. Is that okay?”

She shrugs again. “She’s your sister,” she says, as if that settles it. “What did she say?” Her eyes are guarded. “When you told her?”

I kiss her throat, suck at her pulse point. “She told me...” I pause because she told me a lot and most of it I don’t want to repeat to Corrine. “She told me it was the craziest thing I’ve ever done.”

Corrine laughs through her nose. “You and me both.”

“Corrine,” I say. “I don’t want to talk about our siblings anymore.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

I stand, hold out my hand to her. “I don’t want to talk at all.” I pause, reflecting. “Unless it’s for you to tell me to eat you out again.”

Chapter 26: Corrine

As I come around the corner to my office on Monday, Wesley sits at his desk wearing an adorably obnoxious smirk. He holds up his wrist, tapping his watch. His playfulness tugs at my lips. He stands as I get closer.

“I got to work before you.” His smile grows wider. “That’s never happened in the history of Wesley.”

The smile crawls up one side of my face. “That’s not exactly true,” I say.

“Until I saw your apartment with my own eyes, I was pretty convinced you slept at the office.”

I laugh, opening the office door. “Now you’re just being silly.” He follows me inside and I jump when his hands come down on my shoulders.

“Oh,” I say, glancing at him as he pulls my red coat from my arms. “Thank you.”

He lets out a pained sound. “You look like a fucking knockout.”

I flatten my hands down my black wrap dress. “I know,” I say quietly. A flush fills my cheeks. “That’s why I wore it.”

He hangs the coat on the hook on the back of the door and pulls the blinds on the glass-paneled wall. Then he grabs me around my waist.

“Wesley.” His name is a soft sigh on my lips.

“Corrine,” he murmurs before kissing me, touching his tongue to mine, making me moan.

“Wesley, wait,” I say, even as my arms snake around his neck and pull his body to mine. “Can’t,” he murmurs, palming my ass and I am dangerously close to making a very bad decision.

He pulls back just far enough to say, “Been missing this since yesterday.”

“No,” I say, stronger now, and he steps away immediately. “We can’t do this here.” I rub my finger along the outline of my lips, blindly trying to fix any smudges.

He wipes a spot on my chin. “You’re fine,” he says, sullen.

I take a deep breath, searching for some perspective in the space between us.

“Okay.” I point to the chair on the other side of my desk. “Sit,” I say, rounding the desk and taking a seat in my own chair.

He sits but watches me with a guarded expression on his face, fidgeting

with his tie, crossing and uncrossing his legs. There are heart-eyed skunks on his socks. I watch him squirm for a moment, mostly because I can't believe I had sex, multiple times, with a man who wears skunk socks, and also because I can't believe the warmth in my chest tells me that I find it cute.

"I think we need to set some amendments," I say, sliding my glasses on.

"Let me guess, is one of them: No Sex at the Office?"

I nod. Even I feel a little sad about this rule.

"I concede that that's probably a good idea." He scratches at the back of his head.

I press my lips together. "Yes."

"Okay, then... I've thought of an amendment, too."

"Of course." I hold my hands out, to give him the floor.

He fiddles with his glasses. "Well, I've never... I've never had sex outside of a committed relationship," he says, a flush crawling up his neck. "So, I guess, I don't want to..."

He stops, taking a deep breath. "I'm not trying to say that we have to be a *couple*. But could we both agree not to have sex with anyone else?" He looks down at his hands, like he's embarrassed. "I just don't think I have it in me to be casual...with you."

I nod.

"You think I'm old-fashioned?" he asks. "I'm twenty-five and I've never had a hookup."

"No, it's not that," I say quickly. Before last week, I'd never had a hookup either.

When it comes to Wesley, I meant what I said: I want. Him and his capacity for caring. I want to be worthy of this person he is and be the woman he thinks I am. I want to be able to say everything, like he does, without worrying about how much of myself I'm giving away. But I *can't*.

Wesley doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve or even on his socks. He rents ad space on highway billboards. He doesn't have it in him to be so casual, and it's a relief actually, that I'm not the only one who feels like they're groping around in the dark.

But I don't have it in me to be as open as him.

He smiles. "Okay. Well, what about..." He gestures over his shoulder.

"Your job? Well, it will look more like we expected at the beginning of all this. I do still need you to do some admin work for me. But that was always going to be case." I wince. "I don't want this to seem like I'm rewarding you,

either, for..." I can't even say it. *Sex*. "But I've held you back long enough and for no reason. You came here to work with me. So let's work."

He smiles. "No...well, that's great. But..." He fiddles with his watchstrap. "Do we have to go back to pretending that we hate each other?"

"Oh." I sit back in my chair, and try to hide my smile. "Yes." I shrug. "I guess being nice to each other is okay."

He's quiet for a moment before a laugh escapes. "You're funny."

The only person who thinks I'm funny is my mother.

"You think I'm funny?"

He strolls to the door and looks over his shoulder, his hand on the handle. "Of course I think you're funny. Why wouldn't I think you're funny?"

I feel like I've missed an important part of the conversation.

I'm okay with not being funny. Some people need to make other people laugh. But I value other qualities in myself. "I'm a lot of things, Wesley. But I'm not funny."

"Well, then, why do I feel so happy whenever I'm with you?" he asks.

My face is blank, except for my eyes, which feel like they're about to fall out of my face, and my cheeks, hot with delighted embarrassment.

He sighs, knocking his head gently against the closed door. "I concede that might have been a touch heavy for two people who are just hooking up. Albeit, exclusively."

Forget highway billboards. He rents ad space in Times Square. And *oh*. I know that I need to be careful here, to not push his boundaries and keep work safe for him. But I didn't realize how very gentle I need to be with his heart. And with mine. We have the capacity to hurt each other, not just professionally. A few weeks ago, I would have tried not to bat an eye at the thought. But now that I know him, I want to protect his heart as much as I want to protect mine.

"Do you want to come over tonight?" I ask.

He pauses, brushing his hair back, and says, "Yes." He sounds relieved.

I nod. "Okay. Maybe around eight?"

"Sure." He turns away to open the door.

"Do you really feel happy when you're with me?" I say quickly and a little too loud.

Turning back to me, he frowns. "Of course I do," he says, with his words and with the heat in his gaze.

He watches me quietly. "I want to kiss you right now. I want to show you

with my mouth exactly how happy you make me.”

I press my thighs together. “That...that is not work appropriate, Mr. Chambers,” I say, trying to hide the smile on my face.

“Back to work, Ms. Blunt.”

Chapter 27: Wesley

Corrine sits, cross-legged, on her living room floor, in a pair of black tights and a black sweater with a deep V-neck. She smiles at me as I walk in, then turns back to the fireplace, speaking quietly into her phone. I stand for a moment in her foyer. Do I make myself at home? Should I strip down on the bed? What's the protocol here for a secret hookup?

She turns back to me, her eyes narrowing, and now I'm wondering on a scale of one to ten, how creepy do I seem loitering in her doorway? I toe off my shoes and fold my jacket over the back of a barstool, hooking my messenger bag over it as well. I sit beside her, stretching out my legs and resting my weight on my palms behind me.

"Okay, Mom. I'd better go," she says, her voice sweet and soft. "Love you, too."

She sets the phone down, smiling at me.

"Hi," I say. "How's your mom?"

"Hi," she says. "Good. She sounded sleepy."

"And how are you?" I ask, nodding to her phone so she'll know I really mean, *How are you taking all this?*

She smiles but it's sad. She's quiet and I think maybe she won't answer, maybe this is a thing that we don't talk about even though we put our tongues in each other's mouths.

"My mom used to say that I was a slow cooker friend."

I nod, even though I have no idea what she's talking about.

"I'm a slow burn," she explains. "It takes a long time for me to warm up to people."

I don't know whether or not agreeing will get me in trouble but that is the most accurate assessment of Corrine Blunt I have ever heard. So I say, "Ahhhh."

"I just..." She picks at her fingernails. "I've never thought about what it might be like to exist in a world without the one person who knows me better than anyone else."

An ache blooms in my chest for her. I know exactly what that feels like. It feels like being cracked open, having all of your most vulnerable pieces turned out. It feels like living your life as an exposed nerve.

“I’m sorry. You probably don’t want to talk about this.”

I shake my head. “Sometimes it feels like nobody wants to talk about my mom, about her death, or how I felt—feel—about it.”

Sometimes that’s the only thing in the world I want to do, talk about it. Keeping it inside me these past few months has felt like holding poison in my mouth, trying not to swallow it. I never really planned on saying all this but I feel like I might choke on the words if I don’t keep going.

“But I wish...” I stop. She’s so quiet and I’m not sure if I should be talking about this right now. “I want to talk about her, alive, maybe even more. I wish people would ask me about her, you know?”

Speaking my memories out loud feels like the only way I’ll be able to keep them. I glance over at her quickly and she smiles. I realize she may think I’m fishing but I can’t tell if I wish she would ask me or not.

“You might not have to find out,” I say. “What it’s like to exist in the world without the one person who knows you better than anyone else. Not yet.”

I curl my fingers through her high-pile rug while I wait for the blood to drain from my face. What kind of person brings up their dead mom with their wicked-hot-boss booty call? A guy who apparently doesn’t want to have sex tonight. Also known as myself.

“My mom is...proper,” Corrine whispers. “She could barely tell me about her symptoms since they had do to with...” She gestures to her abdominal region and I smile.

“Yeah, my mom was kind of the same. She said she’d tell us but only if we really wanted to know... In the end, it didn’t really matter, though. I had to help bathe her and dress her when she got really sick. She’d always get so flustered...” I smile in Corrine’s direction but I don’t actually make eye contact. I can’t believe I am blowing this so epically.

“What else?” Corrine asks, her hand sliding over the top of mine on the carpet, stilling my fingers where they tap a fast rhythm. “What was she like?”

I can’t believe I ever thought this woman cruel or sadistic. In this moment, she’s the kindest person I know.

I smile in a way that, I hope, conveys my gratitude. “She was a total lady,” I say. “She had this really expensive perfume that she’d only wear on special occasions. Someone in our office building wears it. Every time I’ve gotten a whiff it’s like *whoa*. Mom. And looking back I think she was one of those annoyingly perfect moms. She always dropped us off and picked us up on

time and she always had food for us when we got home from school. She came to every recital and play and tournament. She missed nothing, right? But she also swore like a hardened criminal. The words that woman could string together when she stubbed her toe would bring tears to *my* eyes.”

Corrine makes an indulgent sound. I feel a little bit lighter on this carpet. Like there was a weight pressing me into it before that’s been lifted. Like if I stood up right now, I might not be able to see the imprint of my butt in the carpet fibers.

I clench and unclench my fist and lift my hand, brushing her hair back from her face. “I don’t mind if you want to talk about it, though. You can ask me anything. If you’re feeling...” I shrug. “You know.”

“I do know,” she says. Her eyes are bright and her cheeks are pink from the warmth of the fireplace. Tonight feels like the first truly autumn night of the season.

“If you do have to find out, though, what that feels like, you’ll get through it. You can get through it.”

If I can do it, then she can, too.

“You think?”

I smile and kiss her neck because it’s what I’ve wanted to do all day. “I know.”

“What did you do this evening?” she asks.

I press another kiss to her collarbone. “Just went home, had dinner. Amy is opening a new restaurant so she wasn’t home. I came here.”

She runs her fingers through my hair and my eyes roll back in my head. “You?” I ask, remembering to be polite.

“Same,” she says as I kiss down her neck. “Worked a bit.” Only Corrine could look so blissful talking about working from home.

She tilts her head back, sighing, as I place more open-mouth kisses down the column of her throat and more across her collarbone.

“Sorry.” I pull away, clear my throat so that the next time I speak I won’t sound like I’ve swallowed gravel. “We were talking about important stuff.”

She nods but pushes me down on the floor. She throws her leg over my hip, hovering over my tented fly. “Is this okay instead?” she asks. Her gaze follows her fingers as she undoes one button after another out of its hole.

“Definitely.”

She pushes the two halves of my shirt aside, curling her fingers until each blunt half-moon marks my skin. She scratches not enough to hurt, just

enough to make every nerve ending in my body pay attention. I fist my hands in her shirt and pull it toward me until she has to follow. Her hair makes a dark tent around us.

Her skin is warm and so fucking soft I want to rub my face all over her. My palms slide up her rib cage and cup her naked breasts. I love the weight of them in my hands, how her nipples peek out between my fingers and pebble beneath my palms. The feeling creates a powder keg of lust, igniting in my hands, traveling straight into my dick.

Everything about Corrine is intense, stronger, heavy, *deeper*. And the nervous, twitchy guy in me can't take it.

"Wait," I say. Her exhales tickle my lips and chin. "When you invited me over tonight, it was for sex, right?"

There's no sound, until Corrine drops her forehead to mine and laughs. It's really more of a series of quick exhales through her nose, but she smiles too and that somehow makes them louder.

"Yes," she whispers, her voice shaking.

"Thank god. I was worried you wanted me to format another spreadsheet for you."

She scoffs but the smile is still there and this doesn't feel as heavy now. I can carry this. Our mouths come together and our hands move with purpose, pushing fabric off shoulders, pulling it over heads, rubbing between skin and cotton.

She sighs when I glide two fingers over her lips, her skin getting wetter, warmer. Her eyes close as she starts to rock over me. She pulls my pants down, my cock out.

"Pocket," I growl. "In my back pocket."

I lift my ass and she pulls my wallet out from beneath me. She flips it open with one hand, stroking me slowly with her other.

"Here." I hold my hand out to her so I can suit up while she finishes undressing.

I hold myself up for her as she straddles me again, her shirt and tights thrown to the side. With her hands on my chest she sinks down on me, and before she can move I grasp her hips, holding her in place. I close my eyes against the sight of her on top of me: the flush that covers her chest; her nipples, larger and darker than I thought they'd be, surprise me every time I see them. They make my mouth water.

I let her take over, now that the urge to rut up into her and come with teeth-

cracking hardness has subsided. Rubbing her body on mine, she leans forward, kissing my collarbone, scraping her teeth over my nipples, until she gets a sound from me.

My hands skim up her legs until my thumbs meet over her clit. Her rhythm gets shorter, tighter. Her hair tickles my chest and my face as we both watch my hand move between her legs, my cock disappearing over and over again.

She's quiet the whole time until she whispers, "Don't stop."

I don't. "Like this?"

"Don't stop," she says, more urgent than before.

I really, really don't.

She takes a hiccupped breath. Her palm creeps up my chest and she presses her middle and index finger against my lips. I open my mouth and she slips them in.

Her eyes are dinner plates, the Roman Coliseum, the fucking moon. "Oh," she says. Her body squeezes me, hot and tight.

"I'm not stopping," I say, not until she releases a long-held breath and shakes on top of me. Then I hold her hips in my hands, and press up, up, up, until she cries out and I cry out and something like an aftershock moves through her.

Corrine falls forward. Her lashes brush my chest with each blink. I stroke her hair and wait for this to feel weird or wrong. I wait for this to feel like I just fucked my boss. But that feeling never comes. The only thing wrong with any of this is that my skin is prickling from the cold air and I am just starting to notice and uncomfortable floor sex shouldn't be just as good as bed sex. Or desk sex.

She rolls to the side and I roll with her but have to stop when I almost roll onto my glasses.

"You kept your glasses on for sex," she laughs.

"You kept my glasses on for sex," I tease. "My hands were busy." I cup her breasts and make a distinct honking motion and this somehow pulls a laugh out of her.

I shiver. "Are you cold?" I gather her closer for warmth.

"No."

"Yeah, me neither." She smiles. I think I like her smiles better.

Chapter 28: Corrine

Wesley isn't gone five minutes before he knocks on the front door again.

"Just a second," I yell, my voice echoing among the tile, but I doubt he can hear me from my en suite bathroom.

My stomach flutters with giddy, ridiculous butterflies as I pat my face dry and trot back to the door. Wesley is exactly the type of person to have either forgotten something essential, like his bag or his glasses or his pants, or to have come back just to do something sweet like kiss me in that toe-curling way again. I scan the living room as I walk to the door but don't see anything of his. There is a large indentation on my carpet that serves as a red-flag reminder to his presence. I almost don't want to vacuum over it.

"What'd you forget?" I ask as I pull the door open.

"Sorry?" Richard smiles at me on the other side of the door.

My heart stops. Sweat breaks out under my armpits and around my hairline, an immediate panic response.

Richard frowns down the long hallway of my condo building. "Was there someone else here?"

I shake my head no before I realize that lie won't track. "Yes," I croak. My throat is the eye of a needle. They must have just missed each other. Can a heart stop from a close call?

"Oh?" He makes a show of checking his watch. He's still in his suit, but his tie is gone and the top buttons on his shirt are undone. His cheeks are flushed and his eyes are red. "It's past eleven." The smell of scotch wafts across the threshold.

Great. Drunk Dick.

"Emily. Emily was here." My voice sounds too high and too loud.

Richard leans forward, peering past me into my apartment. I cram myself between the doorframe and the door, squishing myself to leave as little space as possible. I know he won't see that spot on my carpet and immediately know what it is. I'm doubtful there's anything else in my apartment that could give away what I just did, but I feel the need to protect myself, my space from this uninvited guest, just the same. I wasn't aware Richard even knew where I lived.

Now that my heartbeat has slowed to a moderate-exercise pace and I

realize that Richard doesn't know that Wesley was here or that I was on top of him or that he touched my butt, my brain kicks in to ask, "What are you doing here, Richard?"

He frowns at the accusatory note in my tone.

"What I mean is..." Now my nervousness bleeds through. "How can I help you?"

In his silence, I search his face for the man he used to be. I'm desperate to have him back, his leadership and guidance. The young woman in me is still so loyal. Maybe he was never that man, though, and it's just taken me this long to realize it.

He leans against the frame, bringing his body and his alcohol breath within inches of my face. Breaking eye contact feels like the wrong move right now, like losing a fight I probably can't win anyway.

"I just wanted to see how you're doing. I know you were disappointed about the promotion...and with your mother and all..."

His deodorant smells sharp, like he's sweated through it. The urge to wince, to close this door and lock it against him turns my hands into fists.

"If you want I can come in and we can discuss..." He pauses and looks down my body and back up again. I feel like I need to go take a shower. "Divesting you of some of your smaller files. To lighten the load."

The edge in his voice sends a chill up my spine. Like this is an offer I'd best not refuse. Tears sting at the corners of my eyes at the injustice of this moment. I feel like a computer simulation, calculating all possible scenarios in my head before I answer:

Invite my drunk, lecherous boss into my home and deal with the consequences.

Or say no—again—and deal with new ones.

Either way, I'm going to end up saying no to this man and I can't imagine it will have a positive effect on my career.

"I'm sorry, Richard." My throat still feels too tight to get the words out. "I'm just about to go to bed. Maybe we can discuss more in the morning. At work."

"Fine." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Tomorrow."

"Thanks for stopping by," I say, as I start to close the door.

His hand shoots out, gripping the door and pushing it back open. A sound escapes from my mouth, surprised, scared. Weak.

"You look very nice tonight."

He searches my face; suddenly he seems more sober than I gave him credit for.

“Glowing.”

I nod quickly, swallowing down the panic that’s rising up my chest in the form of bile. “See you at practice.” He winks, walking away without another word.

I slam the door shut behind me, throwing the dead bolt, my hands shaking on the chain lock. Leaning with my back against the door, my heart beats in my ears louder than any sound coming from off the street below.

“Goddamnit,” I grit out, kicking the door with the bottom of my foot, banging my head against the wood. Stumbling toward the kitchen, I reach for my phone on the island. The marble feels cool and calming beneath my hands. I drop my face to the countertop while I scroll through my contacts.

Emily picks up on the fifth ring. “Hullo?” Her voice, heavy with sleep, fills my apartment through the speaker. It makes it feel like there’s someone here with me right now. That I’m not so very alone.

“If Richard asks, tell him you were here tonight. Late.”

“Corrine?”

“Yes. Can you do that, Emily? Please?” I tack on.

There’s a pause on the other end of the line, rustling, and when she speaks again she sounds more awake. “Okay. I can do that. What were we doing?”

“Watching TV, chatting, mindless stuff. You...you can’t even remember what we watched. We ordered Chinese and drank wine.”

The lie rolls off my tongue easier than I expected.

“Okay. Is everything all right?”

Deep breath. *Everything will be okay.* “It will be.”

“Okay,” she says again. “But, Corrine? Why do you need me to lie for you?”

Shit. Telling Emily about Richard’s unexpected visit would be easy, but telling her why he thought someone else was here fills my tongue with lead. How could I possibly explain this wanting that’s come over me when I don’t really understand it myself. I look back to the spot on the carpet, where we sat, where I climbed on top of him. Where he made me come. Even now, a shudder goes down my spine, straight to my core, and I have to turn away from the living room to be able to carry on this conversation. I can’t tell Emily what’s going on but I don’t want that to be the last time Wesley touches me.

What the hell am I doing?

“If I say I don’t want to tell you, will you still do this favor for me?”

Emily laughs. “You bitch. Of course I will.” She hangs up and I’m left staring down at my phone, the screen going black, the silence of my apartment incredibly loud.

Chapter 29: Wesley

I push down on the door handle, lifting at the same time so that it won't make that ungodly creaking it tends to make when it's cool at night. The house is dark and quiet as I toe my shoes off, but my body is amped. I'm excited, like I've just come home from a winning game and I want to wake up the whole house and tell them about it.

"Where have you been?" Amy yells from an armchair as she flicks on a lamp in the living room. I jump so high I almost hit my head on the ceiling.

"Holy balls, Amy." I hold my hand over my pounding heart. "You scared the crap out of me."

She rises from the chair, an old quilt wrapped around her shoulders and her polka-dot fleece pajamas peeking out underneath. "I asked you a question."

She sounds so much like Mom it sends a shiver down my spine.

"Have you been waiting up for me?"

She comes to a stop in the entranceway. "Yes. I got home from work and you weren't here. I was worried!"

"Okay. Well...sorry. I was at Corrine's." I scratch the back of my head and look toward the stairs, anywhere that's not at her.

"It's almost one o'clock in the morning," Amy hisses. "What were you doing there for so long? Did you fall asleep? Were you going to sleep over?" Her voice rises an octave with each question.

"No, we just lost track of time." I jog up the stairs. Amy thumps up the hardwood behind me.

"Are you, like, in an affair now?"

"I think you're sensationalizing things a little."

I shoulder open our shared bathroom door and pull my toothbrush out of the holder. After unscrewing the cap on the tube of toothpaste with my teeth, I spit it back onto the counter, squeezing the tube and getting toothpaste all over my hands.

"Why are you so upset about this?" I try to keep my voice low and shove the toothbrush in my mouth, missing my teeth completely and almost choking myself on it.

Amy watches me in the mirror as I gag and splutter and finally, like nothing happened, begin to brush my teeth.

“I get home at half past eleven, Wes. And you weren’t here. You’re *always* here. You’re dependable like that. I can set my watch to you. This thing you’re doing? It’s not dependable and it’s not like you.”

She steps into the bathroom, standing just behind me, meeting my eyes in the mirror as I brush, spit, repeat. Her tone softens, turns questioning. “A few weeks ago you hated this woman.”

“I never hated her,” I mumble around the foam in my mouth. “I strongly disliked.”

It’s only a little bit of a lie. I hated the things she made me do, and sometimes I felt a deep sense of resentment. I don’t know if hindsight is clouding my judgement or not but I’m certain that I never hated.

“Well, you never made that clear to me.” She points to her chest. “You made me hate her, too. And now I’m supposed to accept that you’re, you’re...”

Her mouth crinkles until she spits out, “*Fucking*. This is a huge risk. For you and her. I just... I think you’re making a bad decision.”

The way she says this, with her arms crossed over her chest, the finality in her tone, it makes me feel like she’s made a decision for me. If she doesn’t like it, then I can’t like it either.

Most of our relationship has gone this way. Wherever Amy leads, I follow, because she’s never steered me wrong and it’s usually the direction I want to go anyway.

But not this time. Resentment falls like a rockslide, for my sister and all those other decisions I let her make for me.

I rinse my toothbrush and my mouth, wash the toothpaste off my hands to give myself some time. “Last time I checked I never asked you what you thought.” The way my voice sounds—I’ve never talked to my sister like this before. But I can’t have this conversation with her right now. Not when I can still smell Corrine on me. Not when my skin still burns from her touch. I take a deep breath as I dry my hands on the towel, taking care to wipe both palms and each finger.

“I know, *we know*, it’s a risk. And I’m sorry that I never told you enough good things about her. That’s on me. But right or wrong, it’s not your decision to make, Amy.”

I turn to face her. “You’re right about one thing, though. I’ve always been dependable. I’ve always taken the safe route. And look where it’s got me.” I fling my arms out to my sides.

“I’m twenty-five years old. All our friends are moving on with their lives. Every other intern in this program is younger than me. I’m living in my mom’s house with my *sister*. You’re starting a business and I just get coffee.” She flinches and even though I’m mad at her for meddling, my heart aches to know I’ve hurt her. I blow all the air out of my lungs, grab my hair and pull.

“I’m tired of being the person you can set your watch to, Amy,” I say, quieter. “And I’m tired of you always riding in to save me. Have you ever considered that I *want* to take a risk? Instead of letting things happen to me all the time, I’m finally making something happen. Besides, this is not an affair. No one is cheating on anyone.”

Amy says nothing for a while, just shakes her head. “You know what I mean, Wes. Not a cheating affair. A *love* affair. A *secret* affair. Secrets push people together and they push people apart. I don’t want you to get hurt.” She hugs her arms tighter around herself. “Besides, what would Mom think?”

“Seriously?” I turn toward the toilet and flip up the lid. “I hope Mom would have no opinion whatsoever about my sex life. Now, are you going to shut the door or do you actually want to watch me take a leak?”

Amy’s eyes narrow. “Just think for a second about what you’re doing. Ever since you started working there it’s not just your relationship with your boss that’s been questionable. You’ve been a shitty friend. You’ve been a shitty *brother*. Where have you been, Wes? You never want to see anyone. You missed your own birthday party.”

I close my eyes as a hammer starts to pound behind them. “You know why I missed that,” I say through gritted teeth. “I said I was sorry.”

She’s quiet long enough that I think maybe I can open my eyes. Maybe this conversation is over.

“What about the house?”

My head falls forward, my chin to my chest. I love my sister but right now her voice is the last thing I want to hear.

“What about it?”

“I think we need to make plans.” My eyes are still closed but I can tell from the change in her tone she’s reached decision-mode. She says “I think,” but Amy knows exactly what she wants to do.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you changing the topic the other day over breakfast. We need to make an appointment with the lawyer and call a real estate agent to come take a look at the house and—”

“I’m not ready to sell the house, Amy,” I say, but I’m so quiet I’m not sure

she hears me.

“I know you don’t want to move but sometimes we have to make sacrifices.”

Maybe it’s her tone. Or the way she says *sacrifices* like she can proselytize to me about them. Maybe it’s that I’ve reached the end of my patience for this conversation. Or maybe this has been twenty-plus years in the making.

I turn to her. “*Stop!*” I yell and that one word, the volume, the way it rips from my mouth, seems to send her back into the hall.

“Stop telling me what to do or what’s best for me. You want to talk about sacrifice?” I point to my own chest. “I was Mom’s nurse so that *you* could work your way up in the restaurant. I cleaned up her puke and held her while she cried and kept track of her medications and you got to come home drunk or sometimes not at all and save for your future and do all the things *you* wanted to do so you could open this restaurant. And I never questioned you once. I never told you that what you were doing was a bad idea or a risk. I let you live your life, so why can’t you just let me do the same?”

She takes a slow shuddering breath. She doesn’t say another word. She just leaves, closing the door quietly behind her.

I pee, then strip and start the shower, numb to the words echoing off the old beige tiles. The afterglow of Corrine has been doused with a wet blanket. As the shower warms up, I splash some cold water on my face and let the mirror fog over my reflection.

I used to hate looking at myself. I didn’t like the person I saw. A kid who didn’t know what he wanted, who was scared to make a decision without his sister or his mother. I didn’t know what I wanted to be other than whatever my father wasn’t.

I couldn’t see the man I wanted to be. Whoever that man was, he was on hold, in a macabre game of limbo waiting for my mother to die, because she was never going to get better.

But I see him clearly now, the man I’m supposed to be. Corrine might see him, too. A man with goals and intentions, who tries his best, even if he might fail. This man doesn’t have to wait for anyone. I get to make my own decisions for the first time in a long time. I get to decide where I go, what I do, who I do it with. I chose this career, wherever it might take me. And Corrine. I choose her. When I’m with her and she’s touching me, I see the man I can be. I want her to see me, too. All of her. Everything.

So what happened tonight? That can’t be a risk.

Chapter 30: Corrine

There is no crying in baseball. Or so I've heard. But I've felt like crying all day and now I'm about to play baseball—technically, softball—but I think the same rules apply. My irritability hasn't improved since the Hill City team arrived at the diamond for only our second, and last, practice before our first game.

The group huddles in and around the dugout, shivering and studying the sky. The cloud ceiling looks close enough to touch and full enough that if I did, it would spill water all over Boston. An unseasonably cold wind throws dust at us, getting past my sunglasses and stinging my eyes. At least if I start to cry I'll have an excuse.

Despite the sunless sky, every time I try to take off my sunglasses I have to squint against a glare that only seems to affect me. But the glasses also serve as a second barrier for Richard, who showed up five minutes ago, pulling Wesley aside and further delaying the start of practice.

They make it easy to stare, to sit here and let the fear fester, watching Wesley's face get paler and paler as Richard talks at him, the back of one hand smacking the palm of the other every so often.

"He asked me this morning how my evening was." Emily's voice makes me jump high enough my butt leaves the seat.

"I told him we hung out at your house and got Chinese from that place with the orange chicken."

My whole body slumps against the cold cement wall behind me. "Thank you, Emily."

Richard smiles at Wesley, says one last thing to make Wesley's head wobble like a bobblehead, and starts to head our way. I stand so fast I get dizzy, swaying toward Emily like I've been pushed over by the wind.

"Whoa," Emily says, grabbing my forearm. Her eyes are wide and I feel like she can read too much of my face even with my sunglasses on.

"Practice is starting," I say, breathless.

By the time Richard takes a seat just where I was sitting, I'm jogging around the diamond, trying to get my limbs moving. Every step rattles my brain.

Wesley wants to start practice fielding grounders and pop-ups, which elicits a number of blank stares from most of the team and smirks from Mark and his crony, a short white guy with a buzz cut. But first he takes the group through a set of stretches that everyone complains about, mostly because they involve lying down on the dirt and opening our hips, leaving everyone in awkward positions in front of coworkers.

I skipped interval training for this.

Richard watches me the whole time. His stare is like the diamond dirt, coating my backside in a thick layer I can't brush off no matter how hard I try.

We break off into pairs to warm up, throwing balls back and forth. Emily stands about fifty feet away and we lob the ball at each other. With each pass my mood tanks so that by the time Wesley approaches, it takes everything I have not to throw the ball at him and demand he tell me what he and Richard were talking about.

"Don't rush your throw, Ms. Blunt," Wesley says too loudly. I wince. His voice echoes through my head.

"Why are you yelling?" I ask quietly as Emily retrieves the ball. My throw went wide.

"I'm trying to make it seem like I'm giving you advice," he says through the side of his mouth. "Did you know that Richard bet his parking spot over this tournament?"

I turn to him, anxious relief tingling in my hands and feet. "Is that what he was talking to you about?"

"Heads up." He nods toward Emily and I turn just in time to get my glove up.

"Nice catch."

I want to smack myself for the silly little thrill I get at impressing him. I am both a grown woman and *his* boss. Yet I add a little extra oomph into my next throw.

"Yes, that's what he was telling me about. Basically, if we don't win it will be my fault he loses the best spot in the parking garage." Wesley's voice quickly spirals into panic.

I bite my tongue until my eyes water. I will *not* speak poorly of my superior in front of my intern. I won't.

"How am I supposed to create a winning team in two practices?" Wesley's

voice is thready. He stares into the midground, his eyes wide.

The thwack of balls hitting gloves over and over fills the silence between us. The paranoia prickling at my neck has subsided. Of course Richard wasn't following up with Wesley earlier. He would have no reason to suspect that Wesley was at my home last night.

But I still feel the sting of tears, a tightness in my chest that I can't place.

"Is your mom okay?"

The ball falls from my hand before I can catch it. We both chase after it but Wesley gets it first.

"What? Why did you ask me that?"

He searches my face. It feels like he's trying to see behind my sunglasses but I don't want to let him see me right now and glimpse the fear at the mention of my mother, the discomfort Richard's presence brings. It's all raw skin and I can't handle the sting of exposure.

He shrugs, handing me back the ball. "You just seem really quiet."

The ball is heavier than it was just moments before, and warmer, too. But I can't tell if it's the warmth from Wesley's skin or if my own hand is just that cold.

"I'm just..." It's too much to tell him this. To show him I'm not as tough as I want him to think I am. That I can turn into a weak, scared girl because of one man. "I'm not in the best mood."

"So..." His pause is filled with the sound of snide laughter coming from Mark and his friend. "You probably don't want me to come over tonight, then?"

I throw the ball to Emily.

"No. You should come over tonight."

His smile makes me feel a little better. He starts to walk but turns around. "I've been sort of a bad brother," he says, his voice low. "So later later?"

"You should probably go coach someone else." I nod to the other players and the movement sends a shooting pain down my neck. I gasp, pushing my fingers against a tender spot.

"You okay?" He takes a step toward me, hand raised, but I step back, shooing him away.

"Fine. I'm fine."

Light dances in front of my eyes. I close them to the pink, yellow, and green orbs. My stomach sinks, both with realization and regret. The irritability, my mood, the sensitivity to light. I'm getting another migraine.

The next time I open my eyes Wesley is across the field getting Abila and Marisol started on fielding grounders, but Emily is suddenly, blessedly beside me. I sag against her.

“Migraine?” she asks.

I nod.

“Let’s get you home.”

She follows my gaze across the field as she leads me toward the parking lot. “Do you need me to...tell anyone?”

I trip on a divot and pull up short to keep from falling over. “No,” I say with too much force.

Emily takes a step back, hurt in her eyes.

I keep walking toward my car. My home is calling me. All the lights on dimmer switches. The soaker tub. The pharmacy’s worth of drugs.

“There’s no one to tell.”

Chapter 31: Wesley

Our house is quiet but I know now not to take that for granted. I climb the stairs two at a time and stop at Amy's closed door. The sound of Fleetwood Mac comes softly behind it. The hallway smells faintly of pot. Technically Mom's no-marijuana rule blew out the window when she started using medical cannabis for pain therapy, so I let it slide, despite the fact that smoking in the house will undoubtedly affect the resale value that she's suddenly so interested in.

I take a deep breath. I'm mending fences, not burning bridges right now.

"Amy?" I knock and after a moment her footsteps shuffle on the other side of the door. She opens the door and flings herself back on her bed, picking up a well-loved copy of *The Bell Jar*.

"In a Plath mood, huh?"

She hums a response. *Yes*.

"I know you're still mad at me, Amy. And...shit. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I never should have yelled at you like that."

She hums again. *Um, yeah*.

But she still doesn't turn around.

I step farther into the room. "I wanted to show you how sorry I was but I guess you don't want this?"

She turns her head, just slightly. I present her with a brown box wrapped with pink ribbon. She narrows her eyes. Sitting on her bed, I open it and pull two candles and a lighter from my pocket. I stick a candle in both of the cupcakes in the box and light them. "Which do you want? Cappuccino or vanilla bean?"

"Cappuccino, idiot."

She snatches the cupcake from my hand.

"Happy birthday, Amy," I say. "Sorry I missed our party. Thanks for all the work you did to plan it."

She smiles. "Happy birthday, Wes." We blow out our candles and dig in, sitting in companionable twin silence for a while.

"How was your day?" I ask after my last bite.

Amy takes her time considering the question. "Pretty good. I drank expired milk but I didn't get sick."

I nod. "Gross."

"What about your day?"

Despite having to spend my evening with Mark, and Richard telling me the team *had* to win lest he lose something as trivial as a parking space, I got to play ball today. Corrine seemed off earlier to the point that I worried she'd gotten cold feet. But Emily said it was just a migraine. I want to do something to make her feel better.

"You know what?" I lean back on my hands and smile at the window. "It was better than I thought it was going to be."

"So what are you up to tonight?" She collects cupcake crumbs from her bedspread.

I look out her window at the overcast sky.

"Can I use the car?" Raindrops start to spatter the glass. "Corrine had a migraine and I wanted to get her a couple things to help."

The bed shifts as Amy scoots to sit beside me. "Yeah." After a pause she says, "Are you her boyfriend now or something?"

"No," I say quickly. I shrug as I search for the words. "I just..." I want to make her feel good. I want to make her like me. I want to make her happy.

"I want her to feel better."

* * *

Music that sounds like it belongs on a 1970s sitcom plays overhead. The grocery store lights make all the products seem too bright and the shoppers washed of all color. I browse the aisles grabbing the things I Googled: cola for the caffeine, peppermint oil from the pharmacy, and a gel eye mask.

I send her a text as I get in the car, letting her know I'm on my way over.

Her only response is: **the door is unlocked.**

She didn't use punctuation. Things must be bad.

"Corrine?" I call as I let myself into the apartment. Everything is quiet and dark. I move down the hall to her bedroom, where dim light glows from under the door of her en suite bathroom.

"Corrine?" I knock softly on the door.

"Come in."

The bathroom is lit only by a few pillar candles throughout the room. Corrine sits reclined in the soaker tub, her hair down, her eyes closed. I place the bag on the counter and lower myself next to the tub. Her skin is almost as

white as the porcelain. Her eyes puffy and red, old eye makeup dried in streaks on her cheeks.

The plastic bag full of headache supplies seems pointless when it clicks that those tracks on her cheeks are from tears. All of it is useless in the face of the pain she must be in. I rub her temple and she leans into it. I cup some water in my hand; it's freezing.

"Corrine," I whisper, running my hand over the top of her head. "Are you cold?"

This is a stupid question. Her skin is covered in goose bumps.

"Do that again," she says.

"Are you...cold?"

I'm not sure if it's possible but Corrine's eyes roll beneath her eyelids. She reaches out, her eyes still closed, searching blindly until her fingers wrap around my wrist and lift my hand to her head again. "That."

I run my palm over her head and she presses into my hand, almost purring. So I do it over and over. I run my fingers through her hair and my thumb across her temple. I turn on the hot water and pour water over her hair, pick up her bottle of coconut shampoo and squirt some into my hand, massaging her scalp. She dips her head under the water when I'm done to rinse her hair. "Where do you keep your makeup stuff?" I whisper as she wipes water from her eyes.

Her eyes flutter open. "My what?"

"You know, the stuff you use to take your makeup off."

"Oh." Water falls in a staccato patter as she lifts her arm from the tub, points past me. "Bottom drawer on the left."

Rinsing and drying my hands, I pull the drawer open, find what I need, and return to my spot by the tub. "Close your eyes."

She leans her head back against the tub. I pour some of her fancy makeup remover onto a cotton ball.

I don't know if I'm doing this right. Every dab feels like it won't be soft enough, but slowly the smudges disappear.

I run the tap to wet the washcloth with warm water once again, wipe her face one last time. When I look up from rinsing my hands in the water, she's watching me.

Her wet eyelashes stick together in little bundles, her face is clean, her cheeks are pink. She lifts her hand, cupping her wet palm to my cheek. Water falls from the tap in a slow drip, like it's counting time that's slower in this

quiet room.

She doesn't smile but somehow I know from how she touches me that she's happy. "I'm feeling better now," she says.

"Really?" I ask. "Because of me, right?" I smirk as she rolls her eyes. She can't resist an opportunity to set me on my heels.

She shakes her head. "No. My last dose of Rizatriptan finally kicked in." She laughs when I splash her.

Chapter 32: Corrine

I float on warmth, the pillows and duvet fluffed up high around me like a cocoon. The golden light of the pillar candles steals beneath my eyelids, blissfully pain-free.

I turn my head on the pillow, blearily opening my eyes. On my bedside table is the fuzzy outline of a mug of most likely cold tea. I have a vague memory of Wesley bringing some after I got out of the bath. I roll to my other side and stifle a gasp.

Wesley is here. On my bed. Lying on top of the covers. My heart beats tenderly that he stayed. But falling asleep together feels too much like something real couples do after a long day, content with the companionship. Surviving off more than just lust. An alarm bell rings somewhere deep inside of me but that panic is for later. The fullness of my bed is too good to worry about right now.

The blinds are drawn and no light creeps from underneath, giving me no idea if it's early or late. The act of rolling over and checking my phone for the time seems too much, insurmountable. I just study Wesley instead.

His glasses are gone. His hair is a nest. Wesley always seems like a happy-go-lucky guy. But it's only now that I see him asleep, his face totally calm, that I realize he holds a lot more tension and worry than I'm aware of when he's awake. Sometimes it's easy to forget he lost his mom just a few months ago.

Slowly, I creep closer to him, resting my head on his pillow, placing my arm on his T-shirt-clad chest. He doesn't move. The cotton is soft and the heat from his body borders on burning. His chest rises and falls with slow, deep breaths. I let the covers fall from my leg and roll until my leg hooks over his waist.

He mumbles something that sounds like *nuhhh*. His body feels heavy, anchored to the bed.

Waking him seems selfish. He's asleep, deeply so. I close my eyes but now I am too aware of the flickering of the candle on my dresser, the weight of my body pressed against his. I trail my palm up and down his arm.

I am still hyperaware of the heat of his skin, how the hair on his arm tickles my wrist. I kiss him through the fabric of his undershirt and he stirs, turning

his head toward me, his hand landing on my thigh. My nipples are hard points where they brush against my silk pajama top. I've never felt like this before. Charged. Electrified by another person. And I don't know how to trust my feelings. Do I feel this way because it's a secret, forbidden? Or because it's Wesley? When I'm with him I believe that everything will be okay, with my mom, with Richard, with us.

I rest my hand on the fly of his pants. His cock is already semi-hard and that sends a thrill down my spine and goose bumps along my arm. That no matter what I feel—wild, confused—I think he feels it all, too.

“Wesley.” I whisper his name into the skin of his neck. “Can I touch you? Will you touch me?”

He frowns with his eyes closed. “This isn't a dream?”

I smile against his collarbone. “No.”

He rolls toward me, his hand finding the space between my legs like he was guided by a heat-seeking missile. His lips are warm against my throat. I pull his fly apart and his cock is in my hand, hard and hot.

“Thank you,” I say into his mouth.

He smiles against my lips. “I haven't done anything yet.” He moves down my neck, sucking on skin until he pulls sounds that are halfway to embarrassing out of me.

“Thank you for coming here,” I clarify. “For staying.”

He buries his face in my chest but he doesn't say anything else. He kisses me hard, rubs me harder, the only sounds in the room our harsh breathing, the wet sound of our hands moving over skin slick with sweat and want. I love the feeling of his cock in my hand. The fit, the heat, the power to make him moan.

We match each other stroke for stroke and I gasp as I come, hard and sudden, a quiet sound escaping my throat. His come coats my hand and thighs. I run my fingers through it.

He only moves far enough away to pull a few tissues from the box on the nightstand to wipe away the mess and when he rolls back he wraps his arm around me. We fall asleep drenched in each other.

* * *

“Wake up,” I hiss. I attempt to shake him awake but mostly I just move his shoulder around in the socket.

“Awake,” he mumbles into the pillow. I don’t believe him. His eyes are still closed and there’s a small puddle of drool on the pillow.

I shake him again.

“Awake,” he says, sharper, opening his eyes wide, blinking into the morning brightness to prove it.

“We overslept.” My tone is cool efficiency, while my insides squirm.

I’ll be late. He’ll be late. Plus, I don’t know what to do about last night. People don’t take care of me, I take care of myself.

Last night he cared for, nurtured, cherished me. He did too much. I feel like I can’t look him in the eye right now. He’s been doing it from the start. First my presentation, now this, and checking in about my mother. And what’s worse, my stomach sinks. I’ve come to rely on him. I feel dizzy. How did he wiggle his way into my life so quickly?

Taking a giant swig of coffee to avoid it, I wince as I swallow, the liquid burning on the way down. “I don’t think I’ll have time to drive you home,” I say. “I still have to shower.”

“That’s okay.”

He rolls up, scratches his head, and yawns, like he doesn’t have to be at work at the exact same time as I do. He searches the bedside table for his glasses, patting the surface gingerly. “I’ll just wear whatever I wore yesterday.”

Before he breaks something and I have to add a trip to the optometrist to my list of things I don’t have time for this morning, I hand him his glasses. “But then everyone will think you didn’t go home last night.”

“I didn’t.” He shrugs and his stomach growls. “But no one would assume I spent my night *here*.”

I pause for a moment because he makes a good point. “Right. That makes sense.”

I turn on my heel, hurrying into the bathroom, setting my coffee on the counter. “There’s coffee in the kitchen and food. And you can jump in the shower after me but you need to be *fast*. I’m leaving in thirty minutes,” I call as I turn on the hot water.

He doesn’t respond so I pull my hair up into a bun and step into the warm water. I want to spend long minutes under the spray, letting the heat soak into me, thinking about last night, and earlier this morning. The memories of his hands on me, between my legs, wiping off my makeup, brushing back my hair. The way his touch feels like being held, carried, allowed to rest; they

need time to marinate. But I don't have the time.

Ten minutes later, he strolls into my walk-in closet in his underwear with a bowl of yogurt, granola, and berries.

"Your kitchen is a shrine to starting your day off right," he says, holding the bowl and spoon out for me. My heart does a little flip in my chest.

"Oh. Thank you." I take the bowl and turn back to my wardrobe. All of the colors blend together and my mind blanks on where the skirts, the blouses, the dresses hang. Suddenly, I don't know how to dress myself. He's still standing there, so I face him and make a show of taking a bite of granola.

He cracks his toes. His feet are big. And hairy. And so absurdly masculine in the soft hues of my walk-in closet that for a moment I think I understand foot fetishes.

"You should wear that red dress." He gestures to a wine-red dress with long sleeves and a low neckline. "You look amazing in red."

I frown in an attempt to hide my blush. "That's not exactly work appropriate."

The V is *deep*.

"You could wear this blazer." He flicks the sleeve of a navy blue blazer hanging on the other side of the closet. "How much time do I have?" he asks.

I blink, distracted by his chest, the peppering of hair there, his nipples, a dark reddish-brown. Crunching the granola, I swallow and it almost gets lodged in my throat, it's so dry. "Ten minutes," I croak.

"Yeah," he says with a smile. "Because you took too long in the shower."

I turn away before he can see me smile. I eat the rest of my breakfast standing up in the closet. From the bathroom comes an electric guitar and the echoing bang of drums, a wail that leads into a rap song. Wesley's music reverberates but his voice is even louder, belting out the lyrics.

It's obnoxiously loud and the complete opposite of how I usually start my day. But by the time the song is over, my head is bobbing.

* * *

I'm in my home office when he calls for me from down the hall. "Corrine?"

"I'm coming," I snap. I can't help it. He showered faster than me, he made me my favorite breakfast without even asking, and he picked out a great outfit. And now I can't get whatever that song he was blasting in my bathroom out of my head.

“I’m sorry,” I say, stopping in front of him with my bag over my shoulder and files in my arms. “I’m not usually this disorganized.”

“I figured,” he says, pulling a few files and my bag from my hands, gesturing for me to lead the way out.

“So...” He scratches the back of his leg with his shoe as we wait for the elevator. “Can I, uh...bum a ride to work?” He smiles in a way I should find obnoxious, but is really just charming.

“Everyone will see.”

“You could let me off around the corner,” he counters. “Plus, otherwise, I’ll be late. And my boss hates it when I’m late.”

He bumps his shoulder with mine and smiles and I can’t help but smile back. I feel like this smile is giving away too much about myself and what I’m feeling.

That I’m so thankful he showed up last night. That I liked getting ready with him this morning, even if it has me feeling completely off-kilter.

So I do it grudgingly.

“Fine. But around the corner.” I point my finger at him as we step off the elevator into the parking garage to make my point. I review the day’s schedule and things we’ll need to do when we get in on the drive over. If I can just get back into my routine, into work-mode, I’ll be able to stop thinking about the way he looked last night, as he came in the dim glow of the candles.

The car shifts forward a few inches as I put it into park.

“*Shit.*” I was so focused I never even realized we’d already made it to work.

I slouch down in my seat and try to peer out the windows. He leans over and places his hand on my thigh. I tense.

He gives me a gentle squeeze. “Hey. Don’t worry. I’ll get out first and take the stairs into the lobby. No one will know we drove in together. I promise.”

My jaw is sore from all of the clenching and unclenching I do. The problem is I realize I’m being a touch anal retentive about this. Letting him see me this flustered feels almost as embarrassing as getting caught by our coworkers. “Okay,” I say.

He hesitates. “I really want to kiss you goodbye.”

I want him to kiss me goodbye, too. “You’re going to see me in a few minutes upstairs,” I say instead of doing just that.

He smiles, crooked and boyish, and *fine*—I reach out, closing my fist over

his sleeve. I pull him back to me and kiss him hard and quick. It's not even close to good enough but he smiles again, popping out of the car and jogging to the stairs. My heart pounds long after the heavy door to the stairwell slams closed and I pull myself from the car.

When the elevator doors open on the lobby, Wesley stands at the front of a large group of Hill City employees. I take a step back as they all pile in and nod hello.

"Good morning, Ms. Blunt." He nods back, smiling like we have a secret.

He's so obvious it's disgusting. And yet, I kind of love him for it.

I gasp audibly at the thought. Smother it, push it down below the surface. The feeling planted itself deep inside me last night and has grown and grown. But that *cannot* be what this is. It's infatuation, affection run wild.

"Good morning, Mr. Chambers." My head spins as the elevator takes us up. Everyone else chitchats with each other about their evenings and the day ahead, completely unaware of my internal panic. He leans a little closer.

"That color looks lovely on you," he says quietly.

My eyes fall to my red dress. I smooth my hand over the blue blazer.
"Thank you."

Maybe it's the dress. Or that song he played in the shower about sabotage that won't leave my head. Maybe it's this wild thing planted deep inside me. But I reach out toward him, keeping my hand down by my side, blindly searching until my fingers make contact with his skin. I hold on to his hand the whole way up.

Chapter 33: Wesley

I always knew that the work I was doing for Corrine was valuable, even if its primary purpose was—at first—punishment. But now that she doesn't hate me the work feels even more important. It's easy to assume that an executive works hard but until I was her assistant, until I saw it for myself, I had no idea. If I didn't deliver her lunch she probably wouldn't eat all day. If I didn't pick up her dry cleaning she wouldn't get out of the office on time to get it herself. And if she did make time for those things she'd have to work later, longer anyway.

She's a sharp contrast to an executive like Richard. He comes in around ten, calling his morning "creative time," and takes long lunches only an hour later with "clients" who never seem to have any contracts with us.

Emily was right. The administrative core really is the backbone of the office.

And now she trusts me enough to do things other than menial tasks, like leading the digital strategy for the Grimes account—with her supervision, of course. It's what I came here for.

I'm like her and every other marketing associate in this office now, walking between offices, or in this case the kitchen with my eyes glued to my phone, texting, emailing, researching, drafting, designing. The ringing phones and discussion in the Pit are white noise to my work.

Shouldering open the kitchen door, I stop in front of the fridge. I don't notice Corrine until I'm almost on top of her.

"Whoa." I step back. My grin feels like it's falling over the edge of my face.

She smirks. I think we're both feeling a little high off last night, falling asleep together and then this morning waking up the same way. "You need to put your phone down, Wesley. You're becoming a workaholic."

I lean against the counter beside her. "Hmmm..." I tap the phone against my lip and raise my eyes to the ceiling. "I wonder who I learned that from?"

She pokes me in the ribs and I glance to the doorway, listening for the sounds of footsteps in the quiet hallway outside.

"Sneak attack," I whisper, kissing her. I can still feel her hands on me and hear the warm sound of her voice, like I'm back in her cold, dark bedroom.

I'm desperate to feel her, hear her again.

For a second, her body goes rigid and she pulls away. But when I whisper, "Sorry. You're right," against her lips, she kisses me back and I wrap my arm around her. My heart trips over again and again and I don't know if it's the thrill of *this* or the way she slips her tongue past my teeth. Her hair feels like silk as I run my fingers through it. She rests her hand gently on my hip, underneath my blazer. The easy, comfortable way she touches me sends electric shocks through my body. She makes me want to stand here and kiss her, make out like teenagers, for a good hour or three.

But I pull away. And then go back in for more. I kiss her neck, nibble and suck gently at the skin. Her breath catches where my stubble tickles her and she pushes me away. My lips and hands and feet are numb. I am absolutely wild for her.

"You're breaking the rules," she says in a stern voice.

"I'm sorry." We both know I don't mean it.

That's how Mark and Chris find us, smiling at each other in this private way, just a little too close for business. To her credit, Corrine is seamless in her transition from secret-hookup to My Boss, while my heart pounds so hard I feel light-headed. She turns to the salad she'd been in the middle of dressing, opening a drawer a few feet on her other side so that she can naturally step away from me.

I gape at them for a moment too long and then bend over my phone like the meaning of life is on the screen. Corrine doesn't say a word to any of us as she walks out but I watch Mark's lascivious grin as he tracks her through the room, his eyeballs taped to her ass. That's the thing about a guy like Mark. He's too caught up in his own ego to see what's right in front of him. *I've touched the ass that you're staring at, I want to scream at him. I've literally kissed it and she will never be yours the way she is mine.*

Chris and Mark laugh quietly as I shoot razor blades at the side of his face with my eyes. Mark opens the refrigerator door, pushing me aside with it as he does. I am halfway to the hallway when he asks, "How's it going with that one, Chambers?"

I stop. My spine goes rigid for a quick moment when I think he's asking about *us*. Taking a deep breath before turning around, I ask, "Sorry?"

He jerks his chin toward the door. "Blunt the Cu..." He smirks, holding up his hands in mock apology. "Sorry. Forgot you don't like that word."

Chris's laugh sounds like a broken chain saw.

I pin my glare on Chris. “Does he pay you?”

The guy shuts up.

“To laugh at his bad jokes. Does Mark pay you?” My heart still pounds, erratic. Partly because I’m still coming down from kissing Corrine just minutes ago and partly with rage.

“Hey, Chambers—” Mark cuts in.

“And you.” I stand up to my full height. He might have twenty pounds on me, but I know I still look intimidating when I stand a half foot over him. “Call her that one more time,” I say. “You don’t even have to say the word, just think it. I dare you.” My voice shakes with rage.

His face flushes a shade of angry red. “And what are you going to do about it if I do?”

“If you’re lucky I’ll report you to HR. If not, I will lay you the *fuck* out.”

He steps forward. His cologne is a noxious haze around him. “I’d fucking love to see you try.”

I’m not exactly sure what my response will be. I’ve never been in a fistfight before. And I’m positive that punching a coworker will get me fired, regardless of the fact that my father is a friend of the boss. But I never get the chance to find out because Emily sashays into the kitchen, unfettered and untouchable in a rose-colored satin pantsuit. She stops a few feet from us.

“What is going on here?” she asks sharply.

I swallow, step back. I try to plaster a smile on my face but it feels lopsided and fake. “We were just going over the Code of Conduct,” I say.

She eyes both of us suspiciously and I start to edge my way toward the door. “Do I need to speak to Richard about anything?” she asks me, specifically.

I catch Mark’s eye over her head, his mouth contorted in a childish sneer.

My smile is a little less artifice this time. “No. I think we’re all good.”

I stalk back to Corrine’s office. I’ve already got my statement to HR ready in my head. I’ve never felt surer about anything in my whole life. Mark is about to strike out for good. I rap my knuckles on the door once before letting myself in and shutting it behind me.

Corrine pushes back from her desk when she sees my face. “What happened? Did they say something? Do they suspect something?” she asks, rapid-fire. She cups her forehead in one hand. “What was I thinking? Kissing like that? In the middle of the day? In the middle of the *office*?”

My parents would fight when we were kids. My mother’s quiet, calm voice

would slowly rise in volume and urgency. My father's anger sounded like a caustic, bitter weapon, seeping under their bedroom doorway and down the hall to Amy's bedroom, where we'd usually be sitting together, trying to ignore the sounds of their marriage collapsing, failing. At the time I couldn't understand how a man could let his rage take over. How he could let the disdain and annoyance thicken each syllable to hurt the people he claimed to love. Now I understand that the anger is like a cloak, one I didn't know I put on until it was too late and now I can't get off. I don't want to speak another word to Corrine before I get it off. I pace back and forth in front of her sitting area, my hands in my hair.

"Wesley," she says, coming toward me.

I hold my hands up, palms out. "Just...give me some space."

She looks hurt for a heartbeat, but then hides it away with a practiced, cool expression.

"What happened?" She tucks her hands underneath her elbows.

"They didn't suspect anything. Mark is just...a fucking asshole."

"Keep your voice down." I didn't even realize I was yelling.

"I want to report him to HR," I tell her, my pulse finally slowing.

She shakes her head. "Don't bother."

"Why the hell not?" My voice echoes again and I take a deep breath to try to gain some calm. "You know what he says about you," I say, quieter.

"Yes, and I know that his frat brother coined the name and that he started a rumor that we were sleeping together and I know what Ted the CFO says about my qualifications and I know that the three soccer moms in Accounting call me a bitch when they talk about me in the bathroom. If I reported every little thing someone said about me, the only thing I would accomplish would be to make myself look like a complainer. Being a team player is more important."

"I think this is bigger than a complaint. He calls you a *cunt*," I hiss and she flinches. "Do you really believe they're team players?"

She turns to the window. After a moment, she says, "I believe that no one believes women when they talk about their experiences anyway. I believe instead in rising above the noise." She wraps her arms around her middle. "I still don't want you to say anything."

I step closer to her in the hopes that will make me less likely to yell again. "Are you fucking serious right now?" I growl.

"Yes, I am fucking serious right now and I would recommend that you

watch your tone, *Mr. Chambers.*”

“Did you honestly just pull the boss card on me?” Irritation punching at my gut.

Her mouth flattens. “Well, I *am* your boss.”

“You’re also my fucking girlfriend,” I hiss, spinning and kicking out at the stupid white armchair without any arms. The thing is too big to fall over but I manage to shove it a few feet.

“Go,” she says, her finger pointing to the door.

“What?”

“Go. Get out. Go home. Get a hot dog or buy a motorcycle for all I care but you will not come back here for the rest of the day. If anyone asks, I’ll say you’re running errands for me but *you.*” She pokes me in the chest. “Need to cool off.”

I pant, my chest pushing against her finger. Her amber eyes are stubborn and angry.

“Fine.” I shake my head. “Remind me never to come to your rescue again.” I stalk to the door.

“That’s the thing, Wesley,” she says to my back. “I never asked you to.”

The hurt contorts my face and I turn away before she can see it. Shoving a few client files into my messenger bag, I grab my coat, pulling it on as I march down the hall. I stalk into the elevator, leaning into the corner of the car as the doors start to close. A hand shoots through the slim opening and Richard steps in.

I pull my glasses down, rubbing the bridge of my nose, cleaning the lenses with the end of my tie. He is the very last person I want to see right now. My mouth feels, uncharacteristically, like it will get away from me with him in this elevator. Normally, I can’t ever figure out the right thing to say. But right now, I know *exactly* what I want to say to him and it will most likely lead to my termination.

“Wes.” He slaps my back. “How’s it going, son?”

My smile might crack my face in half. “Great, sir.”

He frowns. “You know me better than that, Wesley. Call me Dick.”

I suppress a shudder. “Great. Thanks.”

“Everything okay?” he asks, studying my slouched posture. “Emily said it looked like you had a run-in with my intern, Mark.”

Taking a deep breath, I stand a little taller, straightening my tie. I open my mouth to tell him exactly what Mark said, to tell him exactly what kind of

man he's chosen to mentor. But the look on Corrine's face when I said I wanted to report Mark stops me. I hate what people say about her, but I would hate betraying her trust more. And besides, it's her story to tell, isn't it?

"Emily must have misinterpreted," I tell him. "I was just hanging out with the boys." Those words, lumping me in with guys like Mark and Chris, taste like ash in my mouth.

"Oh, good." Richard leans back against the railing. "I've been meaning to tell you how happy it makes me to see you and Ms. Blunt getting along. I know that she can be a little...difficult at times." He smiles and it's too big for his face, exaggerated like one of those dramatic masks from an ancient Greek play.

"But you know, I've noticed a real difference in her these last few weeks. She seems to smile more. And she has such a beautiful smile."

I have to turn away from him. If I can't plug my ears against the patronizing tone in his voice, I have to at least look at anything but the superiority on his face. Of course *I* think Corrine has a beautiful smile but the fact that her boss is even commenting to me about it makes my skin crawl. I am supremely confident none of my coworkers or supervisors has ever commented on my smile.

"Yeah, well, she's taught me a lot," I say. "She is the hardest-working person I've ever met. She has more integrity than anyone at Hill City."

"Good, good," he says, as we reach the ground floor. He's completely missed my jab.

"Wesley," he calls as I head for the doors.

I turn around, trying my best to look the opposite of impatient.

"If you ever need any extra mentorship, though, I can help."

It's laughable, how standing in that same elevator at the beginning of this internship, I would have jumped at the chance to be mentored by the CEO of Hill City Marketing & PR. To learn from him, to get the chance to hear him tell more stories about my mom—and even my dad. But the veneer that used to coat Richard Skyler has tarnished. I don't know if he'll ever be able to polish it back to that high shine.

"I'm sorry, sir," I say and watch his face fall a little bit. I've never thought of myself as a particularly cruel person but in this moment I don't mind seeing his disappointment.

"I've got all the mentor I need."

Chapter 34: Corrine

“Knock, knock!” Emily’s smile and voice are so over bright, they practically glare off the golden brass vase on my desk. “I haven’t eaten yet. Want to get lunch?”

I don’t. Not really. The salad I prepared earlier sits untouched at the side of my desk, wilting and soggy. My mood isn’t conducive to socializing. But Emily has helped me so much, without question. My secret is an elbow digging into the side of our friendship. The only thing is, now I want to tell Emily more than ever. Wesley called me his *girlfriend* today and I’m not sure which I hate more: how much I liked it or how much it can’t be true.

I check the time on my computer screen. “Sure.”

“So,” she says, dragging out the word as I collect my purse and sunglasses. “Is everything okay with Wes?”

I put my sunglasses on even though we’re still inside. “I think so,” I say, feigning indifference. “He’s running some errands for me this afternoon.”

“Oh...” She pauses while we make our way out of the building. “Just because it seemed like there was a bit of a confrontation between him and Mark in the kitchen today.”

I make a speculative sound so that I don’t have to reply with actual words.

“Is everything okay between you two?” she asks. “Are you getting along better?”

“We’re professionals, Emily,” I say as we step into the large, bright foyer on the ground floor. Never has that sounded so much like a lie. “Where do you want to go for lunch?”

“Oh, there’s this new place on Franklin. They haven’t officially launched yet but they’re open for lunch during the week. I wanted to give it a try.”

“Great.” My smile feels like a lie because right now, everything between us feels like a lie. “Lead the way.”

* * *

The restaurant, Amy and May’s, has a bit of a hipster vibe with a lot of air plants and a coffee bar beside the regular bar. But it’s also bright, with lots of green, fresh, wild-looking flowers in small vases on every table. The front

wall is an open window with a bar so diners get to feel like they're eating outside. People sit at antique-y tables, eating off mismatched fine bone china and drinking out of mismatched glasses. Everything seems like it was sourced from local garage sales but somehow it all comes together to create a homey, happy aesthetic.

"I was thinking of organizing a happy hour event next week," Emily says as a hostess takes us to our seats, placing a short menu in front of us. The restaurant has made the smart decision of choosing to do a few things (hopefully) well, rather than impressing with a large menu.

"Do you want to come?"

"Ummm..." I scan the menu. "I'll certainly try."

"Welcome to Amy and May's," a familiar female voice says from beside our table. "Do you know what you'd like to drink?"

I blink slowly at the face in front of me. The eyes are a familiar dark brown but it's the smile that stabs the memory back into my brain. The same smile as Wesley's.

"Oh..." Amy blinks at me for a long moment. "Corrine. Hi." She smiles between Emily and me. "Nice to see you again. Did Wes tell you to come here?"

Emily's gaze is heavy against the side of my face while my mouth hangs open and my brain screams for me to say something, *anything* to help explain how or why I know my intern's sister.

"No," is all I can come up with. "No, he never mentioned this place."

Amy's face falls. Immediately, I realize how wrong of a thing this was to say.

"Not because, umm..." My hands flutter over the table. "He's just been so busy, you know?"

Amy's face changes from the friendly, familiar customer-facing one to something a little cooler. "Yeah," she says. "He's been quite busy lately."

Shit. That is also probably my fault. From the very little I know about Amy I think I would *like* her. She seems like she doesn't take any shit and she protects her brother, which is saying a lot because he's already a jump-in-front-of-a-bullet kind of guy. But this thing between us, the secrecy of it, means I haven't gotten the chance to get to know her and now we're stuck with this: misunderstandings and misconnections, when what I really want is for Amy Chambers to like me.

I want her approval for her brother.

“So how do you two know each other?” Emily interjects. My heart feels a moment of relief and gratitude that Emily has saved me from this awkward encounter with my lover’s sister. Then it moves right back into a pounding panic at having to try to explain all this.

I widen my eyes in Amy’s direction, a flush moving up my face in a wave, but she blinks calmly. “I’m Wesley’s sister. We met when I was dropping dinner off for Wes a few weeks ago,” she says, her career-saving lie rolling off her tongue like a smooth whiskey.

I close my eyes. *Thank you thank you, Amy.*

“So do you know what you want or...?”

Emily orders a pork belly sandwich. I choose something but forget what it is before Amy’s even left the table. A different server drops off our waters and yet another server drops off our food. Emily does most of the talking while internally I put out all the fires in my brain: whether Emily will believe Amy’s lie, whether I’ve just created tension between Wesley and his sister, and still the fact that Wesley called me his *girlfriend* earlier.

What I want most is to talk to my mom about all this. To tell her how I’ve put my foot in my mouth with Wesley’s sister. To worry with her over how my lies will affect my relationship with Emily—or more important, my and Wesley’s jobs. I want to tell her the little thrill I got from hearing him say the word *girlfriend*. To be claimed by someone as kind and as good as him. I want her to help me figure out how I can tell him that no matter how much I want that, it’s not something we can ever have. I want to cry with her over the disappointment that realization makes me feel.

But the idea of telling my mother even an inkling about what I’ve done fills me with a shame so heavy, I have to put my sandwich down.

She is sick. She is suffering. She is coming face-to-face with her mortality.

And I can’t even keep my hands off my intern. I can’t burden her with this; she doesn’t deserve that. And I certainly don’t want to think about the judgement I might see in her face.

“Did you hear what I said?” Emily asks.

“Sorry? What?”

The restaurant has cleared out around us. Amy stands behind the coffee bar, diligently scrubbing at the chrome parts of the coffee machine.

“I said...” Emily’s voice is thin. She sounds frustrated with me. “That you know you can tell me anything, Corrine. Right? You can tell me anything that is going on with you and I will *never* judge you for it. If it was something that

had to do with your job, maybe...” She bites her lip. “A coworker or...even an intern?”

She looks at me imploringly. I lean my whole body away from her, trying to escape the reality that she *knows*. She knows about Wes and me.

“You can tell me and I won’t do anything to hurt you...or anyone else. I just want to help.”

My fingers close around the half-empty glass of water. I drink it down, hoping to get some moisture into my husk of a body.

“No,” I croak. “No, I... Emily, I...” The words are there, lining up on my tongue, ready to march out to meet her. If I can’t tell my mother, I could tell Emily. I could tell my friend.

But Sean’s voice rises like mist from the back of my mind before I say a word. His voice telling people we were sleeping together, his cruel laughter. None of it was true, of course. But if I admit to this, aren’t I making it true? Doesn’t it all become true? Every rumor is confirmed. Every terrible name justified.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say.

Emily watches me, her eyes moving over my face like she can see every lie there. She doesn’t look mad or even disappointed. She seems sad. “Okay. I just have to run to the bathroom.”

At some point, someone had dropped off the bill on a small china plate, a saucer with gold leaf detailing. I put some cash down, get up from the table, and approach the coffee bar.

“Amy.” I lean against the counter. “I’m really sorry about what I said earlier. About Wesley not mentioning it. It’s not that he didn’t care. Wesley did mention you were opening a restaurant. He just didn’t say it was *this* restaurant. It’s lovely, by the way.” I feel like Wesley right now, rambling. “He probably would have mentioned it more but I’ve been working him so hard and—”

Amy snorts and turns to face me, a damp rag clutched in her hand. “Yes, I think you have been.”

I blush at the frank words. “Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“It’s fine.”

Amy leans her hip against the other side of the counter, frowning. She sighs. “Listen, I was kind of a bitch to you when we first met and clearly this didn’t go very well either. Why don’t we just...” She shrugs. “Start over.”

I nod, closing my eyes in relief. “I’d like that.”

She smiles, but it's closed-lipped. Nothing like the smile she shares with her brother.

"You have a really wonderful place here, Amy." I gesture to the restaurant. "The atmosphere is fantastic and the food was delicious." To be honest, I don't remember what I ate or how it tasted but it was gone by the time a server came to collect my plate. I silently promise her I will pay more attention next time I eat here.

"Thanks." She sighs as she follows my gaze around the space. "We're doing our grand opening next week. We're opening up for dinner service and launching a new cocktail menu. We will be here. Why don't you come? Bring your friend?"

I grab onto her olive branch like I am drowning and it will save me from cold waters.

"I'd really like that, Amy. Thank you."

Chapter 35: Wesley

Everyone who lives on Corrine's floor has come home. Everyone but Corrine. I couldn't go home after she kicked me out of the office. I sat in a park. Then it started to rain, so I sat in a Starbucks and listened to everyone's normal, uncomplicated coffee orders. When five o'clock rolled around, I came to Corrine's apartment because I knew I needed to apologize. That was two hours ago.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. The simple act of shifting my weight, fishing my phone out of my pocket, shoots pain through my back from sitting on the hard ground.

It's Jeremy.

Wanna grab a drink tonight?

My thumbs hover over the keyboard. I type out a **yes**, delete it. **No**, but I delete that, too.

I type out exactly how I'm feeling.

I think I'm falling for my boss but I don't think she can say the same. Amy is mad at me and I don't know why but I'm mad at her, too. She wants to get rid of the house but I can't. It's Mom's house. I miss you. I should have told you all of this over drinks. I miss my mom. I want to go back to a time when Mom was alive and we were friends and Amy and I weren't out of step but keep Corrine too and I can't. I can't.

My finger hovers over the send button. Younger versions of Jeremy and me smile out from the contact photo at the top of our message window. The two of us at a Sox game, years ago, our faces red from beer and the sun and laughter and singing "Sweet Caroline" until our throats were raw. My chest aches. I want that back so bad but it's like trying to catch the smoke from a smoldering fire.

I delete the message and write:

I have to work late. Sorry.

Resting my head against the wall beside her door, I close my eyes. Maybe she knew I'd come here. Maybe she'll never come home. Just as I'm about to heave myself up off the floor, I hear the muted sound of high heels on the carpet. The strides slow until they stop beside me. I open my eyes.

"Hi," I mumble.

Her mouth is a flat, red line.

I reach out, circling my thumb and forefinger around her ankle. "I'm sorry," I tell her.

She turns and unlocks her door, stepping into her apartment and out of my grasp, but she holds the door open. My bones feel creaky and old as I unfold from my spot on the floor and follow her in.

"Do you want to split my chicken salad with me?" she asks, depositing a plastic bag and some mail on the kitchen counter. She steps out of her shoes, rubbing her foot along the back of her calf.

"Kind of," I say sheepishly. "I haven't eaten since this morning."

She sighs, and it sounds like she's saying, *Oh, Wesley*, and starts dividing the greens and chicken onto two plates. I lean against the counter.

A Tiffany blue envelope, different from all the bills and flyers, sits on top of her mail pile. "What's this?" I push the stationery toward her.

She gives it a cursory glance. "A thank-you card, most likely." She pushes my plate toward me. "For the bridal shower gift you bought."

"Oh. Yeah. Are you going to go to their wedding?" I ask, wondering if I would be her date.

"No." She sort of laughs the word.

"Why not?" I move around her kitchen, open a bottle of red wine for her, and grab a bottle of beer out of the fridge. She sets the plates at the coffee table, sitting on the floor and curling her feet underneath her, turning on the television to a twenty-four-hour news station. I sit on the couch beside her. I can't fit my legs in any comfortable way under the coffee table when I sit on the floor.

"Because the groom is my ex-boyfriend."

"Why did you get an invitation to her bridal shower? Just to rub it in?"

"No. We've tried to remain friendly. I think it was meant to be a nice gesture."

I stop with my food halfway to my mouth. "Seriously?"

She nods, pushing food around her plate, her cheeks a little pink, and I think she's embarrassed to tell me this. "We broke up about two years ago. He said I worked too much. He was tired of me choosing my job over him. I'd gone to school with the bride so they'd met a few times. They started dating two months after we broke up."

"He's an idiot," I tell her, even though I can't quite be angry with him for it. Now I get to spend time with her outside of work, get to make her smile and touch her. "He is," I repeat when she says nothing. "He's an idiot for giving you up."

She blinks up at me, quiet and beautiful, and then she keeps eating like we've said nothing to each other. But that's like her. Corrine needs time with heavy things. She soaks them up like a cactus. And they grow inside her and come out as something else, a small smile across the table of a conference room. Or a text I get to wake up to with just an XO sent at one in the morning; usually with a corresponding work email in my inbox.

A beautiful blooming night flower, entirely for me.

I finish first, placing my plate onto the table. I trace the mouth of the beer bottle with my index finger. "So... I'm sorry," I say.

She turns to me. But before she can answer I stop her.

"You have something." I point to my top front teeth. "Right here."

She smiles, a little embarrassed, closing her mouth and wiping her tongue over her teeth. She bares them at me. "Did I get it?"

Leaning forward, I swipe at the flake of pepper with my finger and wipe it on her tongue.

"Got it." I laugh.

"You're gross." She smiles. "Thank you," she says. "For the apology. I understand how upsetting or frustrating it must be for you to hear that being said about me but what I need you to understand is that no matter how frustrated you feel, I feel it ten times worse. And I need you to trust me when I say I know how I want to handle it."

I nod. "I'm sorry. I'll be more understanding. Can you just tell me why?"

"Why what?"

"Why won't you report him? Why is being a team player more important than their respect?"

She sighs, takes a final sip of her wine, and sets the glass on the table. "When I was in college this woman, Sarah Beck, came into one of my business classes at the end of the year. She gave a lecture on digital

marketing and how it's changing how we consume and use the internet and how we sell things. She was..."

Corrine shakes her head like she's trying to dislodge the right word. "Aspirational. Everything about who she was, that was what I wanted to be. I went up to her at the end of class and practically begged her to give me a job at her company." Corrine gives me a knowing smile. "She worked for a place called Blitz Media. She was the only female executive and she was notoriously difficult."

Corrine closes her eyes, sighs again, a smile still on her lips. "She let me be her assistant for that summer. And she was an infinitely better boss than I've been to you. I never had to do so much as a coffee run. She let me work alongside her, like an equal. It was a dream come true. Richard was my mentor and he launched my career but Sarah, she...nurtured me, she raised me into the business woman I am today."

Corrine's wistful expression flattens and my stomach sinks. "There was this senior marketing associate who had the worst attitude. I don't think it was that he couldn't handle having a woman as a boss, but he couldn't handle having a strong woman as a boss. She didn't send emails filled with exclamation points and happy faces and she didn't pose ideas in the form of questions. She just...did it. She told her team what she wanted and she expected to get it. She didn't fit into his idea of what a woman should be and he let her know it. He made sick jokes about her, in front of her. He'd chum it up with the other execs and rub it in her face that she wasn't one of the guys. Once he even did that shtick where she was standing in his office and he dropped a pen and asked her to pick it up."

My eyes bulge out of my head and Corrine laughs.

"Yeah, that was my reaction, too. She marched straight to HR after that and filed a report." Corrine turns to face me fully. "The next day she was fired. They told her she wasn't a team player and had security come and escort her out. And of course I was fired, too, since the only reason I was there was to be her assistant for three months."

I open my mouth and then shut it again. It's not that I don't know what to say. I just don't think there's anything I could possibly say to make it better. Other than, "I'm sorry."

She smiles, shrugs. "The last I heard, she got a job in New York. I don't think she's working at the same level that she was but...at least she's employed. But that's why. Okay? I know not every office environment is like

that. But I also know enough about *our* office environment, about Richard, not to risk it.”

I place my hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” I say again, trying to infuse as much sincerity as I can. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you to handle it yourself.”

She pats my hand in a placating way and we’re silent for a moment longer. “Do you want to talk about the other thing?” she asks.

I wrack my brain for some other stupid thing I’ve done recently. “What...other thing?”

She lifts her eyebrows. “The ‘girlfriend’ thing?”

I blow out a long breath through my mouth. “Right.” I did call Corrine my girlfriend. “Do you want me to not do that again?” I wince.

“You know that we can’t...we can’t *be* that to each other.”

“I know,” I say. I know, I *know*, we can’t but it hurts anyway. More than I thought it would.

“But if you’re worried about...” She winces. “Exclusivity...”

“No.” I shake my head, holding my hand out to her. “I trust you, Corrine. I guess I just got...carried away in the moment,” I say, making a circle with my finger around my ear, trying to play it off like a joke but it doesn’t feel like a joke to me. Calling Corrine my girlfriend feels like the truth.

“You were pretty upset,” she says quietly.

I nod.

“In fact, I think you might need a reminder.” She stands slowly in front of me.

I lean forward on the couch. “A reminder of what?” I ask, cupping her hips and kissing her stomach.

With a playful smirk, she says, “Of who the boss is here.”

Blood rushes to my groin but I check the heat pulsing through me. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about this more?”

Maybe we’re not a real couple but this feels like a thing that we should discuss.

She runs her fingers through my hair and my eyes fall closed at her touch. “The only thing that’s left to discuss is what I’m going to do with you,” she says, her tone playful.

I throw my arms along the back of the sofa. If she wants to stop being mad at me, I can play along. “By all means, remind me of who’s the boss. In fact, I think I may need to be punished for my earlier insubordination.”

Corrine unbuttons her navy blue silk blouse, revealing black lace beneath. I

pull off my tie and start to unbutton my shirt but she stops me with a *tsk*. She unzips her skirt and steps out of it, unclasps her bra, and lets the lace fall away. Hooking her thumbs into her black panties, she pushes them down her legs. Her nipples are peaked and a flush pinks her cheeks.

“I thought you were supposed to be punishing me,” I rasp. “This is the best punishment *ever*,” I say as she straddles my legs. But she pushes my hands away when I try to grab her hips again.

“No touching,” she says, stern, her voice cool.

I fist my hands in the couch cushions as she unbuttons my pants, staring at the bulge in my boxers but not touching it. She doesn't even let her hand brush against it.

She transforms before my eyes. She's not the cold ice queen boss and she's definitely not the soft liquid Corrine who comes apart beneath me. She's someone else entirely. Beautiful and powerful and entirely impossible to look away from. There's nothing ice about her. She is all fire and I burn for her.

Leaning forward, she kisses me, tunneling her hands in my hair and positioning my head however she wants. She pulls my hair, kissing and biting at my neck until I can't help but lift my hips, seeking some kind of contact or relief for the heat burning through me. But she pulls away.

“No, no,” she says. “Give me your right hand.”

I hold it out in front of me like I'm offering it to her to shake and she laughs once through her nose. She folds down my thumb and ring and pinky fingers. She places my index and middle fingers on her tongue and I have to close my eyes again. Trailing my hand down her neck, her chest, her stomach, she guides my hand between her legs, and I watch with my mouth open, my breathing ragged as she moans, her eyes falling closed and her head falling back.

She's drenched. She rubs my fingers and her wetness over her petal-soft lips and the wet rise of her clit, then she lifts up on her knees and takes my fingers inside of her.

“Holy shit, Corrine,” I whisper as she starts to fuck my hand, her eyes still closed, and her perfect, pink mouth forming an O. I start to move my hand with her, pressing the heel of my palm into her clit and curling my fingers inside her.

She pulls my hand out of her. Her eyes open but heavy lidded, she lifts my fingers to my mouth, painting them across my lips, pushing them onto my tongue, and I moan around them at the salty taste of her. She replaces my

fingers with her tongue, kissing and licking and messy and I don't realize that I've grabbed her breasts, her ass, until she pulls away from me, pushing my hands back. She picks up my hand again, leaves three fingers up this time, and when she pushes them inside of her, I have to grind my teeth, press on my dick with the heel of my other hand, as she moans while she uses me for her pleasure.

"I love your hands," she gasps.

"You do?" My question comes out as a growl. I can't keep my eyes off my wrist moving between her legs.

She nods. "I love how long your fingers are, and the blunt nails, and—ah." She breaks off, starts to move faster. The sound of it is obscene, wet, hot, sex. My whole hand is soaked. And then she's letting go of my wrist and I steady her with my other hand on her waist. I lean forward and lick and suck her nipples. She holds me in place by my hair.

"I love how kind your hands are," she whispers, her voice trembling. "I love the hair on your knuckles. I love how strong they look when you touch me." She gasps. "Wes. I'm *coming*."

My eyes feel too big for my head. I nod. I can feel her: her tight inner muscles, her tense runner's thighs, her whole body balanced on the sharp edge of a knife. I watch her face, run my hand through her hair, gather all of it back behind her head.

"You're fucking coming," I say, wonder in my voice, and she does.

She comes all over my hand, soaking me more; shaking over top of me, she cries out, her hands fisting in my hair as my fingers curl and my hand twists over and over again until she begs, "Stop, stop, please."

I cup her head in my hand and kiss her, pulling my dick out of my boxers and rubbing the head through her wetness. "Please, Corrine," I beg against her lips, guiding her hands to me. "Please, touch me now."

Her touches alone could be enough to end me. But then she levers herself over me and starts to sink down onto my cock. "You have to get a condom," I grit out.

Her eyes dart back and forth between mine. "Or we could not use one?" she whispers.

I brush her hair back from her face. My heart pounds from the need to be inside her and the weight of this moment. It's important, this conscious decision to be bare with each other. Maybe I can't call her my girlfriend but the label feels flimsy in the face of this.

She is *more*.

“Are you sure?”

“I still trust you.”

I lean back, let go of her waist. “I don’t think I’ll last very long like this.”

Her response is to sink, slowly, down.

Maybe I blocked out how good the last and only time I had sex without a condom felt. Maybe the adrenaline in that moment numbed the sensation of feeling her hot and wet and surrounding me because it’s like that one time never happened. I have to fist my hands in the couch cushions again, close my eyes against her breasts teasing me, clench my teeth against her sweet, sucking heat. She fucks me slowly, her hands on my shoulders, down my chest, her lips everywhere.

“Don’t come, Wesley,” she whispers.

I shake my head. If I talk I’ll come.

I don’t know how long it’s been, minutes, seconds, but already that familiar heat rises up in me.

“Don’t.”

I shake my head.

Her finger traces the outline of my mouth. She kisses me, between her fingers. Her tongue slipping into my mouth the way my cock slips into her.

“Wesley,” she whispers. A smile in her voice.

I shake my head.

“Wesley. Come.”

Something comes free inside of me. My hands unconsciously move to her hips, holding her in place as I take over, rutting up into her, and grunt her name as I orgasm.

She falls forward on my heaving chest and I brush her hair back, down her spine. I pull my suit jacket from the arm of her chair, draping it over her shoulders. Her body grows heavy on top of me as she falls asleep naked, in a now-dark living room with CNN muttering quietly behind her. She can’t be my girlfriend but, for now, this is better.

Chapter 36: Corrine

Wesley calls it our first fight. I call it conflict resolution. But either way things feel different after. Work is incredibly busy, the Grimes account taking up a lot of both our time. Wesley makes more time for his sister as well, so we don't get to see each other as much. But that makes coming together that much sweeter. The next Friday afternoon, I stop beside Wesley's desk. "Did you..."

I look down at him from the corner of my eyes. "Book a dinner meeting for me tonight?" We haven't signed any new clients recently. But there, clear as day on my calendar is an appointment with a client I've never heard of. It's finally happened. My sex life has distracted me from work.

Wesley is a horrible actor. His typing is too pronounced, like he's a Muppet trying to write an email. "Yup."

I sidle closer, perching on the edge of his desk, also trying to seem casual. As if this is something I would ever do. He stops his ridiculous typing, leaning back in his chair to smile up at me. He's smug and adorable. I lean closer and a thrill thrums up my spine at the idea of flirting, in our own way, in the middle of the office.

"And who's the client?" I stare at his lips as he bites back a smile.

"Double Chambers Inc.," he says.

The office is quiet. Three in the afternoon on a Friday has made everyone lazy or sleepy. So, I lean in closer to him as he whispers, "Do you want to know a secret?"

I nod, fighting the sudden urge to pull his bottom lip between my teeth.

"It's me," he says in a gleeful whisper, his eyes wide, his smile wider.

The tension thrumming through me snaps. I sit back. "You?"

"Yeah." He turns back to his computer screen and I watch as his face shutters, trying, I think, to hide the disappointment that my reaction elicits. "I know you said you can't be..." He pauses for a long breath. "You know."

His girlfriend.

"But I want to take you out. On a date."

"Wesley, this is exactly why, though. Someone might see us."

He turns to me. "They won't. It's my sister's friend's restaurant. They have a private room. He's letting me use it. He even said we could use the back

door through the kitchen so no one will see us coming and going. It's all very clandestine," he murmurs out the side of his mouth. "I thought it would be fun."

I can't think of anything less fun. My shoulders creep up to my ears at just the idea of it: being out in public together where absolutely anyone could see us. "Well...why?"

"Why what?" he asks, scanning an email.

"Why are we going on a date?" I ask, barely loud enough for him to hear.

He sits back again, giving me his full attention. "Even if we can't have an official...status." He pauses again, rechecking the perimeter for eavesdroppers. "Don't you want that? Don't you want more than...secrets?"

I stand and back away from the desk like it's an animal that's turned on me. "I don't know, Wes."

"It'll be fine. I promise." He turns in his chair, following my path as I back toward my office door. I need to get away from this conversation to figure out what I'm going to say.

"Corrine." His voice is too loud and my shoulders shoot to my ears in response. I check up and down the corridor but there's no one around. "Ms. Blunt," he says quieter. "Don't walk away from me. Please."

I stop in the office doorway, scanning the hall one more time, then gesture for him to follow me. I shut the door behind him, flicking the lock. I sit on the couch and he takes the armchair. "Of course I want more than secrets."

The secrets are what's killing me. I want to tell my mom and Emily about him. I want to see Amy on the street and not have to wonder how I'll explain how I know her. But I also want my career, and I don't see how I can have both.

Maybe James was right. I do choose my job over relationships. Over everything.

He runs a hand through his hair. "If we were hitting a movie or going to a Sox game I could see why you might be nervous. But, Corrine."

He leans forward, grabbing my hands. "We can arrive separately. No one will see us. No one will know. And... Amy is working late and she said she'd make herself scarce. I thought..." He pauses to blush.

"You could sleep over tonight. It's the weekend. We have nowhere to be tomorrow and I'm always going to your place."

My heart does a little throb at the vulnerability in his voice. I can tell how badly he wants this and against my better judgement, I ache to give this to

him.

“I’m not asking for too much, right?” He seems to be asking himself more than me. “Just dinner. Can you try? Can you at least try? We can even talk about work the whole time.”

A laugh escapes. “O-okay,” I hear myself say. I’m a train with no brakes. It’s exhilarating even as I can vividly picture the fiery mess it will make.

His eyes shoot to mine and he jiggles his knee. “Okay?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “Okay. We can go to dinner,” I say, very carefully.

He stands and pulls me up with him. “Who knew it would be so difficult to convince you to go out with me,” he says with a small laugh.

He kisses me and I don’t hesitate. Even though we’re at work and we’re not supposed to be doing this here, I can’t help myself when he looks this happy. Until two sharp knocks rattle the door.

I stiffen and start to pull away. I know, *I know*, the door is locked, the blinds are drawn but I check, nonetheless, because *what if?* The knock comes again.

“Ms. Blunt?” It takes only a second to recognize Mark’s voice. He jerks the door handle like the total, entitled asshole he is. But Wesley doesn’t miss a beat, doesn’t even acknowledge the interruption. He keeps kissing me, pulling me back into him with his hand in my hair, his fingers cradling my jaw.

Something blooms inside me as I wrap my arms around his waist, falling lazily into a kiss that has the potential to become dangerous at the office. That feeling comes back from the night Wesley crouched uncomfortably on the hard tile floor next to my bathtub. The feeling, maybe, like love. I don’t want to acknowledge it, don’t want it to be real. I’ve been in love before. This feels nothing like that. It’s limitless, endless. Deep and I am falling in it. Deep enough that I don’t care who might knock on that door next. Deep enough that I don’t care if Richard Skyler walked through that door right this moment.

And it’s terrifying.

* * *

My car makes the quiet tick, tick, tick sound as the engine cools. I slump in the driver’s seat watching a few people come and go from the restaurant. The

parking lot is packed. Of course, it's Friday night so that's not a surprise. I know, without having to check the time, that I am late. I left the house only five minutes before the reservation, after spending too long in the shower, trying to decide if I should go, and too long in the closet alternating between what to wear or if I should bother wearing anything.

Everything about this feels wrong. No, that's not the right word. Wesley isn't wrong. But this, a date, in public with him, is dangerous. Not just to our job. It's dangerous because it feels real.

Anger grips my chest in a tight fist. Because how dare he make me do this? How dare he pressure me? How dare he put our careers at risk for what? Because he...

...because he loves me? I shy away from that thought, the ludicrous idea that Wesley *loves* me. We're both smart enough to know that's not what this can become. A real relationship. Real love. It's one thing for me to toy with the idea but for him to feel it? For those feelings to be real?

A small quiet voice asks, but why not?

I pick up my phone, open the messenger app, but I can't think of what to say. I can't send him some brush-off text. I can't lie to him. He deserves better than that. He deserves better than being somebody's secret. But I can't give that to him.

I drop my phone back into my purse and pull the keys from the ignition. *This will be fine.* Maybe if I say it enough times it will start to feel true and the wobbling in my knees will stop. I lock my car door behind me and hurry across the parking lot. I left my coat in the car and the wind is brisk. I enter behind a group waiting for a table in the cramped vestibule. Reaching into my purse, I pull out my phone to find the text from Wesley, telling me how to find the private room.

"Corrine." The voice is deep and self-satisfied. As I slowly raise my head, I hope against hope that anyone else will be standing in front of me. Richard leans in close, his navy blue suit the same one he wore to work today. My heart pounds in my throat.

This. Can't. Be. Happening.

"Are you following me?" he asks, playful. I plaster myself against the door, trying to find more space and hopefully more time to answer.

The restaurant smells like garlic and grilled meat but it's overpowered by whatever cologne he's doused himself in.

"I...I..."

I search behind him. Dear god, please don't let Wesley leave the private room right now. Richard puts his arm around me, guiding me from the busy waiting area, past the hostess stand, toward the dark wood bar. There's a hallway just behind the bar leading to the stairs. That's where Wesley is, just below us in some room decorated with wine bottles and fancy prints. He can probably hear my footsteps above him right now.

My hand shakes in my purse.

Richard leans in close as we approach a small group of older men at the end of the bar, all other Hill City executives and a few senior associates. "Why don't you have a drink with me?"

His breath is hot and reeks of scotch. I stop, not letting him drag me any farther into this nightmare. "I have to go," I say loudly.

He frowns, turning his back to the rest of our colleagues to face me. "But you just got here." He brushes his knuckle against my cheek, over my lower lip, and I jerk away. His touch leaves a mealy shiver in its wake.

"I'm in the wrong restaurant." I force out a laugh, cupping my forehead in my hand. "So silly," I say.

He studies me, the charm slowly leaking from his eyes replaced by something more calculating. "I think it would be best if you stayed," he says. Then, after a long pause, "The rest of the executives would love for you to stay."

I swallow. My hands are sweating and I can't seem to catch my breath. "Rain check?" I ask, barely making a sound.

Before he can reply, I turn on my heel, stumbling through people and tables, wrenching the door open and running across the parking lot to my car. I throw myself in just as a text comes from Wesley.

Where are you???

I rest my forehead on the emblem on my steering wheel, sucking in air that was somehow nonexistent in the restaurant.

In my lap, the phone lights up again.

Is everything okay?

"No," I hiss, jamming my keys into the ignition and peeling out of the parking lot. I throw my phone onto the passenger seat. "Everything is *not* okay."

Chapter 37: Wesley

My last girlfriend, Talia, was unfailingly kind. She said hi to everyone, gave her time and energy to helping others. She was dependable, too, like me I guess. That's why it was such a shock when she stood me up. We were supposed to meet for brunch after finals in junior year. She was going to meet Amy and my mom, officially. She just never showed, which was embarrassing enough. What was worse was that when she finally responded to my texts, it was to tell me she wanted to see other people.

So maybe I'm just overly sensitive to the whole experience. But somehow, even that rejection can't quite compare to being stood up by Corrine. I waited in that room for an hour and a half. I texted her, called, but never got an answer.

I throw myself on the couch, loosening my tie and flicking through television channels. Amy won't be back until at least midnight. But she said she'd probably go out with friends after and I plan to be in my room with the door closed by the time she gets home.

I pick up my phone, my finger hovering over Corrine's contact information, when it starts to ring. Like I've conjured her from thin air. Too bad I didn't have that power an hour ago.

Instead of Corrine's face showing up on my screen, it's a picture of her hand, splayed out on her bed. She wouldn't let me take a picture of her face to put in my phone. She won't let me take any pictures of her. At all. Because she says it would be too hard to explain why I have photos of my boss on my phone if anyone ever saw them. So, I took a picture of her hand and her painted red nails because they reminded me of her red lipstick and her red glasses and because I'm a pathetic loser.

"Hi," she says quietly.

"Hi."

"Can you let me in?"

I frown at the phone screen. "Where are you?"

"Outside your house."

I stand. "Oh." I make my way to the door slowly, mostly out of spite.

"Hi," I say again as I open the door, still holding the phone to my ear.

"I went to the restaurant," she says, hugging her stomach.

I end the call. “Did you go to the *right* restaurant?”

She kicks a hole into the welcome mat. “People from work were there. Richard was there.”

“So you stood me up?”

“Wesley,” she sighs.

I pull the door open farther. “Come in.”

She follows me into the living room, toeing off her heels and laying her coat over the back of the couch. She sits right on the edge of the couch, like she can make a quicker getaway that way. “Richard spotted me the second I walked in the door. I panicked. I didn’t want him to see us there together.”

“You could have lied,” I say.

“No.” She picks at her fingernail but her voice is firm. “It was too risky. The whole idea was too risky.”

“You could have just told them you were meeting someone.” I try to keep my voice level and calm. She was right to be nervous but I was still the one left sitting in that room alone.

“They’d wonder why I was in a private room. I didn’t know what to say.”

“You could have said exactly: I have a date. In a private room. With a guy who gives me multiple orgasms.”

She glares at me. I’m being childish, I know. I shake out my hands.

“I understand why you didn’t come but you could have at least answered one of my texts.”

She says nothing, leaving us in infuriating, empty silence.

“Or any of my calls.”

Still nothing.

“So that’s all you have to say?” I take a deep breath when I hear the anger in my voice. I sound too much like my father right now and I hate it.

“I’m sorry.” She puts her hand on my knee. “I’m sorry, Wesley.” That’s the problem. I know she is. It makes it so much harder to be mad at her. She leans forward, puts her other hand on my chest.

“Wes,” she whispers. She leans forward and kisses my throat. I close my eyes and swallow against the bolt of electricity that her touch sends straight to my dick. She starts to unbutton my shirt and I put my hand over hers.

“I think we need to talk about this.” I shift away from her.

“What else do you want me to say?” Anger coats her voice. “I said I was sorry.”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t try to fuck this problem away,” I say quietly. The

fact that she'd just throw sex at me like that will solve any of this makes me feel small and insignificant and dirtier than I expect. "Don't think I don't notice every time we have heavy conversations. You'd rather be...intimate than talk to me." I stumble over my words. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, I just..."

I stand, trying to put some distance between us. "It was just...a shitty thing you did. You might not know what it feels like to be stood up. But I do," I say, hitting my chest a little too hard. "Has anyone stood you up before, Corrine?"

She opens her mouth. Closes it. Repeat.

"Well, I have. I've waited for someone to show, worried if they're okay, hoping there was just some misunderstanding, wondering if they're laughing at me." I look away, too ashamed to meet her eyes. "And it's embarrassing and it hurts. *You* embarrassed me. You made me feel like some dirty secret."

She crosses her arms over her chest and she lifts her chin in that way she has—so that even though she's shorter than me she still seems like she's looking down at me.

"I don't think I should have to apologize because I care about my career. And yours. I'm trying very hard to keep both of us employed."

I expect the hurt to hit me like a punch to the gut but really, it's more like a burn that I can't feel at first. Expectation, numbness, then the throbbing.

So this is what it feels like to know you're not good enough.

It feels like complete shit.

It feels like your heart breaking. Like the hurt, the realization comes over me slowly, creeping up my spine. It hurts this much for a reason. Because I love her. Even though she hurt me and I'm fucking pissed at her, I get it. I hate that she's hurting, too, and it's because I love her that I want to take it away. I want to take her in my arms and run my fingers through her hair, tell her everything will be okay. Do everything I can to make it true. But she's closed to me right now. And besides, she's the reason I feel this way at all.

"I think that we should table this for now. We can talk more on Monday," Corrine says, gathering her coat.

I laugh but none of this is funny. Only I would realize I was in love with someone because she stood me up. "Fine. I'll make sure to put it in the agenda for the Monday meeting."

She stops at the door, turning to face me. But whatever I think she's going to say, she doesn't. Her jaw hardens and her lips purse and she's gone before

she's actually left.

* * *

Amy and Jeremy sway to the hip-hop pumping through the speakers. Emily smiles at me over the rim of her glass. Maybe it's the warm and sunny weather that's blanketed Boston or the fact that the Sox are playing like kings this season but the city seems energetic, fresh, and it's rubbed off on everyone.

"Thanks for organizing this," I yell across the circle to Emily. The email invitation for a happy hour event that rolled into my inbox on Sunday afternoon was exactly what I needed. Something to be excited about that wasn't Corrine.

Emily nods in time with the music.

I lean closer, unsure if she heard me. "And thanks for letting me invite non-work people."

I'd been feeling guilty for lying to Jeremy the other day. So I invited him and Amy as an apology they maybe didn't know was necessary. It hasn't been nearly as awkward as I thought it might be, mixing my old-friend group with new people. Probably, I haven't given Jeremy enough credit. He can make friends with anyone.

She waves my words away. "Of course! The more the merrier. Too bad Corrine couldn't come, though," Emily yells, leaning into the middle of the circle to address me directly.

I take a sip of beer. I didn't realize how addicted to Corrine I'd become until we went a whole weekend without speaking. Other than a few work-related emails she sent on Sunday night, we've had zero contact. She was stone-faced through a client meeting this morning and stayed closed up in her office all day.

"She's pretty busy, I think."

I turn back to my sister and Jeremy but I can still feel Emily's gaze on the side of my face. She's been doing this since we arrived, staring at me in a way that sends alarm bells down my spine.

I feel my phone signal a message in my pocket but I ignore it while Abila and Marisol regale us with their tales of woe from Accounting. I have a beer but it's mostly for show. It feels strange to drink in front of colleagues. Abila is in the middle of a rant about invoicing when Emily slams her drink onto

the high-top table beside us.

“Holy fucking shit,” Emily yells.

Abila scowls at the interruption but her expression quickly morphs into one of shock. “Oh. *Oh my god.*”

Amy, Jeremy, and I turn, following their gazes, and I nearly drop my beer bottle. Holding her stark-white coat folded over her arm, Corrine leans against the bar as the bartender passes a tumbler of clear liquid across the dark wood. We watch in silence as she comes toward us, stopping a few feet shy of joining the group. “Hello.”

I bite my cheek to hide my smile. I think if anyone saw it they’d know that my feelings for this woman go far beyond professional respect.

Emily recovers first. “You made it!”

She reaches for her, grabbing Corrine and pulling her into the circle, reminding her of the others’ names, and introducing her to Jeremy. Amy and Corrine share a secret, awkward smile as they shake hands.

The group starts chatting but I can’t stop staring at her. She smiles slightly as Abila continues her story, a little more subdued and with way less swearing than before. Emily grins the entire time and Corrine listens intently, her eyes flicking to mine once, again, and again.

I’m supposed to be spending time with my sister and my friend. But now I feel like a compass needle, constantly having to move my gaze away from her true north. I shift my weight and look everywhere except at her but it feels like every time I let my guard down, blink, she’s there.

I pull my phone from my pocket and find the text message from earlier. It’s from Corrine.

Are you still at the bar?

I reply, Not that I’m not happy to see you but...what are you doing here?

I hit send and a few moments later she reaches into her coat pocket, turning her body slightly away from Emily. Her lips purse as she types.

Just wanted to see you...

I bite the inside of my cheek, hard enough to make it sore, but I can’t stop my eyes from searching out her profile. A blush crawls up her cheeks and I’m

arrogant enough to think it's because she can feel me looking at her. I think I know what she's doing: this is how Corrine says sorry.

Maybe it's the way the low light of the bar makes her mysterious and sexy or the way she went so far outside her comfort zone for me. Maybe it's just because I love her and I'll forgive the people I love almost anything.

But I forgive her.

My chest feels a little lighter because of it. If she wanted to make it up to me I appreciate the gesture but *this* isn't what I want. Because even though we're here, together, we're not here together. I can't throw my arm around her. I can't kiss her cheek or tease her for gracing us with her presence. And I realize, every time I'm shown an opportunity where I can't do those things, I want them more and more.

She doesn't take more than one or two sips of her drink. She never puts down her coat. But even she can't stop her body from swaying to the music or smiling at Jer's jokes. When I dance I look like I'm cutting all the wrong shapes but for once that doesn't matter to me because all I really want is to sidle up behind her and match the motion of our bodies to the beat of the music. I want to buy her next drink. I want to hold her hand when we walk out of here together.

But we can't be a real couple in public.

Can we go home now? I text.

She pulls her phone from her pocket, continuing to nod at Abila as she types in her password. She fights a smile hard. Her mouth flattens as she turns to Emily.

"Everything okay?" Emily asks. She looks to me. Back to Corrine.

"Mmhmmm." Corrine is casual and quiet. "Just a small emergency back at the office." She turns to me. "Maybe you can give me a hand?"

"Sure," I say quickly.

Amy clears her throat in an incredibly obvious way. I flip my hair out of my eyes, trying to seem a bit more chill than I feel. Emily smirks and I scratch my jaw, avoiding Corrine's eyes.

"You okay to get home?" I ask Amy.

She frowns. "I thought we were hanging out."

Shit. "We will. At the launch on Friday. I just..."

Amy rolls her eyes. "Fine. But you're staying the whole night on Friday."

Wrapping her in a hug, I squeeze enough to make her whack me in the back. "Can't...breathe," she croaks.

“You’re the best sister,” I whisper.

“I’ll take care of her.” Jer grins.

“You mean, I’ll take care of you,” she retorts.

Jer hugs me and we say some more goodbyes before I follow Corrine out of the bar. We walk in comfortable silence back to the office building.

Corrine hands me her keys. “You drive.”

She waits at the passenger door, scrolling through her phone, reminding me of the first time I saw her when I didn’t know I was seeing *her* for the first time.

We get into the car and I adjust the seat and roll down the windows to let in the smell of coming rain. The streets are dark and quiet. By the time I pull into the parking garage beneath her building, her hand has found a home on my thigh and could this be what a relationship with Corrine would be like? Driving home from after-work drinks with friends. Her letting me drive and me not having to adjust the seat.

Her body warms my left side as she sags into me on the way up to her apartment and I pull her closer, dropping my head into her hair and smelling coconuts. I hand Corrine the keys and she unlocks the door. Toeing off her shoes. Turning to me with the door open, she says, “Coming?”

Chapter 38: Corrine

“Are you hungry?” he asks, opening the fridge as I walk down the hall to my bedroom.

“Not really,” I call.

I pull off my clothes, rubbing the lines my bra left over my rib cage and on my shoulders. The bathroom light feels too bright and I wince as I flick it on. The sound of pots or pans and running water make it all the way back here as I wipe away my makeup and wash my face.

“What are you doing?” I yell but he doesn’t answer. Pulling on a favored pair of worn black tights and an oversized University of Minnesota T-shirt, I pad back to the kitchen. “I recorded *Jeopardy*.”

Wesley presses a warm mug, fragrant with my favorite brand of peppermint tea, into my hand. He snorts into a glass of water. “Did you already watch it?”

I pause for a moment, at the thoughtfulness of making me a tea. He already does these tasks at work but somehow they feel heavier, more important when he does them here, in my home. Then his words replay in my head. I pin him with a glare.

“I don’t need to watch it first to beat you, if that’s what you’re saying.”

A small smile curls one side of his mouth. “You make a good point, Ms. Blunt.”

He follows me to the living room and we settle on the couch. He puts his feet up on the coffee table and I put my feet up on his shins, like we’re two people with a routine, comfortable enough that we do things like this every night.

As I turn on the television and find the right episode, he plays with my hair, tucking it behind my ear. “I have a question,” he murmurs.

“What is the Hapsburg Empire?” I say to the TV. I get that endorphin hit that comes when I answer the question before the contestant can.

“Why did you come tonight?” he asks.

I open my mouth. Another answer in question format on the tip of my tongue. But I turn to him instead.

“I thought...” My eyes fall to his tie. “I know you’re not...” I take a deep breath.

I want to be more like him. I want to say what I'm feeling the same way he can. But I'm not sure I even understand what I feel. Not when it comes to Wesley.

"I bailed on our date and I wanted to make it up to you."

He nods. "I appreciate that but I already have to go all day at work not being able to touch you. Standing beside you tonight and not being able to put my hands on you was torture." He punctuates this with one hand on my thigh, possessive and hot.

I blink slowly up at him. The best thing about him is how he always seems to feel the same thing I do. He puts the feelings into words for me, when I can't. I imagine his hands on me at Happy Hour. Standing beside each other with the warm weight of his palm on my hip. On my ass. A stolen kiss, pressed quietly to my neck when the others go to the bar to get drinks. Meeting in the hallway by the bathrooms and grinding against each other while our bodies buzz from alcohol and music and laughter. My arousal is a warm drink, filling me up slow.

His eyes bounce between my own. His gaze feels like the softest touch, like lips gently brushed over skin. "You took off your makeup," he says, like he's just noticed.

I nod.

"I can never decide what I like better." He presses his thumb to my mouth, dragging it across my lower lip and chin. "Your red mouth or how soft your skin looks, and how your lashes are still wet. Or how I know that your lips are the same rose color as your nipples."

The best thing about Wesley is also that he knows exactly what to say to make me want to fuck him. But he never knows that he's saying it.

"Do you want me to put my hands on you now?" he asks quietly into the space between us.

"No." I shake my head. I can't say the things I want to say but I've always been better at action. "I want to touch you."

I brush my lips against his. "I'm sorry," I say. "I'm sorry I made you feel like a dirty secret. You're not."

"It's okay," he says between kisses. His nose bumps mine.

"No," I say, angry. "It's not."

It isn't okay. He shouldn't have to feel that way. "Sometimes, Wesley, I feel like..." My heart trips in my chest. "You're the only thing I can hold on to."

Between my mother, Richard, my job, Wesley—my intern whom I am secretly fucking—is the only stable thing I have. And I hurt him.

“You were mad at me the other night, when I tried to kiss you.”

His dark eyes are cool. “It felt like you were trying to distract me from the problem.”

Sudden tears sting my eyes. “I just...you’re so...strong, Wesley. You’re so brave.”

He shakes his head. I stop him with my fingertips on his chin, his stubble roughing the pads. “You tell the truth about what you want, who you are. All the time. Every day. I wish I could be like you.”

Wesley looks like he doesn’t believe me.

“I think you think it’s a bad thing. But it’s the thing I—” I stop myself, swallowing down the words. “I admire most about you,” I finish, my heart in my throat.

“I can’t do that, be like you. I’m still trying. I want to be better with...” I clench and unclench my hands. “With actions. I hurt you and I’m sorry. I tried to show you tonight how sorry I was but can I show you now what you mean to me?” I close my eyes against the way my heart trips over him. “How much it means that in everything that is happening, you’re the person I trust more than maybe even myself?”

He cups my jaw. “You don’t need to show me. I believe you.” He kisses my chin. “Corrine, I know this is complicated and I’m not trying to make it more complicated, but you need to know that I think I...”

I cover his mouth with my hand, ribs bruised from the adrenaline of the look on his face. My hand shakes.

“Shhh...” He can’t say that. Not now. I won’t know what to do with myself. My strict schedule? My routine? It will all be chaos.

Falling in love with Wesley Chambers was never part of the plan.

I straddle him, his stubbly jaw scratching at my lips. I move my hands down his chest and my mouth follows the trail they blaze. Stopping at his belt, my eyes flicker to his in a silent question. He holds his breath and nods, just barely. His whole body is still, frozen in silent anticipation as I pull his belt from the loops. His chest heaves as my fingers breach the elastic on his boxers and I wrap my hand around his length.

I can’t catch my breath. Putting my mouth on him is the new breathing.

He grabs at the fabric of the couch as I lean forward, my lips puckered, and place a soft, barely there kiss right at his tip. His legs tense and his back goes

rigid at just this infinitesimal amount of contact. How can it be that I am trying to do something for him and yet he still makes me feel so good?

I plant more small, closed kisses along the underside of his cock. Part of me wishes I hadn't taken off my lipstick, that I could leave proof of my being here on his most intimate skin. My nipples point through the fabric of my T-shirt. My panties are already wet, just from this. Just from kissing him. I will never get enough.

"Never," he whispers and I realize I said it out loud.

Finally I do the thing we both want. I lick up the length of him, closing my mouth around his head. A moan escapes me at his taste, salty and hot. I watch him, his head dropped back against the couch, biting his knuckles.

I am filled with him and yet it's not enough. I want more.

He pushes his pants and boxers a little farther down and gently takes my hand, guiding it to his sac. He squeezes me over his warm, soft skin. His whole body melts into the couch cushions. His lashes flutter and his cheeks pink. He is hot and hard in my mouth and soft at the same time and so, so beautiful. He's put all his power in me and yet he could probably get me to do just about anything right now. Climb to the top of the John Hancock tower, come to work naked, tell Richard and Mark they're worthless. If I could keep feeling this way, and keep making him feel this way, I'd do it.

My living room fills with the lewd sounds of my mouth on his skin and his tight gasps. His quiet *ohhhs*. I close my eyes because the sight of him is too much. I want his hands on me instead of my hand between my legs.

"Touch me?" I beg.

The only part of me he can reach is my head, but he places his hand there, his fingers gripping my hair gently. He guides me back to him, moving my head up and down on his shaft.

"Fuck, yes," he hisses as I let my teeth gently graze his skin. I pull his foreskin back, suck his tip again, and his fingers clench in my hair.

He moans in a voice that sounds nothing like himself. He sounds a little like he might die but he's happy about it. A curl of heat crawls up my own spine as he softly trails his fingers over my throat and chin and traces my lips where they're stretched around him.

"I'm gonna..." He gasps. "I'm coming, Corrine."

He comes, hot and hard, on my tongue and the back of my throat. At some point, I don't know when, we entwined the fingers of our free hands together. I want to feel his body, his mouth, his hands between my legs. I'm so aroused

I feel like I might go off just from the friction of walking.

Slowly, I stand, wiping my mouth.

“I’ll be right back,” I say.

He clenches our fingers together. “Wait.”

His cock lies flat against his bare thigh. The sight is erotic enough that I have to close my eyes.

“Let me take care of you.”

He draws the pads of his fingers to a sensitive spot on the inside of my leg just above my knee, draws his other hand up the back of my thigh. I wrap my fingers around his hair, pull his head back and kiss his smiling mouth. He cups my breast, the heat of his palm burning through the fabric of my shirt. We’re going to fall upon each other out here again.

“Take me to bed and touch me.”

His mouth is on mine before I’m finished. He parts my lips with his, slipping his tongue inside in a move I know he’ll use between my legs later. It takes all my strength to tear myself away, walking to the hallway.

He follows slowly, tucking himself back in, turning off the television, taking his wallet and phone out of his pocket and placing them on the counter.

The bedroom is pitch-black but he finds me there, like muscle memory guides him. The bed dips and my hands find his waist in the dark. He doesn’t need to touch me. He can do it after. I can’t wait any longer.

I push and pull his clothes off necessary body parts and his hands do the same to mine. Spreading my legs, he rests in the cradle of my body, rubbing his cock as he gets hard again all over me until we’re both slick and wet.

“Want you,” I say. Because it’s the only thing I can speak out loud right now. I just *want*. I want so much it’s a need.

Taking himself in hand, he pushes inside me. I could come like this, just from him filling me up.

He shudders, burying his face into the space where my jaw meets my throat.

Gripping my shirt in one hand to keep the hem above my breasts, he kisses my hot skin as he starts to move.

He pets me, my clit swollen and begging. With his mouth on me, his cock in me. This is all I need. Just this.

My orgasm moves slowly through me, like the sun through the room throughout the day. Hot and long I come around him, tremble beneath him

while he thrusts in long strokes. Not until I'm wrung out does he let himself come again, wrapping his arms around me, pulling my body into his, pushing himself into me as far as he can go.

He is everywhere and yet it's still not enough.

Our chests heave together as we catch our breaths. He rolls to the side, bringing me with him. Wesley hitches my limp leg around his hip, keeping his softening cock inside my body.

"Don't leave," I say. I feel weighted to this bed. We can never move again.

"Tired?" He kisses my forehead. I can only hum a response. "Want me to stay until you fall asleep?"

"No," I mumble. I wanted more. To fuck his fingers, his mouth but my lips feel buzzy and numb. "Don't leave," I say again, my body or my bed. "Stay all night. I'll drive you home in the morning."

"Yeah?" He sounds surprised and happy and exhausted.

I nod against his chest.

"How come?"

"Let's pretend tonight was real," I say. It's easier in the dark. "Didn't it feel real tonight?"

The routine of it, the comfort. My feet on his legs, his feet on my table. It felt like maybe, one day, it could be real.

"Yes," he says after a long pause. He peppers my cheeks and shoulders with kisses. I purr another happy sound.

"It felt a little bit like that."

There's a tone in his voice, like what he's left unsaid is, *it felt a bit real but it's not*. And it disappoints him.

This is all I can give him. Maybes and pretend. But I think—I know—he wants more. He deserves it, too.

He's the kind of man who wants to hold my hand, to know that we claim each other when we walk down the street. He wants to pull me out to the dance floor even if he's probably not a very good dancer, to tease me for showing up late to Happy Hour.

I don't know how much longer he'll wait.

* * *

A take-out coffee cup slides slowly across my desk on Friday afternoon.

"Here," Wesley says. "You were working pretty hard and missed your own

alarm.”

I blink up at him as the soft bell sound of my PM coffee alarm tinkles from my cell phone in my desk drawer.

“Thank you,” I say. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Making him fetch coffee now feels a little weird, but my Friday afternoon slump won’t let me refuse the caffeine hit.

He shrugs. “You could repay me by coming to Amy’s launch party tonight?” He smiles crookedly, in what I think is an attempt to look cute.

He holds up his hands as I start to shake my head. “Separately, of course. She said you should bring Emily.”

Leaning back in my chair, I hold my coffee up to my nose, let the warmth of the cup seep into my palms. “I don’t think it would be a good idea. A little…” *Awkward*, I want to say. “Risky.”

He sighs, sounding less disappointed and more resigned.

“Wesley, you *know* we can’t be seen together outside of work.”

“It’s not like we’ll be seen together. We’ll just be in the *same place*.”

Stepping out of my shoes, I scrunch my toes into the carpet beneath my desk to ground myself. “Why do you want me to go so badly?”

“Because I…” He stops. Closes his mouth. He shoves his hands in his pockets, his shoulders move like he’s trying to find the right fit in an ill-fitting jacket. “Because I like spending time with you,” he says quietly.

“Well, you can spend time with me. After. Why don’t you leave early so you can help your sister. And I’ll see you tonight after the party or tomorrow at the softball game.”

His eyes widen and he rubs his stomach. “If we don’t win I’m gonna blow chunks.”

“That’s disgusting,” I say. But I can’t keep a straight face anymore when he goes cross-eyed.

His feet shuffle as he makes his way to the door. “Are you sure you don’t want to come? It would mean a lot to my sister and…to me.”

I want to give him the answer he wants. “Just call me after.”

He nods, his mouth turning into a crooked frown. “If you change your mind, you know where I’ll be.”

The door closes softly behind him and I take a sip of my coffee but it tastes dull…like nothing. My eyes wander away from my work, to the door.

This internship will be over soon. We couldn’t still work together here but if he was willing to take a job at a different agency—he’d have great

experience and references. They'd be silly not to see his talent. Or maybe if I...left.

Once I think it the idea takes full form, like it's been in the back of my mind—or maybe my heart—for a long time. I've been staying out of some sick sense of loyalty to Richard but for what? I could leave and Wesley could stay and then we could...maybe?

I'm on my feet before I've really thought about it. The door is open and I rush down the hallway. He's just past the Pit as I arrive on the other side. "Chambers," I yell.

Everyone stops, including him. He slowly turns, his eyes wide and confused. A murmured *ooohhhhhh* rises up from the Pit as I stalk around it. Richard watches me from an open office doorway, glowering, but I ignore him. He is inconsequential, he just doesn't know it yet. Wesley meets me in the middle, fiddling with the strap of his messenger bag.

"Is something wrong, Ms. Blunt?" His voice is quiet and respectful.

"I just wanted to let you know..." With a quick glance at the Pit, I keep the stern expression on my face. "I will be attending the event tonight, after all."

"Really?" His smile is too big for the conversation we're supposed to be having in front of colleagues.

I take a step back. Without noticing, we've stood too close together, in each other's orbit. "Yes."

"Okay." He takes a step back as well. "I'll...make the proper arrangements."

He winks so only I can see.

* * *

The hallways are quiet and most of the other offices are dark by the time my phone interrupts my work again. Without checking the time, I know I've worked too late and it's probably Wesley wondering where I am. Pulling open the drawer, I answer without turning away from the screen, shutting down the computer with my free hand.

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving right now."

"Princess, it's your mom," Dad says. "She's in the hospital."

I stand fast enough that the computer chair hits the wall behind me. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I don't want to panic you."

His voice is thin and reedy. He's panicked himself.

"She collapsed and the ambulance brought her in. They're running some tests but...if you can, maybe you should come here. Just..." His voice catches. The sound of an intercom breaks through the silence. He must be calling from the hospital. "Just in case," he says.

The chair slowly rolls back to me and when it hits the backs of my knees I collapse. I let the fear beat at my heart before remembering to breathe.

"Okay. I'll have a flight booked by the end of the night. I'll be there soon, okay? Do you need me to call the boys?"

"No... Maybe... You just get here as soon as you can."

He disconnects the call but I do nothing. The fear paralyzing me. Beating at the walls that cooler heads tried to put up. I want to hug my mom. I want to be by her side. But I also want Wesley. I want to hear his voice telling me everything is going to be okay and I want him to hold me for a few precious moments before I leave.

I call him but it goes to voicemail. I hang up and send a text instead. My hands shake so hard I need to spell the words three times before I get them right.

I can't come. Call me. It's an emergency.

I can't bring myself to type the rest. Putting it in print makes it too real. It can't be real yet.

My mind feels like a thousand different balls of yarn, all with their ends tangled. I don't just need his support. I need his help. I can't do this—booking a flight, calling my brothers, dealing with the week ahead—but he still doesn't respond.

"Breathe," I whisper. "Everything will be okay." Rolling my shoulders back, I start with work first since it calms me most, going through my schedule for the next week, sending emails to reschedule meetings and push back presentations.

"Corrine," a voice says from the doorway and I jump, almost knocking over my hours-cold coffee.

"Richard." His name sounds more like a curse than a greeting. "I'm sorry but I can't chat right now, I have to—"

"No." He walks in, shutting the door behind him. "You need to make time for this."

Pulling my glasses off and rubbing away the stress on the bridge of my nose, I say, "Okay, Richard." The air in this room smells stale, close, unmoving. He just brings this claustrophobia with him wherever he goes. "What do you need?"

"What I need is for you to listen to me. I'm tired of you dicking me around."

"I... I...what?"

My brain snags on the utter absurdity of a man named Richard turning *dick* into a verb and a laugh bubbles out. But he seems too caught up in this moment to care. He approaches my desk like he wants to hurt it, leaning against the glasstop so he can get as close to me as possible.

"I have been patient, Corrine. I have offered you every opportunity. You know that I want you. You've always known."

The laughter dies in my throat. "This...this is wildly inappropriate."

A sense of surreality washes over me. The office tunnels, the air whooshes from my chest. I know I'm not in any physical danger. At least, I think? My eyes dart to the door over and over again. My legs twitch with the need to get out. There is nothing I want more than to get the hell away from this man.

"You want to talk about appropriate?" His face turns a deep shade of red. "Your little tease outfits aren't very appropriate for work, Corrine."

He gestures toward me. "Tight skirts and that low-cut dress you wore the other day," he scoffs.

I close my eyes. If I have to be in this man's presence for another minute I might scratch him.

"What are you trying to say? The clothes I wear aren't any different from the clothes every other woman at this office wears."

My phone vibrates in my hand and I see a text from my stepfather before Richard reaches out to grab it. "Pay attention to *me*."

The phone feels like my only link to anything outside this office right now, so I grip it tighter, holding it behind my back in a game of grown-up keep-away.

"No, *you* pay attention, Richard."

The look on his face should probably scare me. But I'm done being scared and intimidated by this man and the power he thinks he has over me. Whatever was left of our relationship, my respect for him, has burned up with his rage.

"I'm not interested in you, Richard. I never have been and I never will be. I

find your come-ons offensive and uncomfortable, and if you don't leave me alone I will be reporting you to HR."

For a moment, his face shutters, the anger wiped away by something that looks a little like fear. But then it's gone.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Corrine? It might not end well for you."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I hiss. My heart is a battering ram. My thighs shake.

"It means that we value team players at Hill City. And team players don't run crying to HR," he says, his eyes narrowed.

"That was the wrong fucking thing to say to me, *Dick*."

He leans back, making a point to let his eyes travel down my body, a sneer contorting his face. "I'll give you a little time to rethink your choices."

I fall back into my chair the second he's gone. My hand shakes and cold sweat has formed at the small of my back and under my arms.

The screen blurs as I try to type out another message to Wesley.

Please come. I need you.

I don't know what Richard truly wants from me. Other than my fear, my impotence. But I don't feel terrified into inaction like Richard hoped. The opposite, actually.

Once my hands stop shaking, I open a new email message and start drafting.

Chapter 39: Wesley

“These are so good,” Jer exclaims, popping another hors d’oeuvre into his mouth. The lights cast a golden glow over the crowded space. The two-piece band is loud but not enough to drown out the voices and laughter of everyone here. Everything is birch and green. The fine bone china is an ode to our mother, who loved the stuff so much she had multiple sets. The name, Amy and May’s, is a nod to her as well. Laura May Chambers would be proud of her daughter tonight.

Amy’s restaurant is packed for her launch and my chest swells with pride even though I’ve done absolutely nothing to make all of this happen.

“That’s what you said about the last one,” I laugh. Jer’s eyes get wide again as more food comes his way. He throws back the rest of his cocktail and swipes a falafel thing off a tray.

“You have to leave some food for the rest of the guests,” Amy chimes in behind us.

“I’ve been telling him,” I say, leaning into her. “I think we’re going to have to send him home soon.”

She nods.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Most likely another message from Corrine. When I saw the preview from her first text, **I can’t come**, I decided not to read anymore. Spiteful maybe. But after her performance in the Pit this afternoon, for her not to come anyway, I’m tired of being Corrine’s second best.

That doesn’t stop the little pool of dread that builds in my stomach as I let Corrine go unanswered.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Amy says, reaching up to hook an arm around my neck and reeling me in for a kiss on the cheek.

The dread pool gets soaked up a bit by my sister’s love. Corrine can wait awhile longer, especially since it’s clear that she’s not coming. And besides, it’s necessary. I’ve put her before Amy for too long. Maybe if Corrine were willing to return the favor it wouldn’t feel like the right move.

My phone is a dead weight in my pocket, so that I can’t truly forget about it. But I won’t check it, at least until the end of the night. I can go that long.

I think.

* * *

“This place is going to make a ton of Amy, money,” Jeremy slurs as I hold him up and Amy opens the cab’s passenger door. Laughter and music spills out of the front of the restaurants along this stretch of street. The night is so cold that just my suit feels like not enough clothes and I resist the urge to turn to Amy and say, in our mom’s practiced delivery: *I told you to bring a coat.*

“Okay there, buddy.” I half heave Jeremy into the back of the car and he has a hard time sitting upright. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“S’fine,” he says. “Hey. Hey.” He grabs my hand in both of his. “I’m really glad we’re hanging out again. I missed... I missed you, man.”

Ruffling his hair, I say, “I missed you, too, buddy.”

His smile is fuzzy. He turns toward the cab driver. “Excelsior, sir.”

“I think I need to talk to my bartenders about overserving,” Amy says, biting her lip and wrapping her arms around her middle.

I wince. “Yeah. Maybe. Though Jeremy isn’t known for his tolerance levels.”

She nods. “Thanks again, bro.” She pumps her shoulder to mine. “It means a lot that you’re here.”

“Are you kidding, Amy?” I wrap her in a hug. “I’m so wicked proud of you.”

She pinches my side to release the hug, walking backward to the restaurant. “I’ve gotta get back inside. Are you coming?”

“In a minute.” I wave and pull out my phone. The little red notification lights up my message app. With a sigh, I open them.

I can’t come. Call me. It’s an emergency.

Please come. I need you.

My stomach clenches in a moment of panic. But an emergency to Corrine could be work related. These are work-related texts. They have to be. There can’t be an actual emergency.

“Her mom,” I breathe, the words sinking in my gut.

Pressing her number, I put the phone to my ear. I step to the curb and lift my hand as another cab approaches. With each ring the knot in my chest

tightens. The cab stops and I throw myself in, hurling the address at the driver.

Boston has never seemed bigger than it does right now, when I'm trying to get back to her.

The cab pulls up in front of our building and I jump out.

"Hey," the cab driver calls from his open window. "You forgot to pay."

"Ahhh." I run back to pay, not waiting for change. Wendy the security guard frowns at me from behind a crossword puzzle book as I run through the doors. The elevators require another long wait. I calculate how long it would take me to run ten flights up the stairs but decide I'll be too sweaty and might throw up even if I somehow get up there faster.

I burst through the door to her office too many minutes later, my tie flipped over my shoulder and my pulse pumping against the collar of my shirt. She looks up from her desk. Her eyes red and her cheeks blotchy.

"What happened?"

"Where were you?"

"I...my sister's...? What happened?"

Corrine slumps in her chair, her face in her hands. "Everything happened," she mumbles through her fingers. "My mom," she warbles and my heart plummets somewhere to my knees region. "I have a flight booked for Minnesota tomorrow." She gestures at her desk. "I was trying to tie up loose ends but..."

Relief hits my bloodstream like amphetamines. This is something I can *do*. "Okay. We can go get you packed right now."

Still she sits in the chair, staring at her desk. "Corrine?"

Something uncomfortable and a little terrifying claws up my throat. "Did something else happen?"

She nods, slowly. "Yes."

She takes a deep breath and comes together in front of me. The red glasses on her nose, the severe bun, the tight lips. A corporate general.

"Richard happened." Her jaw pulses a fast rhythm. "He barged in here half an hour ago demanding that I...god, I don't even know. He's been..." She looks away, like for a moment she's ashamed. "Pursuing me for weeks, longer. I think he offered that promotion as a ruse. He showed up at my apartment the night before my last migraine."

"W-What?!" I try to do the math in my head, of how long ago that was, if I was with her that night.

“He’s an obsessive, entitled *asshole*.”

My mouth hangs open but I can’t make it form any words. “I had no idea it was that... I thought your mom...do you want to...” I still feel like I can’t catch my breath, can’t catch up to what’s happening.

“Report him?” she asks. “I already am. I have a letter drafted to Sue in HR.”

“Okay.” I nod. Her energy is charged, almost angry. It’s a little terrifying but also wildly impressive. And maybe a little sexy. “I’ll help,” I say, even though I have no idea how. “I’ll help.”

“I’m not going to let him do this anymore, Wesley. He doesn’t get to control my job *and* my personal life.”

I keep nodding. “I’m proud of you,” I say, my voice soft, and it’s the softness I think that breaks her.

She shakes out her hands and her face falls. “Oh god.”

She rushes around the desk and I meet her halfway.

“Oh god,” she says again. Her whole body shudders against mine. “I don’t want to lose my job but I can’t keep living like this, waiting for him to corner me again.”

“You won’t lose your job. I won’t let you.”

“Say it?” Her eyes are wild. “Tell me it will be okay?”

“Everything will be okay.”

Her chest brushes mine with each breath. She still doesn’t look like she believes me.

“You don’t have to believe it yet. I believe it.”

She buries her face in my chest. The shakes that wrack her body start to slow and then stop. We stand together, my hand running through her hair, over and over until she feels loose and soft against me. Guilt riots through me. This whole time I thought she was ditching me tonight. Meanwhile, Richard was harassing her while I drank and ate with my friends. She needed me and I wasn’t here for her.

We sway slightly, like we’re dancing to a song only we can hear. Her arms come around me, moving up and down my sides, and I follow the path she makes on her own body. She presses her open mouth to my pectoral. The heat of her tongue through my shirt sends a bolt of lust to my groin.

“Corrine?”

Her hands move to my ass. Rubbing her stomach against my hardening cock. I try to push myself away. I don’t want her to think I want anything

from her right now.

“Corrine?” I ask again.

“You have to be quiet,” she warns, as she pulls at my tie.

“What are you doing?”

She convinces me with her hand on my heart. “I need this. Us. I need to feel you or else I’m afraid I’ll never stop shaking and I’ll never get past this moment.” She kisses my chest again. “I know you think I use sex to distract you but...” She grips the lapels of my jacket in her hands. “It’s not sex, Wesley. It’s you. I need you.”

I laugh, pushing my thumb against her lips. “You did it,” I say. “You told me exactly what you wanted.” I breathe into the skin at her neck. “Are you sure?”

She nods, her chin bumping my chest. “Yes.”

And it’s all the convincing I need. I turn her, hitching her bum onto the end of the desk, and begin working on her buttons.

“Can I kiss you?” I ask, my hand resting between her spread legs.

Her eyes are desperate. “Yes.”

I sink to my knees as she pulls her shirt from her shoulders. She unzips her skirt and I pull it down her legs. She shimmies and almost falls off the desk and I laugh as I try to steady her while kissing her knees and thighs. Hooking my finger in her panties, I pull them down her legs.

At some point she got my suit jacket and tie off, my shirt open. She puts her hand, small and warm, at the spot where my neck and shoulder meet, pulling me into her. I let her reel me in. I think I’d let her lead me anywhere if I could see this look in her eyes again. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes so big they’re black, like I am the answer to her most important question.

My first taste of her sets me on fire; I moan, my eyes falling closed as her hand twists in my hair. I spread her wider, scorching my fingerprints into her skin. She answers each thrust of my tongue with a pulse of her hips.

I suck at her clit, flick my tongue over her, let her fuck my face, her breath catching, until she comes hard and fast. She rides her orgasm out on me, until she’s still, her fingers lax on my head.

Using the edge of the desk to steady myself, I wipe my hand over my mouth. Corrine turns between my arms. She leans against the desk, tipping forward, and I devour the sight of her; the tan lines on her shoulders left over from her summer runs, the dimples on her lower back, the round globes of her ass, and her feet—*my god, Corrine*—still in her heels.

“Wesley?” she says and I bring my eyes back to hers. “Fuck me?”

She has ruined me for other women. The pleading note in her voice, the way this woman *begs* me to fuck her—as if she has considered the possibility that I might—that I *could*—say no.

I am ruined in my love for her.

My belt buckle hits the carpeted floor with a dull clang. I push my boxers down my legs and take myself in hand.

She presses back into me and I groan.

“Fuck me,” she hisses and I smile into the skin at the back of her neck. Sliding my hand up her body to cup her breast, I push into her. She bends until she is flat against the desk.

“Like this?” I nuzzle into her ear, moving slowly.

“Yes,” she cries and somewhere in the back of my mind I remember that we need to be quiet, but I’m just not sure I care anymore.

Our last time here was desperate and confused. I want to erase that. I want this memory to be the one we think of for years to come when we think of Office Sex.

This time, every touch, every place our bodies come together, is about pleasure, yes, but also about trust. It’s about love.

I want to keep teasing her like this but the wet heat of her, hugging me, is too much. The way I am so much taller than her and yet, like this, we fit together perfectly. I have to let go. I bend my knees, roll my hips, and fuck her in earnest. My hands on her hips hold her in place as she grips the sides of her desk. I watch the side of her face, her eyes wide open, staring but unseeing, her mouth caught in a silent scream.

My skin is so hot, too tight. I’m going to come so much sooner than I want to.

Like she can read my mind, she spreads her legs wider and I slip my hand between them, finding her clit still slick and swollen. I roll my fingers over her, my orgasm barreling down my spine, and somehow, mercifully, she’s coming, too. Squeezing me tighter while she lets out one final cry.

Corrine lies on the desk, her breathing slowing. She shudders as I rub one hand up her back and slowly pushes up, her back against my front.

She is wet down her thighs and sticky where we’re joined together, and becomes even more so as I slowly pull out of her. But she laughs, resting her head against my shoulder. I wrap my arms around her middle, looking over her shoulder at the way her breasts push up as her back arches.

“Thank you,” I whisper, biting into the skin at her neck.

She moans, softly. “For what?”

“For letting me fuck you at work,” I say with a small laugh. *For letting me fall in love with you.*

Her eyes close but her smile stays and I bury my face in her hair. I know that if I were to smell my skin, hours from now, I would still smell like her.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Richard’s voice is a whip cracking through our post-sex haze.

Chapter 40: Wesley

I pull my pants up around my hips with one hand and wrap my other arm around her body, turning us so that she isn't completely exposed to him.

"I—Richard. This—" Corrine sputters. "I thought you left."

"I came back," he snarls.

"This isn't what it looks like," I say, feebly, over my shoulder. Even as I say it, I know it's pointless.

This is *exactly* what it looks like.

"Really? Because this looks like my executive is getting fucked over her desk by her intern," he snarls. His face is the color of blood. Spittle flies across the room.

"Richard, I can explain," she says, stepping away from me and pulling her blouse around her body. Corrine's voice trembles and even I know that was the wrong thing to say.

"I'm in love with her," I blurt. She tenses in my arms. Richard only shakes his head, disgusted.

"Don't say another word." He points at us. "Both of you, get yourselves cleaned up and be in my office in two minutes." He shakes his head, anger and revulsion clear on his face, before he turns and walks away.

"It's going to be okay," I tell her, putting my hand on her back.

"Like hell it is," she mutters, pulling away from me and dashing tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. She scans the floor for more of her clothes.

We stitch ourselves together, numb, and walk to Richard's office. I try to take her hand but she makes a fist, walking ahead the whole way and never turning back. The closer we get to his office door, open just a crack, the farther my stomach sinks to my feet.

It's stupid, considering what we were doing, but I can't believe this is happening.

Just before the door, Corrine stops. Her back is rigid and her shoulders heave with each breath. She turns to me. Her arms come around my waist, her face buried between my arm and chest. I can't hear, but I feel the deep sob that wracks her body. For the longest second, I do nothing. I am so surprised by this, her complete physical affection in the middle of the office.

But the shock quickly wears off and I put my arms around her, curl over her, resting my cheek on her hair. I wish I could do something, say something to protect her.

“I’m sorry,” is the best I can come up with.

She takes a deep breath, her whole body shuddering on an exhale. “I am, too.”

She steps back, trying to right her clothes, but throwing them on so quickly has given her this messy, frumpy aesthetic. “Listen, I don’t think you should come in with me. I... I don’t think I want you to see or hear whatever happens.”

“No.” I take a step forward. “I’m just as much responsible for this as you are. We face this together.” I reach for her hand but she makes a fist, pulling it behind her back.

She pauses. Her lips pressed together like they’re holding something heavy in. “Why didn’t you answer your phone, Wesley?” she asks, her voice colored with hurt.

“I... I was at my sister’s launch party.”

“If you had been here, if you had come when I first called. None of this would have happened. Do you know that?” The disappointment in her face triggers an ugly thing inside me.

“That’s not fair. Have you ever thought that if you had come to Amy’s party in the first place none of this would have happened? This isn’t my fault.”

She blinks quickly. “You’re right.” She nods, a blank expression on her face, her voice toneless and flat. “I can’t blame this on you. I have no one to blame but myself. Maybe I was just scared. Of losing my mom, of losing in general. Maybe that’s what this was from the very beginning, a distraction.”

My brain stutters to catch up with her and so does my heart. “That’s not...that’s not what this was. Not for me. And I know not for you either,” I tell her.

I shake my head. “Don’t do that to us. Don’t question this. Don’t rewrite our history.”

But it’s like she doesn’t hear me. A switch has been flipped somewhere inside her in the time it took us to walk from her office to his.

“And you.” She looks at me like she’s seeing me for the first time. “You were probably just trying to find someone else to take care of.”

I physically bow inward. Her words are like a hit to the chest I didn’t see

coming.

“Don’t say that,” I say, my voice hard. “We’re not going to say things just to hurt each other. You’re panicking right now.” I try to reach for her but she moves out of my grasp. “And that’s okay. But we’re doing this together. I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

She looks at me with the same indifference that she used to.

“We’re real, Corrine,” I say, pointing between us. I say it slow and loud so she’ll hear me. But nothing changes. I start to falter. “We...we were real all along.”

For the first time, I know that it’s true: even though it was a secret and that secret made everything more difficult, more intense, her feelings were still real and so were mine. The horrible part is that it took getting caught to realize it.

I don’t recognize this woman standing in front of me. “We’re not real. We can’t be. We’re not right for each other. Do you realize what’s going to happen in there? You’re going to be *fired*. So will I. And it’s my fault.” She shakes her head as I try to argue. “Don’t you see, Wesley? I’m just like him. I’m no better.”

I keep my mouth closed, afraid if I open it all the wrong things will come out. I shake my head. “You are nothing like him.”

Because I love you. She never reacted to my declaration in her office. Unless you count ignoring it as a reaction, which, in this scenario, is a pretty straightforward answer.

Her jaw clenches, her nostrils flare, like my silence pisses her off. “Don’t you get it?” she spits. She sounds like she did on my first day. Angry and barely containing herself. “This was a mistake, Wesley.”

Each word is a cannon in my head. Percussive, destructive. Painful.

“You,” she says slowly, like I’m an idiot. “Were a mistake.”

A tear falls down her cheek but she dashes it away. She’s angrier now than I’ve ever seen her. Angrier than when she thought I’d called her a cunt. My head won’t stop shaking.

“Don’t fucking say that to me.”

She’s just trying to hurt me. I think it again and again but it doesn’t help. I’d rather go back to the time when I thought she hated me than endure this. This hurts more than any cruel thing she’s ever done before.

She’s scared and she’s just trying to hurt me. But that’s the most horrible part, because it’s working.

“This.” I gesture between us. “I am not a mistake, Corrine.”

My voice breaks. Right now, we feel like one.

“We’re real,” I say but I can’t even convince myself.

Her voice is ice. I don’t need to hear her next words for my chest to crack the rest of the way open, for my heart, my lungs, to fall on the floor at her feet.

But she says them anyway.

“No. We’re over.”

I step back, like distance will somehow make this hurt a little less.

“Corrine,” I croak. My throat hurts. “Can we...talk about this? Maybe once we’re not so...”

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

She stands tall, her shoulders back, her face remote. Confident, intelligent, severe. She is every bit the woman I fell in love with. And I hate her for it.

Chapter 41: Corrine

Richard doesn't acknowledge me when I walk in, shutting the door quietly. I wait to feel something. My eyes are dry, though my face is tight, as if I was at some point crying. I don't remember it.

"Where's Wesley?" Richard asks.

I open my mouth but no sound comes out at first. My whole body is wrung dry, a desert. "I told him to go home."

Anger, like lightning, flashes across his face. "You had no right to do that."

"I guess I've been doing things I haven't the right to do a lot lately."

He studies me, silent and fuming. "Sit down."

The clack of my heels is jarringly loud against the hardwood. He had it installed last year, tearing out the ugly carpet. My body feels disjointed, my limbs put together wrong. I'm sweating. My heart beats faster with each step closer I take. By the time I sit down across from Richard my hands shake and all those feelings I wondered at are here, burning against my eyelids.

I wasn't lying, when I told Wesley that I don't do these kinds of things. I don't take these risks. And yet, the only thing I want right now is to feel his presence beside me. Hear his awkward, nervous laugh. Feel his hand at my back, on my thigh, steadying me.

But I broke his heart instead.

I needed him to be away from here, to not incriminate himself any more than he already has. If that's even possible. This can't be what loving someone is; protecting them from the things you don't want them to see. It can't be. This hurts too much to be love. And yet, walking away feels like integral pieces of myself are suddenly missing.

Was protecting him—after everything he's done to protect me—the real mistake?

Richard walks around the desk, bypassing the chair beside me, and sits on his desk, directly in front of me. He's so close the shins of his pant legs brush against my knees.

Faintly and from a distance, alarm bells ring. But I think they're only in my head.

"Well, Corrine. What are we going to do about this?"

I am eye level with his crotch. I focus past his hip instead, to a photograph

of him shaking hands with some B-list actor whose name I can't remember.

"I hate it when you don't pay attention to *me*," he hisses, grabbing my chin between his thumb and forefinger, jerking my head back to him.

I sit back in my chair, pulling myself out of his grasp. He's never laid a hand on me—never an aggressive one, at least. My heart ratchets up in my chest.

But then, I've never seen him like this before. He's unhinged, sweating. His eyes are bloodshot, anger etched into every line of his skin.

"Don't put your hands on me ever again," I warn him. I can't keep the tremor from my voice.

His lip curls.

Looking away from him feels like turning my back on a hungry wolf.

"You understand how confused I must feel, don't you, Corrine?" His voice is oddly gentle considering the violence that seems to simmer beneath the surface.

"This was completely my fault. Mr. Chambers is not at fault in any way," I say in a rush. "It was...is inappropriate of me and a gross—"

He barks out a hard, sharp laugh. "You think I'm angry about the impropriety?"

My gaze bounces back and forth between his eyes. "I...well, yes."

He leans forward. His breath whistling through his nose. "What does that skinny, bumbling idiot have that I don't?"

I'm too shocked by Richard's vitriol toward Wesley to fully register what he's said. "I thought he was your... I thought you liked him."

My phone chimes in my hand. I catch a glimpse of the area code, 612—a Minneapolis number. Probably my dad or brothers calling for an update on my flight situation. I want nothing more than to be *not here*. I want to be with my mom. My heart aches with how far away she is. None of this feels like it's worth salvaging if I can't be actively working my way toward her right now.

He grabs my arm before I can see more and I stand, the chair falling onto its back. It claps against the hardwood.

"What is *wrong* with you?" I hiss. My arm throbs under the echo of his hand.

"What is wrong with *you*?" he yells back. "I gave you your time. I gave you your chances. And you threw them away."

I shake my head. He's raving. "It's never going to happen, Richard. How

many times do I have to tell you that?”

He throws his head back, laughs again. “Let me lay it out for you. I pursued you and you turned me down and decided to sleep with *him*. So here are your options.”

His voice lowers and it sends a chill down my spine. “If you want me to keep quiet about what I saw tonight. You end it with him.”

“I already have.” I cross my arms over my chest to keep it from cracking in two.

“And you give me exactly what he got.”

I blink. I blink as if blinking will somehow help me hear. And then I shudder.

“You’re sick,” I tell him, my anger shaking my voice. My skin feels grimy and unclean and I crave a shower to wash away whatever invisible taint he’s left from his gaze. Everything about this man, just being in the same space as him, breathing the same air, makes my skin crawl.

“I wouldn’t touch you to save my own life,” I spit.

“What about to save your job, Corrine?”

I think he’s taking joy in this. The corners of his mouth curl upward, his eyes gleam. “Everything you’ve worked for. All of the whispers, the doubt you’ve had to endure. All of that for nothing?”

“Get it through your decrepit, old brain,” I say. “I will never fuck you for my job.”

“What about for his?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You seemed upset, Corrine, when you first walked in.” He puts his hands behind his back, walks around me slowly, like he’s taking a nice stroll through the park.

“Of course I was upset.”

“Will you miss your little...boyfriend?”

I close my eyes. “He wasn’t my boyfriend.”

“Neither was the last one, right? What was his name? Sean?”

I open my eyes to find him right in front of me. He knew. He knew all along. Maybe he even believed the rumors.

“Did you consider what kind of implications your indiscretions will have for Wesley?”

“Yes,” I say. My heart rips through my chest, broken. “I think about my mistakes all the time.”

“He’s been out of school with no job for two years. He certainly won’t be receiving any references from me. He has his mother’s great big house to take care of now.”

My heart sinks. I didn’t know about that, though. “N-no. I hadn’t thought of that.”

He shrugs. “I could be persuaded.” He pauses meaningfully. He’s like the caricature of a villain. “To give him his job back.”

All the showers in the world couldn’t scrub the grime from this interaction off my body. There was a time I aspired to this office. A time when I wanted so badly to gain the approval of the person in here. Richard is not that person.

“That’s the difference between you and Wesley Chambers. Mr. Chambers would never want to work for a man who uses sexual coercion to get him the job. He is a good person. You...” I look him up and down, let the disdain seep through my eyes, curl my mouth, and emanate from my pores. “You...are nothing.”

He takes a step forward and I take one back blindly, hoping I don’t trip over the chair. He looms over me, an angry, impotent man. He wants power over me. I’m done giving it to him.

“Take another step and I’m calling the police,” I say. “And I’ve solved your little team player problem for you, Richard. I fucking quit.”

Chapter 42: Wesley

I drink coffee in my kitchen as the sun starts to peek in through the windows. This was my mother's favorite time of day, before we were awake and demanding breakfast and asking whether the clothes we wanted to wear were in the laundry still. When she was sick, I'd set my alarm at ass-crack o'clock to help her downstairs and shove a warm cup of coffee in her hand, then go back to bed so she could sit like this and revel in her alone-ness.

I want to be like her. But alone is too close to loneliness. I can't take any more of that right now.

Amy is still sleeping off the success of last night. Her party feels like forever ago. Certainly not less than twenty-four hours ago.

My phone chimes a message and I throw myself at it across the kitchen island. Because maybe it's Corrine.

Even though I know the chances of it being her are highly unlikely, my heart still breaks a little when I see that it's Emily instead.

I just got a message from Richard that Mark is now in charge of the softball team? WTF Wes. Are you not coming?

And then my heart breaks all the way.

My team. I've lost my job, the woman I love, and now my team is in Mark Gutterberg's hands.

Throwing my phone to the side, I stand. I dump the rest of my coffee in the sink and pace the length of the kitchen. I want to wake up Amy just to piss her off. I want to talk to Corrine. I want to hold her. I want to hit a ball until I have blisters. I want to go cheer my team on anyway. I want to rip the clipboard from Mark's hands. I want to know that Corrine's mom is going to be okay.

I want *my* mom.

The sun leaves perfectly rectangular squares of light in three sections across the kitchen floor now. I stand in one to try to feel warmth.

My phone chimes again.

"Fuck off, Emily," I whisper and immediately regret it. None of this is her fault. My feet drag as I walk back to the island, heave myself onto a barstool.

Trying to be like Mom isn't working. I should probably just go back to bed.
But it's not Emily. It's Jeremy.

Dude, I am hurting.

A laugh bursts out of me.
Although Jeremy means his hangover, I write back,

Me too.

See, he writes, I didn't even know you were drunk last night!
Wanna get food?

Mom would have called this kismet. The thing I need the most, offered to me: to not be alone, to have my friend back.

Yeah.

* * *

I huddle underneath a green awning but the rain is that misty kind that coats my face, seeps into my clothes, until everything feels sticky and damp. I try to blow a hunk of hair out of my face but it's too heavy and wet. I sigh.

I'm the human embodiment of Eeyore.

Pulling out my phone, I tap the screen, searching for a message from Jeremy, but it's pointless. He makes fashionably late look early. I decide to text him instead:

Getting a spot at the bar.

The restaurant is crowded and too dark for a brunch place but there are two empty high-backed barstools at the dark wood bar. Just as the bartender sets menus in front of me, Jeremy appears at my side, soaking his chair and me as he pulls off his raincoat.

"Sorry I'm late." He sounds breathless.

"It's okay," I say, since technically I no longer have anywhere to be today, or any day now that I don't have a job.

"I'll have the eggs Benedict," I say, placing my regular brunch order and sliding my menu back to the bartender. "And a coffee."

“Whoa. I just got here,” Jeremy complains but he leans over the bar top to peer at his menu. “Oooh, I’ll have the waffles with a side of bacon and…” He gazes around the crowded room. “A Bloody Mary, please.” He turns to me. “Hair of the dog.”

Jeremy slings an arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer to him, shaking me in a one-armed hug and patting my head like one would a large, friendly dog. “How was the rest of your night? Man, I got wasted at Amy’s party. Is she pissed?”

“I’m fucking my boss.” The words escape and I’m so thankful that the din of the other patrons has drowned out my verbal diarrhea to our neighbors. I lean back on the barstool, flattening down the hair he’s dislodged.

“Kay.” I can feel Jeremy nodding beside me. “Hey, thanks,” he says to the bartender as he sets our drinks down in front of us. Jeremy turns to me and finally I make eye contact. It’s not as embarrassing as I thought it would be. There’s no judgement on his face. Just curiosity and mild humor.

“So the kind of uptight lady that came to that happy hour thing last week?” Jeremy sips his drink.

“Well, we’re not together anymore. Actually, she dumped me.”

Jeremy squints at me with one eye open, like following my line of thinking is a little too much while his liver is trying to do a full-body cleanse.

“Chambers, I need *context*,” he begs, pulling a smile to my lips.

Our food arrives while I give Jeremy a rundown of my first day, what Corrine heard, and everything that happened after that, including our secret relationship, how I wanted more up until Friday night, and the termination letter—effective immediately—I found in my inbox this morning.

I feel terrible for whichever HR person had to process that paperwork over the weekend.

“Have you told Amy?” he asks around a bite of his bacon. My plate sits untouched. I pick at my English muffin and nod.

“What does she say?”

I shrug. “Corrine is kind of the reason I’ve been such a shitty friend lately. I don’t think Amy…”

“Likes her?” Jeremy offers.

I nod.

“Okay, well, if you got caught last night she’s probably been fired, too, right?”

I shrug. A termination letter sat, shiny and condemning, in my inbox this

morning but I haven't asked Corrine about her job. But now I feel a little hungover. I was so obsessed with my own pain I didn't stop to think what might have happened to Corrine after I left. After I left her with Richard.

A slow, sweaty panic builds up my spine.

"If you're both unemployed, you can be together? Right?"

I shake my head. I've never been much of a crier but I have to pause for a moment to catch my breath. "She said...she felt like I wasn't there for her," I say. "Last night. Her mom is sick with the same thing Mom had and...fuck, I don't even know if she's okay."

I rub the heels of my hands into my eyes as a headache starts to build. The restaurant is suddenly too loud.

"She said, if I had been there for her last night none of this would have happened. We wouldn't have been caught. And... I don't know, maybe she's right? I was ignoring her. I ignored her, when she needed me, because I was pissed at her for not coming to Amy's party. It was so petty. Who the fuck does that?"

Jeremy winces over a sip of his Bloody Mary. "Are you, like, asking me my opinion?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I just... I hate that she's hurting." My chest aches. "But you know, she said some really shitty stuff to me, too," I say, on a wave of indignation.

"Like what?" he asks around an enormous bite of waffle.

"Like..." I follow a dent in the wood with my fingernail. "I was a mistake."

Jeremy nods, like he agrees with the general shittiness of such a comment. "Do you think she meant it? Or was she just..." He shakes his hands, his arms, his head, a quiet *ahhhh* coming from his open mouth. The woman on his other side leans away as she scowls at him over her shoulder. "Totally panicking?" Jeremy asks.

I shrug again. "Maybe she meant it." Even as I say it, I don't really believe it. She meant to hurt me because she was hurting and scared. But the way she looked at me every moment before that one, she didn't see me as a mistake. She needed me.

I think she might even love me.

"Maybe... I don't really care if she did." The words make me a little sick. "That sounds...screwed up, I know. I just... After the last two years, and losing Mom, I felt like I needed something to go right for me. And she...she was the one thing that felt right. Even if it was wrong. Even if we weren't

supposed to be together. I want that back.” I can’t hide the aching in my voice. “I want her back.”

Jeremy tosses his napkin on his plate. He seems to have scarfed down his meal. I worry for his digestion. I rest my head in my hands, staring down at my cold food. The Hollandaise sauce has congealed into a yellow blob.

“Can I tell you something about my friend Wesley?” he asks.

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah, sure.”

“You’ve always been defined by someone else.”

I sit back in my stool. “That seems...unnecessarily rude.”

“I don’t define you that way. That’s what *you* do. You think of yourself as Amy’s brother. Your mom’s nurse. And you probably thought of yourself as Corrine’s assistant, and then Corrine’s lover. You define yourself in relation to other people,” he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Maybe you need to define yourself by, you know...” He shrugs. “You. You’re always going to feel lost,” Jeremy says. “If you don’t know who you are.”

“Since when did you become so wise?” I ask, mostly to distract myself from the sudden urge to cry.

He lifts one shoulder. “I started going to therapy after Angie and me broke up. It’s given me...perspective.”

“So... I shouldn’t try to win her back?”

“I don’t know.” He sounds wary. “She sounds a little mean, to be honest.”

I smile. “She kind of is. But...it’s like, her protection. It’s not real, you know?”

He studies me. “You’re kind of gone for this girl.”

I shake my head. “She’s definitely a woman.”

“Chambers.” He shakes me by the shoulder. “You’re smart and kind and honestly I’m impressed you hooked up with your boss because I never really thought you had it in you.”

He’s right. I can’t even bring myself to be offended. “I didn’t either. Amy and I went as each other’s dates to junior prom,” I remind him. He snorts a laugh but quickly composes himself.

“Because Amy wasn’t out yet,” Jeremy counters.

I laugh. “But also she’s still my sister and mostly because I was too much of a chicken to ask the girl I really wanted to take. And remember that time I punched myself in my own eyeball asking Talia out in college?”

He winces. “Oh yeah. That was a train wreck.” He rubs his own eye. “But

she said yes.” He points at me triumphantly.

“That was a sympathy yes.” We all knew that.

He shrugs, as if that was inconsequential to his point, and pulls out his wallet. At some point the bartender slid a bill toward us.

“I got this.” He waves me away when I reach for my own wallet. “You’re like super unemployed now.”

“Thanks.” I take a deep breath. Before I can mend anything with Corrine I need to fix things with Jeremy. “Listen, I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you during Angie and stuff. I’m sorry I’ve been...not here. But I’m ready to be here, now.”

“Me, too. I’m here, I mean.”

We stand and pull on our coats. Whatever pain I was feeling this morning is still there. But it’s less now, numb.

“So what are you going to do?” he asks.

“She’s in Minnesota. She said she had a flight this morning.”

He purses his lips as we step outside. The rain has stopped and the sky is split in half, one side gray, the other blue. “Well, that gives you time to decide, right? What you want to do. She said you weren’t there for her. So maybe when she gets back you can, like, be there for her?”

I nod. But waiting for her to come back—whenever that might be—feels like forever. Relationship purgatory. I don’t even know if she will come back. She doesn’t have a job to come back to.

Suddenly, I don’t want to wait another minute for her to come back. I want to go to her, be there for her, right now.

“Shit,” Jeremy whispers as he checks his watch. “I’m gonna be late.” He starts to jog down the street, on the sunny side. “Text me.”

“Yeah.” For better or worse our secret is out. Even if the future with Corrine is uncertain it’s a relief to be honest with my best friend again. “I will.”

The only thing left to do is be just as honest with the woman I love.

Chapter 43: Wesley

“Are you sure this is the right decision?”

I picture Amy sawing at her lower lip with her teeth. She’s been on the phone with me since I landed at Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport, wavering between unyielding sisterly support and trying to talk me out of going to Corrine’s parents’ home. Amy drove me to the airport yesterday after I told her about what happened. She stayed up, texting me while I paced the length of the terminal during my midnight layover at O’Hare.

I don’t think this is what Jeremy had in mind when he suggested I be there for Corrine, and showing up at your secret ex-lover’s house, in a different state, seems a little forward. But I need to remind her what kind of man I am. The kind that shows up. And I had to do something while I waited for news on whether Linda Blunt was going to be okay. So I decided to do the thing I already have tons of experience in.

Taking care of her. Of them, all of the Blunts. If they’ll let me.

“I’m just worried they’ll feel like you’re intruding...” Amy says.

“If they do, then I’ll leave. But I have to do something. I’ll lose my mind if I don’t.”

She sighs over the phone.

I watch the suburbs of Minneapolis glide past, the overcast sky turning everything gray.

“Okay. Well... What are you going to say?” she asks.

I knock my head against the window. “I guess I’ll start with I’m sorry?”

She laughs. “And then?”

“How can I help?” I say after a moment.

The car pulls to a stop in front of a white, two-story clapboard house with a tidy front yard.

“I’m here,” I say as I pay the driver and climb out of the car.

“Okay.”

I can tell by the hesitation in her voice that she doesn’t want to hang up the phone.

“Thank you, Amy. You’ve helped so much.” The house has a white door and warm light coming through the window.

“I love you, Wesley.” Her voice is so strong, so clear, like she’s standing

right beside me, and it hurts my heart that we don't say those words to each other enough.

"I'm not going off to war," I joke but the laugh dies on my lips. Because the thought of going into a home filled with the same pain, worry, grief that I know so well feels like a battle. One that I've lost before.

"I love you, too."

I make my legs move up the flagstone path and onto a wooden porch. I raise my hand, bringing my fist down onto the door in three slow, morose-sounding knocks. The house is so quiet and I wonder if no one is here. Maybe they're at the hospital.

I raise my arm, ready to knock again, when the door swings open. An older version of one of the teenage twins from the photo in Corrine's living room faces me. His blond hair is short and already thinning and his shoulders fill the span of the doorway.

"Hi. I'm... I'm here to see Corrine."

He stares at me like how the Terminator might look at Sarah Connor. He closes the door. From behind it he shouts, "Corrie! It's for you."

Corrie. I tuck this morsel of information away. Her family calls her Corrie but I've only ever thought of her as Corrine. I imagine a smaller Corrine being chased by her little brothers, shouting her nickname after her, *Corrie! Corrie!*

Corrie feels like a gift, a treasure after what already feels like too long without her. The house is quiet again. Until the door opens. And she's an arm's length away.

Her hair is down, falling past her shoulders, and she's always beautiful like this. She seems tired, like she's been crying. There's no makeup on her face and she's pale and small, and not just because she's wearing a sweater three sizes too big, with the sleeves rolled up.

I open my mouth, ready to apologize and explain, but I can't because my arms are filled with her. Her mouth covers mine, her tears wet my cheeks. I forget my words. I wrap my arms around her. I don't let go.

Chapter 44: Corrine

Minnesota doesn't make Chamberses. Massachusetts does. It makes no sense that he is here, but here Wesley Chambers is. In Minnesota.

For a brief moment I consider that the stress of quitting my job and getting to my mother and ending my relationship with Wesley has left me delirious, but my arms are too full for this to be a hallucination. It's the smell that clinches the reality of him, like a warm spot of sunshine through a window, clean laundry, and a hint of cinnamon toothpaste.

I didn't know they made cinnamon toothpaste until I started kissing Wesley Chambers regularly.

This smell, this weight in my arms, takes me back to the too few memories of waking up next to him, inhaling him like he's air.

"I can't believe you're here," I say into the fabric of his wrinkled gray T-shirt.

Until my mother got sick, I never realized being the "strong older sister" meant when our family matriarch was in the hospital I'd have to be the one to hold the rest of them up. They're not just heavy physically.

The weight of their grief is crushing me.

Not only have I been supporting them emotionally while they cried beside our unconscious mother's hospital bed. All I've done is cook, clean, and comfort since I got home. But there's been no one to comfort me.

Family surrounds me but I've been so utterly alone.

"You're here." The words crumble around my sob. He's here and I'm not alone anymore. I hate that I'm crying and I hate that I need him. I'm not supposed to need anyone but as I grip his thin canvas jacket in my fist and catch a glimpse of his red-and-orange socks I can't bring myself to care much. I *needed* Wesley in this moment and he *knew*.

"What are you doing to my sister?" Sebastian asks.

I lift my head from the wet spot I've created on Wesley's chest. At some point he'd closed the door, sat at the wooden bench in our small foyer, and pulled me into his lap.

I scramble off him like we've been caught doing much worse than holding each other.

"I'm Wes."

He stands, too, offering his hand to Sebastian. After a moment of suspicious frowning, Sebastian takes it. The couch groans and the hardwood floor creaks as John and James join us from the living room. The television still blares but at least they're off their designated spots on the couch and Sebastian has risen from the kitchen table, where he's nursed the same cold cup of coffee all day.

"What's he doing here?" Sebastian directs his question at me.

"He's..."

"I'm here to help." Wesley wraps his hand, warm despite the cold outside, around mine. "Anyway I can. I can cook and clean. Do whatever you need me to so you can focus on getting your mom home."

I blink down to my feet. If I look at him right now there'd be no hiding the adoration on my face.

"Wes. As in Wesley?" Sebastian asks slowly. "Your intern?"

Wes and I wince at each other.

"That's some commitment to your job, Wes," James says.

"I got fired."

I turn to him. "He fired you?" I'm not sure why I'm disappointed. I knew this was coming. Part of me hoped Wesley might have been able to salvage a little of his dignity in all of this.

He shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You flew all the way here out of the goodness of your heart?" Sebastian's voice contains the sharpness that I'm sure will serve him well when he's cross-examining witnesses. Before we can respond his gaze snags on our hands, the puddle of my tears on Wesley's shirt.

"Ugh."

"Seriously, Cor?" James says.

John chuckles. "What?"

Sebastian sighs and shuffles back to the kitchen. James elbows his twin. "Bro, they're..." He makes a lewd gesture with his fist.

John blinks, shocked. "Corrie, *no*."

Honestly. "I don't need to explain myself to you." We can't even make it three days without returning to the roles we've worn like old sweaters our whole lives.

"Actually, she dumped me." Wesley grins like a maniac.

I hold my forehead in my hand. "What is happening," I mutter.

"Dude." James winces. "That sucks."

John shakes his head. “Harsh, Cor.”

But I can tell from the dimple in his cheek that he’s teasing. They shake Wesley’s hand before returning to the couch and leaving us alone again. There’s so much I want to say to him. Mostly *why* and *how* and *why* again. But I can only blink, speechless at the anomaly of him in my childhood home.

“Wesley...”

“Where do you want me to start?” he asks quickly, like he’s trying to hold me off from any line of questioning.

After a moment of hesitation, I point to the kitchen. “Can you help me with the dishes?”

When he smiles, the dark circles under his eyes become more pronounced. He looks like he’s worn his clothes for too many hours. He needs rest. But he says, “I’ll wash. You can put them away.”

* * *

Wesley cleans the kitchen so I can take a shower. He starts a load of laundry and goes to the grocery store while I call my father to check in on Mom. I feel like we’re playing house with three grown men, who haven’t showered in a questionable amount of time, as our children.

He makes lunch—tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. There’s no way he could have possibly known that was the meal that our mom used to make us on busy Wednesday nights when I had tutoring and Sebastian had soccer and the twins had hockey.

But Wesley notices how still Sebastian gets when he sets the plate in front of him.

“I should have asked,” he whispers, joining me at the kitchen island. “Does anyone have a food sensitivity?”

I shake my head, blowing on the spoon of steaming soup. “We’re fine.”

John snuffles.

“But—”

“Dad suggested we stop by for a visit in about an hour. He said she seemed to be doing better today.” I check the time on the microwave. “Will you be okay here for a few hours?”

The four of us will go to the hospital together but visit her one at a time so we don’t overwhelm her.

“I’ll find something to keep me busy.”

He starts loading the dishwasher. The idea of him alone in my childhood home is oddly...comforting. If there’s one person I could trust not to snoop, it’s Wesley, but even if he did I can’t think of anything I would want to hide. Even the awkward tween school photos seem safe in his hands.

“Are you sure? We probably won’t be back until dinnertime.”

Wesley stands next to me but he’s careful to leave a safe distance between us. He hasn’t touched me once since he let go of my hand in the front room. It’s the last thing I should be thinking of, the very last thing, but the right side of my body is electric where it reaches for him. He’s here because he knew I needed him, but maybe he might need me, too?

“I could catch a cab back from the hospital after I’ve gone in to see her,” I muse.

“Corrine.” He puts his hand over mine. I go still while my skin sparks for him. “Everything will be okay.”

“Right.” I nod. I sound breathless. “Okay.”

When he holds my hand like this, I can believe it.

* * *

As we trample up the porch steps, all the lights in the house blaze. The house looks warm and inviting even if it doesn’t feel that way. We all try to cram into the front door at the same time. Something we’ve done since we were kids, except now that I’m the smallest of the four of us I almost get crushed between a brother and the doorjamb, then trampled by six pairs of boots. When I get into the house, my brothers are already throwing coats onto the bench and I spend an extra two minutes placing them on hangers and hanging them up in the closet.

There are crisp lines on the gray living room carpet from the vacuum. The air smells like lemon-scented cleaner combined with something mildly spicy wafting from the oven. My brothers troop into the kitchen and make exclamations about dinner.

We couldn’t convince Dad to come home with us, even though he looked like he needed a shower, food that wasn’t made in a hospital, and a nap on something other than a chair. But he won’t leave Mom until she wakes up.

When I walk into the kitchen, I have to work very hard to fight the smile that wants to take over my face. The boys hover around Wesley as he bends

over the oven, pulling out a casserole dish full of something cheesy. He's using my mom's matching oven mitt and apron set. There are frills and multicolored owls all over them.

He smiles at me over Sebastian's shoulder and now I don't stop myself. I smile back. It feels so good.

"I only learned how to cook like, five things well when my mom was sick. So I hope you guys like enchiladas."

He places the casserole dish on a trivet and my brothers surround the food like a pack of wild dogs.

Wesley pulls off the apron and stops in front of me. "Hey."

"Hi."

"How is she?"

I watch my brothers over his shoulder and nod toward the French doors leading to the backyard. "Let's talk outside."

I pull on a sweater that smells like Mom's vanilla hand soap and we step into the crisp evening air. I sit on the wooden patio steps and Wesley sits beside me, hunching into himself for warmth. I pull off half of the sweater and he does his best to curl under it.

"She had an allergic reaction to a combination of her medications. She collapsed and they took her to the hospital. She's been in and out of consciousness since. They think she'll be okay but because her body was already under a lot of stress from the cancer and the treatment, she went into organ failure. They need to stabilize her kidney function before they'll say that she's in the clear but...they're optimistic."

Wesley lets out a breath that crystallizes in front of us.

"Okay." There's a world of relief in that one word. He turns to me.

"Everything is going to be okay, Corrine."

I nod. But tears still brim in my eyes. "I thought... I prepared myself for the cancer killing her. Like, I prepared myself for what that process would be like. I didn't prepare myself for her dying from some..." I dash at the wetness on my face. "Stupid allergic reaction. I'm not ready."

I bury my face in my hands so he doesn't see me cry. But he lets me nonetheless. He sits here while the tears accumulate and then the sobs come. He puts his arm around me and holds me up while everything inside of me crumbles.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm so tactless. Here I am complaining about losing my mother when...when..." Another sob shudders through me. "You've

already lost yours.”

“You’re not tactless,” he promises, his voice sincere. “You’re in a shitty situation. You’re allowed to be upset about it.”

I wipe at my face with the backs of both hands. “You probably don’t want to talk about this. You’ve lived through it.”

He shrugs, staring off into the dark backyard.

“You just... I look at you and you seem so put together. So okay. I feel like I should be like that.”

He laughs silently on a long exhale. “You don’t. And I’m not.” He stares up at the stars. His ears are pink from the cold and so is the tip of his nose. In this moment, he looks so vulnerable, so lost. Exactly like a man who lost his mother.

He might be a mess and yet he came here to help *me*. After what I said to him, I’m not sure I deserve it.

“Why are you here, Wesley?” I take his hand in mine.

He looks down at our fingers, twined together, then up to me. “You said you felt like you couldn’t trust me, that I let you down. I couldn’t live with that. I couldn’t let you go through this alone.”

My chest aches for him, for his selflessness, for the way he’s still such a lost boy, for how not okay he feels. “Will you talk about her? Your mom?”

He shrugs. “What do you want to know?”

I lean into him and squint up at the sky. The fear that has been following me rises up again, like a specter just out of my line of sight that disappears every time I turn to it. “You don’t have to if you don’t want but...will you tell me about...when she died?”

He frowns over at me. “Do you really want to hear about that right now, Corrine?”

“I do. If you want to tell me.”

Chapter 45: Wesley

I pull my hand from the warmth of Corrine's grasp. I need my hands free to talk about this.

"The day Mom died..." I take a deep breath. Saying this out loud feels like a betrayal because my mother never did a thing to deserve these feelings. I push past the guilt and let the words out one by one.

"The most overwhelming emotion I felt was relief."

I wait for a lightning bolt to hit me. But all that really happens is a tightness I didn't realize I had loosens in my chest. Corrine reaches out, placing her hand on my thigh, and it feels like permission to keep talking.

"People always say that caregivers need to take time for themselves and I did. But it wasn't... It didn't help. Because no matter what, even if I got away for a few hours or overnight or even a weekend, I knew what I was coming back to. There was no escaping it."

There are tears in my eyes and this is too heavy of a conversation for a person whose mother is in the hospital but now that the words have started I can't stop.

"She was dying, Corrine. She was going to die and there was no way out of that. We just had to wait for it. And *she* had to wait for it." My voice breaks. "And then she did die."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm happy that we were there. That we held her hands and she took her last breaths in our living room. She insisted we play this song, this Beatles song she always loved. 'Rocky Raccoon' was on repeat for days. She said she wanted to hear it as she went because it made her happy."

Corrine laughs and snuffles.

"It was as painless as it could have been but she was still gone. She wasn't ever coming back."

I take off my glasses and clean the lenses with the hem of my T-shirt. My hands feel so cold. I don't know how to make them warm again.

"I should have felt grief, you know? I thought that was what I was supposed to feel. And I did eventually. I feel it *now*. But when the nurse said, she's gone. It felt like...like..."

I take a shuddering, gasping breath. I've never said this out loud. "It felt

like my own death sentence had just been commuted.”

I’d kissed Mom on the forehead and I’d hugged Amy and I’d just walked out. I walked the fuck out of that house and I didn’t come back for hours. “I left. You know where I went?”

She shakes her head, a quick, decisive no.

“I walked all over the city. I got a Big Mac and chicken nuggets and ate them until I felt sick on the curb of a parking lot I don’t even know where. And I felt selfish and so, so relieved. Because I knew that no matter what, no matter how hard it was going to be to live every new day without Mom, that the next time I came back to that house, she wouldn’t still be sick.” I lose my voice for a moment, the grief choking me. “I wouldn’t have to clean up her vomit or pretend that I couldn’t hear her crying when she should have been sleeping. Mom was free and so was I.”

I laugh, my horribly timed laugh. “It was the worst kind of freedom I’ve ever felt.”

Corrine says nothing. Her silence feels both peaceful and condemning. The air thick enough to choke on, with judgement, with my pain, with her own.

“I’m sorry.” I wipe at my face. “I shouldn’t have said that. That’s not why I’m here.”

“That is exactly why you’re here.” She kisses away a tear.

“She didn’t deserve that, Corrine.” My heart breaks again, more painful than the first time because now there’s scar tissue. “She didn’t deserve to die like that.”

The warmth of Corrine’s body moves closer and we lean against each other.

“Surrounded by her family? Listening to music that made her happy?” she asks.

“At all,” I say, stubborn. I feel small, a kid again.

She runs her hands through my hair. “Thank you for telling me.”

I rub the side of my face over my shoulder to rid it of dampness.

“I’m sorry I never asked you sooner,” she says.

* * *

The Blunts keep their home equatorial levels of hot. I’m in nothing but my boxers with the sheets pushed off the bed and the window cracked but I still feel like a furnace. Maybe this is why Corrine sleeps with the windows open,

as a bit of rebellion.

Mr. Blunt came home this evening with the good news that Mrs. Blunt was awake but had begged him to go home to sleep and shower since he “kind of smelled a little bit.” When Corrine introduced us he didn’t seem fazed by the fact that some dude was in his kitchen wearing his wife’s apron and a pair of rubber gloves.

Stress does weird things to people.

I haven’t slept in a house this full in a long time. It feels crowded and loud even though I’m in my own bedroom, a spare at the end of the hallway, and sleep is a fairly quiet activity. One of the Blunts snores but it’s barely a distant buzz from here, like listening to the sound of a car or two as it passes by the side of the house.

The sound of footsteps is easy to recognize, though, and I sit up when they stop in front of my door. Corrine lets herself in. She shuts the door with a quiet click and stands with her back against it.

“Hey,” I say, for lack of anything better. There’s a small, pathetic part of me that hopes she’s here for something that involves my penis but I know better than to dream.

“Why are you here?” she whispers.

I pause. “I already told you,” I say slowly. “To help.”

And maybe to try to win you back, I don’t say.

“But...” She takes a step toward the bed. “I broke up with you.”

The way she says it, it’s like she’s asking for verification. “Yeah. I recall that. Vaguely,” I say with a thick layer of sarcasm.

She sits on the edge of the mattress; the brass frame makes a quiet tinkle. “I just mean, you had every right to be mad at me. To hate me. And you chose to help me instead.”

The confusion in her voice pisses me off. “You think I would leave you to suffer just because you hurt me? Do you think that’s the type of person I am?”

Her small, cold hand finds mine, fisted into the sheets in the dark. “No. I just... Thank you.”

Her other palm cups my jaw. She scratches the stubble there and I lean into her like a cat.

I squeeze her hand and admit the thing that I never would have admitted a few months ago. “Just because we’re not together anymore doesn’t mean I stopped loving you, Corrine. It doesn’t work like that.”

She sucks in a breath but stays silent.

“You don’t have to say it back,” I whisper. “I’d be surprised if you did.”

She lets out this small sound of pained protest. “Why?”

I shrug. “You don’t say things like that.”

“I’m sorry.” There’s a strain in her voice, like she’s trying to hide the fact she’s crying. “I’m sorry I can’t give you what you want.”

Something sharp stabs my chest. But I shake my head, holding my hand to where hers still rests on my jaw.

“What is it you think I want, Corrine?” I’m so thankful for the darkness in this room, so she won’t be able to see the truth on my face.

“You...you want to be together.”

A dog barks somewhere in the neighborhood, the low bass of a large canine. I let it get in a few gruff bellows before I speak again. Now that I’m here, I’m not sure that’s what I came here for.

“I came here to help you, first and foremost. And yes, I also came with the hope that I could maybe remind you who I am. But now that I’m here I think what you said in the hall outside Richard’s office?” I take a deep breath. “I think maybe you were right.”

Her hands cover more of me, my forearms, my stomach, like if she can touch me she can make me believe. “No. You are not a mistake. I’m so sorry I ever said that to you.”

I hold her skin to mine. “Not that. You *were* looking for a distraction and I needed a place to put my grief, at least at the start. We turned into something more. But maybe we should think about reminding ourselves of who we are. Everything moved so fast. Maybe before we come together again, we take it slow?”

She pulls away in the dark but I bring her back close to me. Her hair tickles my chest. Her hands are cold. “I’m not saying I don’t want to be together. I want to figure out who I am without my mom and how I can be a better brother and friend. I want to figure out where I stand with my career so that when I come back to you and you choose me, it’s because of *me*. I don’t want either of us to ever feel like this was a mistake again. I think it was the secret that made it hard. My sister said, secrets push people together but they also push people apart. And I thought she only meant her and I would be pushed apart. But it was you and me, too. We couldn’t be who we were meant to be if we were trying to keep it all a secret.”

“Maybe,” she says. “Maybe.”

But she doesn't sound sure. *Maybe* sounds like another word for *never*.

She crawls up the bed and straddles my lap. Every cell in my body is desperate for her, terrified that this could be the last time. I am hopeless for her touch, even if it's a consolation prize.

"Can we...?" she asks.

"What? For old times' sake?"

The heat from her body is now the hottest thing in this room.

"Wesley," she says, like she might say please. "Let me show you."

No. I should say no. If I had a modicum of self-respect I would say no. When I leave here, I won't have her back. But at least I'll also know that she loves me, even if she can't say it.

"Hurry up and kiss me already," I say.

Her hands move through my hair, tipping my head back, and her lips come down over mine. She tastes like cherry-flavored lip balm and minty toothpaste and she maps every inch of my skin.

My cock is a steel rod. I think I almost have a stroke, I get hard that fast. My hands find her thighs, blessedly bare. I sneak my fingers beneath the hem of her T-shirt and play with her through her panties.

She gasps into my mouth, grinding against my thumb. The fabric is wet and I slip my fingers beneath it to glide them over her swollen skin. Her hands grip my hair to the point of pain in response.

I feel like I haven't touched her in so long, too long. After a few short days, I'm a starved man confronted with an all-you-can-eat buffet. My eyes might be too big for my stomach, but I'm going to do my best to consume every piece of her.

I scoot lower on the bed, holding her up with my hands on her hips.

"What...?" The glow from the streetlamp outside illuminates the confusion on her face.

My hands move to the inside of her thighs and I pull her panties to the side. Her eyes are as big as planets as understanding washes over her face.

Holding on to the bedframe, she lowers herself slowly over my mouth. The salty taste of her, the heat of her body, it's an electrical charge straight to my cock. I could live off the taste of her, her soft quiet gasps, her wetness over my upper lip and down my chin. I keep one hand hooked in her panties, with my other I palm her ass, urging her to move.

Other than following her cues, I have no technique, no idea for what I'm doing—I've never had someone sit on my face before. But none of that

seems to matter. Corrine hovers over top of me, chasing my tongue with her body. I have the most amazing view of the underside of her breasts. But before I can reach for one, her hand anchors in my hair, holding my head in place.

“Oh fuck,” I say, muffled into her body. I love how she takes what she wants from me. She might have difficulty telling me how she feels but she’s never been afraid to take her pleasure.

She grinds down on top of me and I flick my tongue over her; her thighs tense, her breath hitches. “Fuck my face, Corrine.”

“Wesley. Yes,” she whispers and just as quickly as we started, she is coming.

As I sit up, I can’t stop touching her, my hands roaming over her smooth skin without a purpose, just to feel her. She pushes her hand into my boxers and lifts up onto her knees, sinking onto me.

I hold her still, her head resting against mine. My eyes open. Hers closed.

“I love you,” I breathe into the space between us. Saying it is liberating. The best and worst kind of freedom. Even if I won’t hear it back.

She starts to move. Hot, slow, sucking pulses of her hips. My heart might stop from the force of its beating. She kisses me, long and wet, licking the taste of herself off my lips.

She holds me here, in a purgatory of pleasure, keeping me hot but never going fast enough to get anywhere. I find her clit again, rubbing just barely against the taut and sensitive skin, and she moves faster, pulls more from me until blessedly she’s coming again. She takes my mouth as I groan, moves on top of me, the tiniest, tightest movements, as I lose myself in her.

* * *

“What will you do next?” I ask later. The house is still quiet around us, making only the sounds houses make at night. I’ve already decided I’ll be gone in the morning.

Her fingertips leave chills in their wake as they drift over my arm and shoulder. “Wait until I know Mom is okay.” She sighs. “Then go back to Boston and try to pick up the pieces.”

I squeeze her to me in a quick hug. No matter what, she always works so hard. If she has this kind of drive for her career I have to believe she’ll work for us, too.

“What about you?”

“I...don’t know.” My career, our house, my family and friends. I don’t know what I want to do with any of it. “I guess figuring it out is what I’ll do next.”

She kisses me over my heart, holding her lips there as the muscle beats against her. “Where do you think you want to work next?”

I stroke my fingers through her hair. It doesn’t smell like coconut. It’s spicier, like she’s used whatever she could find in her parents’ bathroom. “I don’t know, but I’ll tell you one thing.”

I kiss the top of her head. “Wherever it is, I’m going to make sure my boss *hates* coffee.”

I keep my mouth shut when she bites my pectoral. But only barely.

Chapter 46: Corrine

Wesley is gone when I wake up. The whole house is spotless as I make my way downstairs. It probably won't stay that way for long but it's a relief, for now. There's coffee brewing and a note on the fridge. My name written in his looping scrawl.

Wesley and his sister must have a more respectful relationship than I do with my brothers because if they had seen this first they would have read it. I pour myself a cup of coffee and pull the note off the fridge. I sit down at the kitchen island, taking a deep breath and a sip, to fortify myself for whatever this might say.

But it's not a long letter. It's not even really a love letter. But it's very Wesley: honest.

Whenever you're ready for maybe, let me know.

I love you, Corrine.

—Wes.

I fold the paper over, running my nail over the fold. Hot, silly tears brim at my lash line.

What have I done?

"Morning, Corrine."

My dad is suddenly standing beside me. He's strangely quiet for such a big guy. I fold the note over, tucking it under my mug.

"I'm going in to see Mommy. Want to come?"

My smile is wobbly. "Definitely."

* * *

I burst into tears the second I walk into her room. I worried a hole into the inside of my cheek on the drive over here with Dad. But she's sitting up in her bed, scowling at the tray of food in front of her, not lying there barely conscious like I imagined she would be.

"Why are you crying?" she asks me. "Why is she crying?" she asks my dad, in a tone that suggests he is the reason.

He steps over the threshold into the white-walled room, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I don't know."

"Dear, will you go get me something else to eat? Maybe banana and granola and some yogurt."

A manic-sounding giggle escapes as I imagine the knowing face Wesley would make if he heard that my mother's breakfast order was the same as mine.

Dad walks past me to place a kiss on her forehead, then leaves, closing the door behind him. There's no sun on this side of the building and a washed-out painting of a ship at sea sits on the wall across from her. Nothing about this hospital room is good enough for my mother and I feel the same righteous indignation Wesley felt last night. That she doesn't deserve this.

Any of this.

"What's wrong?" she asks, pushing the tray away and opening her arms.

I hug her but I don't fall into her like I want to. She's sitting up and she sounds like herself, but she's still too small and fragile in this bed.

"Can't I just be happy you're better?"

"Of course you can. But those aren't happy tears, pot roast. They're heartbreak tears. What happened?"

I open my hand and Wesley's note, a crumpled, damp mess from my sweaty palm, falls onto the bed.

"What's this?" Mom flattens the paper down on her lap. She's silent as she reads it. "Corrine?"

"Mom. I screwed everything up."

Her skin feels dry as she rubs a tear from my cheek. "Impossible."

I shake my head. I don't deserve her unwavering faith.

"I've wanted to tell you for so long."

"So tell me."

My mom's face, the kindness in her eyes, pulls everything to the surface. The words tumble out of me. "I quit my job. Or maybe I got fired. I don't really know."

"Oh?"

"Because my boss has been sexually harassing me for...for so long," I whisper, still too ashamed to say it at full volume.

"Oh, Corrine." Tears fill her eyes and trigger more of my own.

"And...my intern. The one that I thought...the one that I didn't get along with..." I can't say any more. Partially because I don't want to say the words

to my mother. But also because they hurt so damn much to say out loud. That we were together. And now we're not.

Understanding dawns on her face. "Oh. Oh, baby."

Her thumbs wipe away the tears streaming down my face. I can't seem to stop crying.

"Did he break up with you?"

I shake my head. "I did. I... I told him he was a mistake. I said horrible things to him."

His face as I said those words is etched behind my eyelids. I don't care that he forgives me, I wish I could fix it.

Mom gathers me close to her. She still smells like her vanilla soap. The hospital scent hasn't taken over. "Was it a mistake?" she asks. "I can't believe it was if you're like this now."

I take a shuddering breath. And then another. "Maybe...maybe at first. I'd just found out about..." I gesture around the room to signify, *all this*. "And Richard... I thought... I thought I just had to take it, you know? In order to make it there, to be successful. I wanted to be loyal after everything he's done for me. But nothing I ever did beyond my complete capitulation was going to be good enough for him. I just wanted to be good enough and when I couldn't be I... I guess, yes. I made a mistake by trying to find distraction in him."

I'm made of the thinnest eggshells. I will crack open and spill all over the floor at the slightest pressure.

"I... I used him." The words come out on a sob.

She pushes my hair behind my ear. "Or maybe you just turned toward someone who thought you were good enough. Who didn't want anything from you...but you."

The tears come faster now, because it's true. Wesley wanted me, even at my bitchiest self.

"So tell him you're sorry, Corrine."

I shake my head. "I can't."

"He won't speak to you now?" Mom asks, with a knowing tone.

I cry harder. "The opposite. He came here. To take care of me while you were in the hospital."

Her body feels frail against mine as she laughs. "Then what's the problem?"

I sit up. Breathe deeply. Wipe the tears from my face, myself. I try to

explain past the shame. “He wants to wait until we’re both in a better place to be together.”

She takes a deep breath. “Well, he sounds very...considerate, dear. And smart.”

“I can’t, Mom. I can’t be with him. Because then everyone will know. Everyone will know that it started when we worked together, when I was his boss. They’ll think...”

She frowns. “Who cares what they’ll think.”

“I do,” I say, pressing my hand to my chest. “Despite recent actions, I actually care about my professional reputation. I couldn’t stand it if people thought...”

“Fuck ’em.”

I blink. My brain rewinds the word my mother just said but still cannot compute. “Wh-what did you say?”

“You heard me.”

Up until this moment, I had no idea my mother knew how to curse.

“Do you think people thought highly of me, when I showed up in this town, an unwed mother? I cared what people thought. I cared a lot. And you know what your father said?”

“I can probably guess.”

She nods, once. “He said, fuck ’em, and he asked me if I loved him enough not to care what they thought.”

I want to be the brave, strong woman my mother was and still is. But the fear won’t let me say it. Not out loud. “I’ve worked so hard, Mom.”

“For what?” Her face is red as her own tears start to fall. “For some pig to harass you? You found someone who loves you and you love them back, baby.” She smiles, like she’s happy for me. She rests her hand over my heart. “Has *any* job felt as good as him loving you?”

I close my eyes, and as the realization washes over me, I laugh. “No.”

Another wave of tears follows my laughter because what have I done? What have I thrown away because of fear?

“Oh.” Mom cups my cheeks. “Oh, my little pot roast. Everything will be okay.”

I cover her hands with mine. When my mother says it, it’s easiest to believe.

Mom’s eyes narrow. “Now, we just need to figure out what we’re going to do about Richard.”

That's one thing I can smile about. I sent my email to Sue in HR, detailing all of Richard's, Sean's, and Mark's misconduct, in the cab on the way to the airport a few days ago.

"Don't worry, Mom. I've got that covered. He's royally fucked."

"Corrine," she says with a gasp. "Language."

Chapter 47: Wesley

I get up with Amy the morning after I get home. “I guess it went okay?” she asks, staring into her French press like that will make the wait for her coffee go by faster. “She didn’t kick you out.”

I yawn and slurp my cereal. “Yeah. It went fine.”

The cold kitchen tiles seep into my socked feet so I curl my toes around the footrest of my stool.

“So are you guys back together now?” Her voice thrums with tension.

“No.”

Somehow it doesn’t hurt as much as I thought it would to say that. Of course, if she called me right now, I’d probably fall over trying to get to my phone.

“She wasn’t ready,” I tell Amy. “And neither am I. It’s okay. It’s for the best.”

She pours her coffee, keeping her back turned to walk to the fridge to pour in some cream.

“Amy.”

For a second, I think she’ll leave. But she stops in the doorway of the kitchen and turns to face me. In this moment, I can’t believe I let anything come between us. She’s my sister, my best friend, my womb buddy. We have twin-stinct.

I will never let anything get in the way of this, of us, again.

She doesn’t say a word, her face resigned.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She rubs her forehead. “I’m sad. I want you to be happy and if she makes you happy, then...” She shrugs.

“I thought you’d be happy,” I admit.

Instead of getting offended she shrugs again. “Me, too.”

I nod and take a deep breath. Since my conversation with Jeremy, I’ve needed to say this.

“I know that I haven’t been a great brother,” I tell her. “I know that you think that was because of Corrine. And I guess partly it was. But, I think maybe I was mad at you after Mom died. Maybe even before. And I know—”

I raise my hand to her because I can tell by the set of her mouth she wants

to argue.

“I know that whatever I was mad about wasn’t your fault...that what I was mad about had nothing to do with who took care of Mom and who didn’t. It was...resentment. I think I was mad because it’s always been Amy and her brother, you know. We’re twins but we’ve never been equal.”

Amy’s face falls and she shakes her head but I push on. I need to get all of this out. “You are bright and funny and everyone loves you.” My chest fills with warmth just talking about my sister. Because all of this is true.

“I fidget too much and I look kind of weird...”

“Wesley.” Her voice cuts through mine, sharp. There are tears in her eyes. “I don’t want to hear you say stuff like this about yourself.”

I huff out a laugh and steel myself for what I’m about to say next. “I don’t want to think it about myself anymore either. You talked before about selling the house and as much as I don’t want to leave here, I think you’re right. It’s the right thing to do, Amy. But I can’t live with you anymore when we leave. I need to figure out who I am *without* you.”

“You—what?” Her face drains of all color.

She sets her coffee cup down. She wrings her hands together in a motion that is totally our mother’s.

“Wes, I’m sorry. I take it back. We don’t have to sell.”

“Amy. Come on. This is what you wanted. You can use your half of the money for the restaurant.”

“Well, where will you live?” She bites at her lower lip. “You don’t have a job and—”

“Amy,” I say. “You know, you can let me figure it out for myself.”

“I can...” She drops her hands and takes a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling with the movement. “I can do that.”

My sister smiles up at me but it’s watery and wobbly.

“If you needed some help I could get you some shifts at the restaurant. Just until you’re back on your feet. But only if you really want them,” she says.

“And you can say no. I won’t be mad.”

I smile. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Her face falls. “I feel like...like I’m losing you again,” she warbles.

I stand and wrap my arms around her shoulders, rest my head on the top of hers. “Not at all. You’re not losing me. You never did. We’re just starting over. Instead of Amy and Wes, now we’re Amy. And Wes.”

She squeezes my rib cage. We stand together for a long time.

“I wish Mom were here,” she whispers.

I wipe a tear on the top of Amy’s head. “Me, too.”

“That better not have been snot,” she warns.

Ignoring her, I say, “At least if we’re not living together anymore, I don’t have to worry about walking in on you ever again.”

Amy pinches my triceps through my sweatshirt.

“Ow.”

“What did I tell you?” She grabs her coffee mug and turns out the doorway, stomping toward the stairs. “We never speak of that again.”

* * *

I take a nap, read a book, and watch five minutes of daytime TV before I realize that a) I haven’t relaxed in so long I don’t know how to do it anymore and b) unemployment is going to suck. My phone rings while I scroll through a job board; it’s a Hill City number.

“Wesley?” Emily says. “Can you come into the office sometime this week?”

For one long second my heart stops from excitement. Maybe I’m getting my job back. For that one second, I kind of do still want to work there, even if it’s without her.

“HR needs to do an interview with you about Richard and his intern, Mark Gutterberg.”

“Oh.”

There’s a long pause where neither of us speak and I realize that she’s waiting for me to confirm. “Umm...why do they need to interview me?”

“Well, I mean, everyone kind of knows now about why you and Corrine were both fired,” Emily says in a hushed tone.

“Right. Of course.” Okay. So Richard probably told everyone.

“But Corrine sent an email detailing months’ worth of inappropriate behavior by Richard and Mark and HR already had complaints on file for both and, well... I might have raised a bit of a stink about how they weren’t taking it seriously. They wanted to get the whole story and it turns out you featured prominently in both.”

“I’m not getting my job back.”

“Ohhhh. Oh no, honey. I’m sorry, Wesley.” She laughs in a way that sort of reminds me of me. “I mean, you were...you know...on company property.

With another employee. Absolutely not.”

My chest constricts but I laugh, rubbing at the spot that hurts, right over my heart. I miss Corrine. Touching her, kissing her, making her laugh, making her smile. But I’m proud of her, too. My body doesn’t feel fully present here in my house because part of it is out the door trying to get to her. To hug her for what she’s done. To tell her how brave she is. As much as I want to be already on my way to her, I won’t go. She deserves the space to heal and so do I. I’m willing to be patient. I showed her who I am and she’s shown me. Now all we need is time.

“That’s okay,” I tell Emily. “This is good, too.”

Chapter 48: Corrine

Three months later

The trade show floor is crammed. There are enough people that I can't take a step without brushing into someone. Conventions are loud and exhausting. The A/C always too high. The seminars and workshops have value but everyone knows they're just here to network, drink too much, and pat each other on the backs about their latest, greatest campaigns.

But I'd still rather be here in the middle of it all than sitting in my hotel room. My speech was on loop in my brain, mixing with the sound of someone else's television murmuring through my walls, and the constant pulse of New York through the windows. Losing myself down here is exactly the distraction I need. But even with all the noise, the blast of cold, dry air, I can't be distracted from him. If we still worked for Hill City, he'd be here with me. I haven't let myself imagine what that could have been like; freeing, probably. For weeks his absence has been a low hum like a headache I can't tame. Mom is doing better. I've found a new trajectory for my career.

All that's left is Wesley Chambers.

My phone rings in my hand with a call from Emily, my new assistant at Beck Media.

"So you've got all your materials right?" she asks by way of greeting.

"Yes, Emily."

She sounds more nervous than I feel. "Did I pack enough swag?"

"You shouldn't have packed any. What am I going to do? Throw hats at people at the end of my speech?"

Her sigh is long suffering, which says a lot since she's only been my assistant for a month. But she also forgave me for never telling her about Wesley so I'll let her sigh a little longer.

"Just take care of Sarah, please. I think she's going to pull up the carpet in my office while I'm away."

After Sarah Beck, my former boss, offered me a job at the boutique agency she was opening in Boston, the first thing I did after accepting—and promising her that I would be reporting any interoffice relationships to HR—was install new, high-pile white carpet.

Sarah hates it.

“She’ll probably just put something dead in it so that it rots and stinks and you’ll have to pull the carpet up. A real power move.”

“Okay, well, don’t let her do that either.”

“Where are you?” Emily asks. “It’s loud.”

“I’m just taking a walk. I can’t be alone with my thoughts anymore.”

“Are you nervous?”

I stop on the trade show floor, spinning in a slow circle. I’m an island in a churning sea. “Am I nervous about my speech entitled ‘Disbanding the Boys Club in Corporate America’? Ummm. A little bit.”

“Corrine. You’re going to be great.”

My cold Grinch heart grows a little bigger. Not only did Emily forgive me for never telling her about my relationship with Wesley. She left Hill City to come work with me. She said it was an easy decision after Mark Gutterberg was fired and Richard took a “leave of absence.” But it means a lot nonetheless.

I walk down a quieter side aisle. “Thanks, Em.”

“Go get ’em, tiger.”

As I end the call, I’m bumped from behind, and stumble headlong into the nearest table. My phone and my bag go flying and I pull down half their display as a gray-suited man rushes past. “Careful there, honey,” he mutters.

I suppress a snarl as I right myself and kneel to collect all of the swag Emily had stuffed into my bag. Mixed with my things are flyers from the table, marketing copy for a new data tracking and analysis system that integrates with CRMs and uses AI to help users learn how to improve their strategies.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, rising slowly, still scanning the copy because it’s actually quite good. “I—”

I stop with my arm halfway across the table, flyers and magnets and coasters in my hand.

Wesley stands on the other side of the table. His mouth agape, his glasses skewed, his hair shorter than it was but still long enough to run my hands through. A blue T-shirt with a company logo on the front stretches across his chest. He’s fuller, taller somehow. Maybe just taller than I remembered. He’s exactly the same and yet completely different. He doesn’t look like he’s mine anymore.

A little shard of shame lodges in my chest at the thought; what right did I

ever have to call him mine?

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi.”

My arm is sore, hanging here in space. I place the stack of flyers on his table.

He blinks at me, like he maybe isn't quite sure he sees me either. “How are you?”

“Good. Good,” I say, too loudly. I make a point of examining the booth, the three men, all dressed in the same T-shirts as Wesley. “Do you work here?”

He nods. His Adam's apple bobs and I am struck by the distinct memory of pressing my lips there, tasting the sweat on his skin, and the sound he made because of it. I close my eyes and lick my lips, like I'll taste the salt again.

“I do the marketing.” He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “We're a start-up.”

“Congratulations.” I flick the flyer on top of the stack. “This is good work. You're doing a great job.”

He says nothing. Ridiculous, inexplicable tears spring to my eyes and I blink away to get them under control. I didn't compliment his marketing work, his hard work, his dedication enough when I had the chance.

“What about you?” he asks, just loud enough to be heard over the din of the trade show. “What are you doing here?”

“My old boss, Sarah Beck, offered me a job. It's a boutique agency. But it...” The blush rises up my neck. Saying this out loud feels like admitting too much. “It allows me more work-life balance.”

His smile is genuine, when he says, “That's awesome.”

A thick-chested man, with blond hair, a thick beard, and wearing a fanny pack, steps forward. “We'd love to talk to you more about how you can use data tracking and analysis to achieve your mandate—”

“Paul,” Wesley says. “Quit. It.”

I take a step back. Then another. If I don't leave now, I never will. I'll stand here awkwardly until I muster the courage to say what I need to. But his face is so decidedly neutral, such a stark contrast to the man I remember, I'm not sure he wants to hear it. I've waited too long.

“I've got to go.”

I grab my bag from the floor at my feet. “I hope I see you around,” I say over my shoulder.

Keeping my head down to stop myself from looking back, I hustle as fast as my heels can carry me back to the safety of my hotel room. The chrome elevator doors are just in sight when he calls my name.

I stop, turn to face him. He's jogging, his long strides eating up the space between us. He's straightened his glasses but his hair is messier than before. He's still beautiful, the man I remember. And yet there's a lean to his shoulders, a calm in his face that wasn't there before. I realize he didn't fidget once back at his booth.

He's like Wesley, but the most Wesley he could ever be.

And he followed me, to Minnesota, to the elevator. He's here, for me. He gives me the courage to say the thing I need to say, the thing he needs to hear.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, as he comes to a stop in front of me. "I'm sorry that I wasn't ready before. I'm sorry for every horrible thing I ever said."

I swallow the nerves in my throat. The lobby is quieter than the trade show, it's easier for passersby to hear me. But I won't let that stop me.

Fuck 'em.

"You said before that, if I was ever ready for maybe...and I just thought... I thought well...maybe?"

Wesley holds out his hand and I reach for it. He places something warm and heavy in my palm. "You dropped this."

He gives me my phone.

"O-ohh."

It takes a moment for the shock to wear off and the embarrassment to set in. The span of a breath or two while my brain calculates, analyzes, and confirms, he didn't come back *for me*. He was just returning my cell phone. My face feels hotter than the sun.

"Thank you," I say to his shoulder. Turning before he can say another word, I make it all the way to the elevators this time, jabbing my finger into the button. "Come on."

The doors open to a gloriously empty elevator. I lean back against the wall and close my eyes. If I can just make it to my hotel room, I can cry. To think, I almost told him I loved him.

The doors start to swoosh closed but a quiet ding sounds before they shut. I open my eyes. Wesley steps on, closer to me than he's been in months. He's less than six feet away and without a table between us. We can't look away from each other across the small space.

"Hi," he says again.

I don't trust myself to say anything to him. I nod.

He rubs the back of his neck. "How's your mom?"

Of course. Of course he'd want to know about my mom. My heart thuds against my chest, apparently having not gotten the memo that this man doesn't want us anymore. "She's doing well." My voice sounds like I need a large glass of water. "She had surgery and is doing chemo. It's tough but she's feeling optimistic."

He nods as the elevator stops. The doors open and my throat closes. I can't have this conversation in front of other people. But there's no one standing on the other side of the doors.

He smiles at the empty space where a person should be but when he turns to me, his mouth is flat.

"I never heard from you. You never called. You never texted," he says. He bends his knees to catch my eyes. "I thought you weren't interested anymore."

The elevator clanks quietly. "I just..." I look around but there's nothing to grasp onto with my gaze, just old ad space and shitty marketing copy behind glass on the walls. "I needed time. To make sure I wouldn't hurt you again."

He nods. It stops again. A couple stands there this time, ready to get on. They wear sun hats and backpacks and the man has a map in his hand.

"This elevator is being tested for...quality control purposes," Wesley says, his fist slamming the close button. "Sorry," he yells as we start to move again.

"You were saying something before, in the lobby," he prompts. I blink at him. This man, he *knows* himself and what he wants. I want to know him, too.

"Oh." My heart flutters, a baby bird learning how to fly. "Oh no. I..."

He steps toward me. All I would have to do is reach out and I could touch him again.

"This started in an elevator with a lot of misunderstandings. So I want to finish this in one, but I want to be clear on where we stand."

He looks me up and down. "I need to hear you say it, Corrine," he says quietly. "It's not...a challenge, or a surrender. I just... I'm telling you what I need."

I nod. "You deserve that much," I whisper.

I close my eyes. "The first time I thought that I could really fall in love with you was that day you washed my hair." I open them. "Do you

remember? After my migraine.”

My heart pounds. I’d rather be naked right now than say all this out loud. And yet, it feels more liberating than nudity ever could.

“Did you?” he asks. “Did you ever fall in love?” There’s a desperate quaver in his voice.

“Yes.” I laugh. “About thirty seconds later. You stood up to get my robe and the floor was wet. You slipped a little bit and you whispered, *whoopsie daisy*.”

His laugh is a garbled, choked sound. He blushes. “Please don’t tell anyone else that story.”

“I’m just sorry I didn’t tell you then.” The doors open. “This is my floor,” I say.

We step out.

I take his hand in both of mine. Touching him sends a pulse up my arm. I want to feel it all over my body. Looking down at his hands, I say, “I love your hands. I want to be able to hold them in public.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“For what?”

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

I nod, reaching for him as he folds over me, our lips meeting sweet and soft. A kiss that assures both parties that there is no need to rush. There will be plenty more where this came from.

He pulls away, tucks a bit of hair back behind my ear. The bottoms of his glasses are starting to fog. “Does this mean you’ll go for dinner with me? You’ll be my girlfriend? You’ll meet my friends? Or something?” He smiles a one-dimpled smile.

I smile back, running my hand through his hair. I’ve wanted to do that, all of that, for so long. I don’t know why I waited anymore.

“Yes. But only if you get back to work, Mr. Chambers.”

He frowns. “Work?”

Fisting his T-shirt collar in my hand I whisper, “Yes. Your job now is kissing me.”

Wesley wraps his arms around me. He runs his mouth up my shoulder, my neck, my jaw, my ear. I melt into him.

“Best job I ever had,” he says, before pressing his lips to mine.

Epilogue: Wesley

One year later

The last time I was here, my life was in shambles. But the Blunt family home remains unchanged. Sunlight brightens the space from the large window at the end of the hall, keeping it warm enough that by the afternoon it's easy to feel logy and ready for a snack or a nap. The smell is a little antiseptic but not enough to be sterile. Just clean, with a layer of her shampoo underneath. It's quiet at this time of day but the floor creaks as I stop in front of a closed door.

Letting my bag slide off of my shoulder, I drop it on the floor.

I take off my glasses and rub them on my flannel shirt. Run a hand through my hair to try to tame it; Corrine told me to get a haircut but I forgot. Plus, I like it when she can pull my hair, anyway.

Blowing a breath through my lips, I knock.

"Come in."

The crystal, antique doorknob sends rainbow fractals across the wall, until I snuff them out with my hand. The door opens with a creak and there she is—leaning against the window, silhouetted in that bright, white, winter afternoon sunlight. Her hair is down and her sweater is too large.

She smiles when I walk in, padding over on bare feet.

"Hi," she says quietly. She wraps her arms around my waist, plastering herself against me. I hold her back. "I missed you."

She arrived in Minnesota two days ago while I finished packing up the apartment I shared with Jeremy and moved my boxes and a few pieces of furniture into her place, in between work.

"Corrine," her mom says. "Don't hog him. Introduce us."

Linda Blunt sits in an armchair next to the window. Her hair is short and a little patchy. She's pale but her cheeks are pink. And she's thin. But Corrine was right when she told me on the phone last night that she's recovering.

Corrine steps away, pulling her hands into her sleeves. "Mom, this is Wesley. Wesley, this is my mom, Linda," she says, ever formal.

We've spoken a few times over video chat when I've been at Corrine's apartment. But this is it. Our first in-person meeting.

"Wes." She opens her arms. "Come closer, you handsome boy. Let me see

you. Chemo did a number on my eyesight.”

“Yeah. Mom started wearing glasses after her first round,” I say, walking over. Leaning down, I let Linda Blunt pull me into a hug. I’m just thankful I don’t have to shake her hands. My palms have never been so sweaty.

She squeezes, tight. The way moms do. I want to pull away after a moment, but Linda holds on, pulls me closer. She rubs my back, strokes my hair. She smells like vanilla, classic mom smell.

A sob surprises me, escaping through a shudder in my chest. I try to suppress it.

“Oh, Wes,” she says. “Oh, Wesley.”

I realize, as I’m comforted by my girlfriend’s mother, that I haven’t been hugged by a mom in a while. This is the first time, in a long time, a woman like my mother has wrapped her arms around me, held me, comforted me, despite being sick herself.

This is my first mom hug, since my mother’s last one.

I drop to my knees on the carpeted floor in front of her chair, so I don’t put too much of my weight on her body as another sob wracks me.

“Oh, Wes,” she soothes. Another set of hands rest against my lower back. Corrine’s don’t move, she just lets me know she’s there.

“I’m so glad,” I say between breaths. “You’re feeling better, Linda.”

She pets my head. “It’s Mom,” she whispers. “If you want.”

I nod into her shoulder. “I want.”

They both laugh, quietly. Corrine gets her laugh from her mother.

I need to bring Amy here. This is better than drugs.

Finally, I sit back. Wipe at the tears on my face with my sleeve. “Sorry,” I mumble.

“Don’t be.” Linda smiles.

I sit on the ottoman and Corrine perches on the edge, taking my hands in hers. I look down at her skin against my skin. There’s still a flutter in my stomach every time she touches me in public, in front of our friends, and family, at Sox games, Happy Hours, or our weekly date night at Amy and May’s. Her face is red and a little blotchy, but she probably doesn’t want me to mention that.

“So, Linda—Mom,” I correct. “How does it feel to be in remission?”

Her chest rises on a deep breath. She glances out the window. “Taking it one day at a time. And just enjoying the moment.”

Huddled on the ottoman, we talk about Linda’s treatment, her doctors and

nurses, the trip she plans to take to Cape Hatteras with the whole family in the new year. We talk about Corrine's job and how much she loves working for her old boss, Sarah Beck, and the softball team she joined. I tell her about Amy's restaurant, her new girlfriend, Katie, a server there. We talk about Jeremy and how much I'll miss living with him even if he's kind of a slob. Our friendship has never been better, stronger, more open. But even if I'll miss him, I can't wait to live with Corrine. To be there when she gets home from a long day, to teach her new Beastie Boys lyrics in the shower, to pick up her migraine medication, and buy her groceries, and get her coffee on Saturday mornings, so she can sleep in before her long training run.

I can't wait for her to beat me at Jeopardy and make sure I eat dinner and rub my back when it gets sore. I can't wait for us to have our own little Happy Hour in our living room when she or I work too late. Or to take the T from her place to Fenway for a Sox game. I'm going to take care of her and she's going to take care of me.

We don't talk much about my mom, other than to compare notes on treatments and recoveries and hospital anecdotes. But I feel her here, in the sun warming my back through the window, the Beatles song playing faintly from the radio downstairs.

Corrine stands, pulling me up with her. She hasn't let go of my hands since we sat down.

"You should get unpacked," she says.

I nod. "Are you getting hungry, Linda? Sebastian requested my enchiladas."

She rubs her stomach. "Very."

Corrine holds my hand all the way to the door.

"Welcome to the family," Linda says. "You sweet man."

Corrine presses her lips together. "Mom," she says quietly, a nervous flush on her neck and face. "It's not like we're engaged."

On moving day, Amy slid our mom's engagement ring into my hand. She said that if she ever got married, she'd rather a girl give her an engagement tiara. The box sits in the back of my sock drawer.

I turn to her, press a kiss to her forehead. "But maybe," I say.

* * * * *

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Acknowledgments

It turns out that the hardest part of writing is not the book at all but the acknowledgments. Now that I've sat down to it, I've realized just how many people I need to thank for this book.

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Karou, I don't know if you'll ever read this book. I won't be upset if you don't but I do hope that one day you read these acknowledgments because nothing I could ever pull from inside my own head will be as funny, as sweet, as smart, as loving as you. You are miraculous. You are my hope. You are a Queen. Thank you for choosing me to be your Momma.

What can I say to you, Michael, that hasn't already been said during declarations and engagements, in wedding vows and on anniversaries, or whispered between pillows at night?

What can I say to the man who has loved me when I thought I was undeserving, who is understanding when I am cruel? Who is patient when I am distracted and my most undying supporter when my dreams are out of this world? You have filled my life with laughter and joy. For me, you are better than any romance novel. You are my happily ever after. Thank you for these two most precious gifts: our daughter and your love. I am so in love with you.

About the Author

Ruby Barrett's romances center on women who demand to be loved as they are and the good-natured, vulnerable men who earn their hearts. When she's not writing about love in its many forms, she's reading. And when she's not doing either of those things you can find her chasing her tiny queen (read: daughter), doing (digital) marketing, drinking tea (never coffee), wearing pants (that aren't jeans), (re) watching *The Office*, or exploring museums (in other cities). She lives in Ottawa, Canada, with her aforementioned tiny queen and her husband (who she kisses a lot).

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It's not exactly love at first like for this social media influencer and the stodgy but sexy professor she's stuck working with, but can they keep their fake relationship from turning all too real?

*Keep reading for a sneak peek at
The Sweetest Charade by Jadesola James.*

The Sweetest Charade

by Jadesola James

Professor Alexander Abbott-Hill was not vain enough to think that his class of undergraduates had suddenly taken an interest in the history of commuter travel because of his skill as an instructor, but something was going on.

All twenty-two students tramped in on time, dressed in their usual athleisure, toting glass water bottles and Starbucks coffee cups. They slid into their seats with uncharacteristic alertness, opening their tablets and laptop computers almost as if they intended to listen this time. Pleased, Alexander greeted them with none of the irritation he usually felt at the presence of the electronic devices.

“How was everyone’s weekend?” he asked as he powered up the instructor’s station.

“Not as good as yours, I bet,” someone murmured from approximately the second row, and the titters that followed that show of wit made Alexander roll his eyes. What passed for irony with this generation...

“What, because I was up reading your midterms? I couldn’t think of a better use of time myself,” he retorted, and pulled up his slides for the day. “All right, everyone log in. We’re starting with your reading on Robert Moses...”

The class went on and grew—well, stranger and stranger. Instead of being half-asleep, students were texting and scrolling and whispering. Oddly, Alexander seemed to be the object of scrutiny. Two girls whispered fervently in the back with round eyes fixed on him. One actually pointed at him, then at her phone. A young man in a lacrosse jersey gestured in his general direction, waving his hands not-too-subtly while talking to his tablemates, who gaped.

After a subtle check to see if his fly was open, Alexander gave up thirty minutes into his lecture and confronted them directly. “Is there something going on?”

Silence.

“Everyone seems very preoccupied this morning.” He shot a significant

look at the young lady who'd been sharing her screen earlier. "Is there something going on in the news that I missed? Has someone died?"

"Um, no," she said, blushing and staring down at the tabletop.

"Have I got anything on my face?" He tried to inject a little humor. "I know I'm fully dressed."

At that, there was an explosion of mirth in the back. "Now you are," he thought he heard a student mumble, but he couldn't be sure. His patience was wearing thin anyway.

"Look," he said. "We have forty minutes left. Either everyone gets it together, or you dump your phones up here. Your choice."

His students managed to calm themselves, thank goodness, and Alexander finished his lecture feeling more than a little ruffled. His students filed out relatively meekly, shooting looks at him over their shoulders. Some were still whispering. Alexander headed for his office, riding the waves of his own irritation.

"Something is definitely in the air," he announced as he opened the door. His teaching assistant, Natalia, was seated at the desktop they shared, squinting at something on the screen. "My class just now? Completely distracted. You'd think Kennedy was shot just this morning."

To his horror, Natalia turned and goggled in the way his students had that morning. She tugged at her nose ring nervously.

"What?" he exploded.

"Um. Dr. Abbott-Hill, have you had a chance to see—"

They were interrupted by a ringing phone. Alexander raised a finger, shot her a "don't move!" look and picked it up.

"Alexander Abbott-Hill."

"Hello, Dr. Abbott-Hill." A woman's voice floated smoothly over the line. "This is Theresa, from the office of the dean of humanities; he'd like to ask if you have any time this morning?"

"Oh. Well, I've just gotten out of my eight-thirty class—"

"Yes, I know. That's why we're calling now."

"When would you want to—"

"Now, if possible."

"Right this moment?"

"Yes, please, if you can. It's quite urgent. Thank you," she trilled, and was gone with a click.

Christ, what a morning. "We'll finish this later," Alexander said to Natalia,

who clapped her jaw shut and nodded. He slipped his tweed blazer over his shoulders and raked his fingers through his hair. “I’m going to see Wayne.”

“I thought that might be Theresa. She always cuts you off when you’re speaking,” observed Natalia.

Alexander just shook his head and left.

The walk to Wayne McDermott’s office was fairly short, just the next building over, and the crisp autumn air was sweet and soothing. He took deep breaths of the earth-scented air, and arrived at his supervisor’s office in a decidedly better state of mind. He was ushered in by Theresa, who smiled serenely at him; the dean was seated at his large mahogany desk, frowning at his desktop screen. Alexander eased himself into one of the two burgundy leather chairs that flanked the desk and waited for the man to speak.

He took his time.

“Dr. Abbott-Hill.”

“Alexander, please.” He desperately wanted to roll his eyes whenever one of the senior faculty approached him with such formality. As the only child of a former faculty member—and a prominent one at that—he’d practically grown up on this campus. He hadn’t liked Wayne McDermott then either, and the man always found a way to take a subtle dig at the fact that he was nowhere near the scholar his father had been.

Dean McDermott grunted. “I’ll get right to it. I asked you to come”—*summoned me*, Alexander thought—“because something has been brought to my attention, and I wanted to address it immediately.”

“Yes?”

“I thought it best that it come from me. Your dad would have wanted it that way,” he added, magnanimously.

Despite the seriousness of the conversation Alexander had to stifle a smile. His father couldn’t stand the man. “Appreciated, sir. I’m sure you’re right.”

“Social media,” the dean began grandly, straining the confines of his button-down shirt, “is a tool which is used fairly broadly in our departments. We want to give you young folks the freedom to get the word out, as it were, to the general public and academic world about what we’re doing. However, when it’s used inappropriately...” He trailed off. “Do you understand what I’m getting at, Alex?”

Alexander, he corrected mentally. Alex had been the little boy coloring on the floor of his father’s office, eating the cheese sandwiches the older man had packed for both of them that morning, waiting for him to get out of class

so that they could go to their big, silent home and crawl into bed. “I completely agree, but I’m a little confused as to why—”

“You are a vibrant and talented young man, and I’m sure that you have a swinging social life. However, I would prefer that you keep it separate from your academic accounts.”

“I’m not sure what you mean—”

“After all,” Dean McDermott continued as if he hadn’t heard Alexander, “your evaluations have given you enough of an issue this year, haven’t they? And with tenure approaching...”

Alexander’s heart began to hammer, even as he felt a flash of anger. His student evaluations last semester had been the worst out of increasingly lackluster reviews. “Boring,” “No relevance to real life” and “Too old-school” had been some of the tidbits that stood out particularly in his mind. Irritation at the students aside, it hurt. He truly loved his subject, and it was painful knowing that his enthusiasm wasn’t enough to carry his class along.

Dean McDermott interrupted his thoughts. “Good man. I’m glad we understand each other.” He stood up, and extended his hand.

Wordlessly, Alexander stood and shook it. The dean didn’t release it immediately; instead he squeezed it and smiled at Alexander, a toothy man-to-man smile that was disconcerting at best. He ran a hand over his thinning hair, and Alexander thought he detected a wink.

“You won’t mind my saying she’s absolutely gorgeous, absolutely—” The dean whistled softly between his teeth. “You’re a lucky bastard. They didn’t make them like that when I was an associate. If they did, I’d never have left teaching—it’s obviously gotten sexier since my day.”

What the—?

Alexander found himself slapped on the shoulder and outside in the hallway in moments. Dean McDermott ambled off in the other direction, presumably in search of coffee or a bathroom, scratching his stomach through his shirt as he went. “I want that picture down within the hour,” he called over his shoulder. “There’s a good man.”

“What on earth?” Alexander muttered, and headed back to the department, a bit quicker this time, a sense of foreboding building with every step. When he opened the door, Natalia was exactly where he’d left her, still gawping at the computer. “Natalia, what in God’s name is going on?”

“You’ve gotten almost four thousand new followers since last night,” she breathed. “And the comments on the photo...”

“What photo?” As he spoke he leaned over her shoulder—he obviously wasn’t going to get any sense out of her by asking questions. He pulled his tortoiseshells up to his forehead in order to see better; when he did, he sucked in a breath.

Natalia was on the photo-blogging site he used, looking at the account of someone named Delysia Daniels. *So no one hacked me, then.* The photo Natalia pointed at was slightly out of focus, a black-and-white filtered affair featuring a couple cuddling on a mess of tangled white sheets. The man’s torso was slim but muscled, decorated with a smattering of dark hair. Thankfully, a sheet covered the essentials.

Beside the subject was another person, presumably female, and looking at her in such an intimate position made Alexander’s mouth go dry despite himself. It took only a few seconds to register the details: a gleam of oil on warm skin, the substantial curve of a bare hip and leg.

A hand, not her own, gripped her thigh possessively. Everything else was cropped out. The caption read:

Every night spent with you is a marvel, @shhistorian.

@shhistorian. Southampton Historian. His username.

“It’s very artistic,” Natalia chirped in. Her voice sounded like it was coming from very far away. He blinked rapidly, forced himself to focus.

His eyes met hers and she blushed hard.

“She tagged you in the photo,” she rattled on hurriedly, fingering the keys nervously. “People are flooding you with comments. Dang, Dr. Hill. I didn’t know you were seeing anyone, you’re not even following her.”

“Why would I—”

“I mean, Delysia Daniels?” Natalia’s voice graduated to a squeak. He’d never seen his sensible TA like this; she was fairly sparkling with excitement. “I mean, congratulations. I know, it’s kind of personal. But still—”

“Wait, you think that’s me?”

“She tagged you in the photo!”

At that, Alexander groped blindly for an office chair. His face was burning. If she thought that was him—Well, it could be any dark-haired man with tan skin, really. “Untag it,” he ordered.

“But, Dr. Hill—”

“Actually, no, I’ll do it myself.” He took in a deep breath, trying to hide

the hammering of his pulse, summoning his usual calm. “Please go to the library, and pick up some blue books for History 226’s exam tonight.”

“But—”

“Now, Natalia. And shut the door behind you.”

Natalia pouted. She logged out, slid her chair back and left the room. It took Alexander a full minute to compose himself before he logged into his account.

The thing was made primarily to remind his students about assignments and department events, as well as acting as a photo journal for some of the primary documents, studies and projects he was working on. The last photo he’d posted was of him posing cheerfully with a local Audubon Society representative at Southampton’s History Day.

At the bottom of the screen was the notification he was looking for: @thereal_Delysia_Daniels had indeed tagged him in a photo, in that photo.

He clicked, and there it was again, large as ever, with a comments section at least as long as his latest historical bibliography. He swiftly untagged himself, then scrutinized Delysia Daniels’s account.

She was a...model, of some sort? She was attractive, he supposed, in a very filtered sort of way, with glossy piles of black hair and smooth skin that stretched over round dimpled cheeks when she smiled, which was often, revealing a mouth of milk-white, slightly crooked teeth.

Her account mostly featured her romping round the Greater New York area with a set that was very expensively dressed, if a little dead about the eyes. She also seemed to be the spokesperson for a bewildering variety of products. She had over a million followers who all seemed to comment on her every move, her clothes, her body parts, her jewelry, what she was eating, drinking, dancing to, and the comments on the picture—

@oatsnhoney123: Damn, that’s hot. Well done Delysia ! ;)

@thomasjprince: He’s grabbing on her thigh lyke...you gotta wonder what happened after that... :-O

@wonderfulwoman99: Delysia !!! Deets!!! Who is heeeeeee??

@collegegyrljess: He teaches at my school, his classes are boring af. But I’d hit it now that I’ve seen it.

Alexander felt dizzy, hot, cold, and wanted to throw up all at the same time. No wonder his students had been so distracted this morning. And the dean... Ooh, man. He clicked through her profile, looking for any information, any information at all...and there it was! A booking number for an agent. He pulled his cell from his inner pocket and dialed the number swiftly.

He had to get a retraction on this, and he needed one now.

The line was promptly answered, which both surprised and startled him. “Integrity Talent, how can I direct your call?”

“Oh. I—Good morning. I’d like to speak to someone about a matter concerning Ms. Delysia Daniels, if possible?”

“Are you an agent?”

“No, I’m a—”

“Are you a publisher, a journalist, a potential sponsor, or—”

“No,” Alexander sputtered. “I’m a—a—civilian. Ms. Daniels posted something about me on her social media account, and it is untrue. I need her to—retract this.”

There was a long pause. Then—

“I’ll connect you to our legal department.”

Alexander groaned.

* * *

The source of Alexander’s would-be retraction, Delysia Daniels, was cruising at 37,000 feet over the Grand Canyon on a flight back from Los Angeles to New York, and having a marvelous time.

American Airlines had contacted her weeks ago, offering the flight in exchange for a “candid review” on her photo-blog account. While this domestic flight was nothing compared to the trip KLM had footed to Amsterdam two months ago, she certainly wasn’t about to complain. She was fuzzy round the edges with the ice-cold Krug she’d had in the first-class lounge at LAX, and sushi she’d described as “so fresh, it might have still been wiggling” made a comfortable dent in her stomach.

She was now three hours into the flight and swaddled in the softest pair of knit lounge pants she’d ever worn (courtesy gift from a swanky English company, which she had yet to feature) and a cashmere-lined blanket and socks. Were she not working she’d have popped half a Valium so she could

enjoy this experience in sleepy bliss, but she needed to take notes along the way.

Delysia pulled out her courtesy preview model of a new smartphone and began recording, automatically tilting the screen to capture her face at the most flattering angle. Despite years of dieting on and off, CoolSculpting sessions and firming facials, that childish roundness she inherited from her mother refused to budge. She'd already filmed her "Mile-High Minute-Long Beauty Routine" featuring honey, coffee grounds and frozen La Mer cream in the tiny bathroom; it'd garnered two thousand views already. Once she posted this, she'd be free to sleep or veg until they landed at JFK.

"Hey, everyone, American Airlines is spoiling me rotten right now, and I am loving it. I never thought I'd say that about a domestic flight, but here I am," she gushed in the husky, hushed tones she reserved for social media. "I don't want to disturb my cabinmates." She panned the camera quickly round the space, taking in the masked businessmen—and possibly one rapper—who sat to her right and left, respectively. She was sure her followers would try to ID them anyway; she never had to. "But I just wanted to check in. See you all in New York!"

She blew a lip-gloss-tinted kiss at the camera and took a moment to add a couple shots of the food she'd enjoyed during the first hour of the flight, her bookmarked copy of Wole Soyinka's *The Open Sore of a Continent* (mostly for the fans in Nigeria; she found his prose completely confusing) and her slippered feet, propped up in front of a frozen still of *Sabrina*, which she watched every time she had a flight.

"Ms. Daniels, is the Wi-Fi working all right for you?" A flight attendant materialized out of the air somewhere round her left elbow and she stifled a smile. The man had recognized her and had been trailing her since she'd gotten on. She was fairly sure some money had changed hands to ensure he'd be assigned to her section.

"It's perfect, just posted about how sweet you all are," she said, then swiftly did so before he could ask for a picture. "Could I be annoying and ask for another bottle of Perrier? My skin just dries out so fast."

"Of course, Ms. Daniels." He was gone in an instant, and Delysia concentrated back on her cell.

There was the usual flood of comments from her latest posts; no time to reply to those, ever, unless her publicist identified one that would be useful to interact with. Same with direct messages. Her work email was no less busy,

but unlike her comments section, she had to look through these—she didn't trust anyone else to handle her business for her, not in today's age.

At the top of the pile was an email from her legal team; that should be interesting. Who was suing her now? Delysia pushed an armful of copper bracelets up to her elbow and opened the email, squinting through her mascaraed lashes. Words were jumping out at her, but in this champagne-soaked context they didn't really make sense. Something about...potential libel, and Southampton University? Out on Long Island somewhere? What?

She shook her head and logged off. This was why she tried to unplug on long flights—God knew it was the only time she ever had where she wasn't documenting every moment for the world to see. If it weren't for the fact that she had to review the Wi-Fi on this flight, she'd never have checked her phone.

I'll call when I land, get details then. Delysia put away her phone, popped in her cordless headphones and smiled sleepily as she snuggled deep into her nest of blankets to watch Audrey Hepburn lose her head over William Holden, while Humphrey Bogart's craggy face hovered in the background, just waiting to fall in love with.

However calculating she had to be on the ground, she could be as romantic and sleepy as she wanted to be here, shielded from the eyes of the world.

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