

Pride & PAPER CUTS

inspired by
Jane Austen's
Pride & Prejudice



staci hart

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INSPIRED BY JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

STACI HART

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Thank you

Also by Staci Hart

About the Author

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many of us can claim our love for Jane Austen, but only a few of us are foolish enough to retell her stories.

I have taken some liberties with *Pride and Prejudice*, and I hope you'll allow me to imagine the Bennet sisters as unruly men (less our Lizzie) and Longbourne as a flower shop in Manhattan. I hope beyond hope that you enjoy my nod to the Bennets and our dear Mr. Darcy, who we love so well.

LOINCLOTHS AND LEATHER

LANEY

“**H**ow about Find-a-Fabio?” Cam asked, pulling a highlighted blond Fabio wig from the box.

A laugh bubbled out of me. “Fabio-and-Seek.”

“Where’s Fabio just doesn’t have a ring to it for a themed party. What about Hide-and-Go-Fabio?”

When I giggled again, she shrugged.

“I can’t believe we actually got *the* Fabio to come to Wasted Words. When he gets here and we make people find him in a sea of Fabio wigs, it’s going to be a riot. Let’s make sure we’ve got a good freaking seat for that.” She tugged on her wig and adjusted it blindly. “Is it straight?”

“Here,” I said, fixing it. “How’s mine?”

“You look absolutely ridiculous. So ... perfect.”

I picked up one of the two giant boxes of wigs and headed toward the front of the bookstore with Cam in my wake.

When I’d started working at Wasted Words last year, the massive book bar instantly became one of my favorite places on the planet. My twin brother, Jett, was a manager here, and after talking it up for years, I jumped at the chance to run the social marketing here when presented the chance.

Cam and I had become best friends within five minutes.

She was a tiny thing with big glasses that somehow managed to look cool despite their size. Like most people, I found Cam impossible not to like—her propensity to make me laugh until my stomach stitched was a big factor. That she was technically my boss added to the appeal of the job exponentially. The

access to all the books I could possibly read tipped it into Best Job Ever status.

“Think anyone will refuse to wear one?” I asked, adjusting my grip on the box of wigs.

“No wig, no entry.”

“Even for the ad execs?” I tried to sound enthusiastic, but the invasion of the ad executives who’d been brought in to manage the national expansion of Wasted Words put my job in a precarious position. Why use me when they had one of the biggest ad firms in New York on the payroll? If I didn’t end up phased out at some point, it’d be due to loyalty alone.

She snorted. “*Especially* the ad execs. If I don’t see Liam Darcy in a Fabio wig tonight, I might shrivel up and die. But I bet you ten bucks he refuses.”

“He can’t be that bad.”

“He has the bone structure of Adonis and the personality of Adonis’s marble representation in the Met. Darcy is the owner’s buddy. Plus, their ad agency is a BFD.”

“A BFD?”

“A Big Fucking Deal. Darcy I could do without, but his sister is a goddamn delight. Is it weird that I want to be her best friend?”

“For you? Not even a little. You asked her already to be your best friend, didn’t you?”

“Just because I asked you to marry me within the first four seconds of meeting you doesn’t mean I asked her too.”

I shot a look at her over my shoulder.

“Well, why’d you ask if you already knew?” she defended. “I can’t help it, Laney. This is just who I am as a person.”

“I’m trying not to be jealous, but you’re not making it easy.”

“Don’t worry,” she said on a laugh. “You’ll always be my number two.”

“I’d ask you to call me your deuce, but that’s not any less shitty.”

That earned me a full-blown cackle. “Sorry to imply that you, one of my favorite people, are excrement. I have a toddler. Everything seems to come back to poop talk these days.”

I dropped the box on the table at the door, where one of the cashiers, Ruby, started sifting through it.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re going to meet them, since you’ll be working with them,” she said. “You’ll fit right in, I’m sure—so long as it’s not up to

Liam Darcy. But he'll warm up once he sees what you can do."

"You make it sound like he's going to oppose me."

Cam's dark brow rose with one side of her smile. "Don't take it personal. I'm pretty sure Liam opposes everybody."

"That's comforting," I deadpanned.

Cam addressed Ruby with the fire-engine red hair behind the table, "Free drink tickets to any guy who takes his shirt off. Fabio Freebies!"

"Even the chubby ones?" Ruby asked hesitantly.

"Especially the chubby ones. In fact, give those guys two for being good sports."

"You got it, boss," Ruby answered on a laugh, and we headed toward the bar, where several of our hottest bartenders were prepping for the crowd.

And what a mighty sight *that* was to behold.

Three gigantic, shirtless men in middle-parted, flowing blond wigs worked behind the bar, carrying ice buckets and loading liquor onto the shelves. Beau walked up with a crate of bottled beers wearing little more than a loincloth and a leather strap across his outrageous chest. Harrison dumped ice into the well in a pair of leather pants. That was it. Leather pants and combat boots, his pecs that outrageous shape that was not quite round, not quite square, but some strange in-between that made your fingers itch. Greg had donned a billowing pirate shirt, unbuttoned to the belt of his very tight, very black flat-fronted Victorian-looking trousers.

The three of them smiled at Cam in unison, but I didn't hear what they were saying. There was just too much top-shelf man-titty on display for functional thinking.

I decided then that I was a big fan of Fabio night.

When I came back to New York a year and a half ago to help my family out, I had no plans other than to help save our flower shop, Longbourne. But now that the flower shop was on its feet again—and doing better than ever—Jett and I moved to the Upper West so he could get back to work managing Wasted Words, and I could start my new gig.

Honestly, I had no real desire to go back to a big firm, content to freelance, thankful for the freedom it gave me. And I wasn't lying when I said they made it easy to work at Wasted Words. The book bar was the easiest thing I'd ever sold.

Somehow, I tore my eyes away from the trio and turned around, taking stock of Wasted Words. Once a warehouse, the high industrial ceiling was

marked by a maze of exposed duct and pipework. Shelf after shelf of books stood proudly on one side of the bar, and on the other stood table after table of comics, graphic novels, manga—the works, everything from brand-new releases to collector finds.

When my gaze wandered back to the bar, the most unladylike snort ripped out of me at the sight of my brother.

Jett cut me a look, his blue eyes hard but always glinting with humor. “Don’t,” he warned.

I circled him when he approached, assessing his studded leather boots and fur loincloth. “Are you supposed to be Viking Fabio?”

“I’m not a Barbie doll, Lane.”

“Of course not. You’re a Ken, all the way.” I flicked the leather belt that crisscrossed his chest, eyeing his wig, which covered the inky-black hair all the Bennets possessed. “I don’t think I like you as a blond. It’s unnerving.”

“*You’re* dressed like Fabio, and *I’m* the one who’s unnerving?”

“Well, listen, Jett—if you can’t get a date in this”—I gestured to the entirety of him—“I don’t know that you ever will.”

He made a face. “I’d say thank you if you weren’t my sister.”

“Ha, ha.” I nailed him in the bicep hard enough that he winced. Or at least pretended to.

“Here they come!” Cam called over her shoulder as the line began to form at the door.

“Seriously. It’s singles night, and I’m making Cam find you a lady,” I insisted.

Jett rolled his eyes so hard, I couldn’t see the irises for a second. “I don’t need help finding a lady, especially not from Cam. A match made by Cam is the kiss of death. It always turns out exactly opposite from what she intends—the last girl I let Cam hook me up with ended up engaged to her ex-boyfriend halfway through the night.”

“Ouch.”

He laid a hard look on me. “I mean it. Don’t.”

I put my hands up. “Okay, okay, fine. I’ll do it myself.”

With a laugh, I dodged him when he tried to grab me, spinning away.

Jett was the last of my brothers to pair off. The other three were well on their way—one engaged and one married with the third married *and* expecting. Worse than that, Jett and I were the oldest. Dusty, old spinsters, if our mother was to be believed. If Mrs. Bennet desired anything, it was seeing

her children married and breeding. She'd take breeding alone if given the choice between that and the alternative.

Thankfully, Jett and I had escaped her designs by moving a hundred blocks away.

Either way, Jett had been unlucky in love. In his case, I didn't quite understand why—the guy was smart, funny, and cut like granite. He was well over six feet tall, with a sharp jaw, Roman nose, and brilliant blue Bennet eyes. He was handsome by societal standards—even by admission of a sister who got a little urpy at the sight of his nipples—he was straight out of the oven. But he'd always had trouble picking the right girl. He'd been railroaded and run around, too kind and honorable for anything less than trust as a given. As such, he'd been through a string of girls that I'd happily gouge the eyeballs out of.

He deserved real love, and he deserved happiness. That he hadn't already found it was tragic.

Tonight would be the perfect night to change that. Everyone was ridiculous in a Fabio wig, and any girl who would make a fool out of herself for the sake of a good time had an automatic foot in the door, in my book.

And if I knew my brother at all, in his book too.

Within an hour, Wasted Words was stuffed to the gills.

Cam and I stood on the stage, where a DJ played Tina Turner's "The Best" as a nod to the theme of the night—'80s romance.

Before us stretched a sea of luscious Fabios with drinks in their hands. Enough of the men had stripped shirts for their free drinks that there was also a healthy amount of skin, and they wore it well. The line at the door looked more like a mob than a queue, and was three-quarters women, looking to take a turn with the beefy bartenders and their dark smiles. The party was already a success, as our singles nights usually were. Cam's knack for bringing the comic book nerds and the romance lovers together was uncanny, and she'd done it for three wildly successful years. Long and well enough that I was sure there were at least a couple of toddlers out there named after her.

She elbowed me in the ribs and pointed at the door. "There he is—Darcy," she yelled over Tina Turner. "See for yourself."

I followed the line of her finger across the crowded room to the door, and I felt the entirety of the universe lean in the same direction.

Toward him.

He was a vast darkness, a vacuum of power, and every molecule in the room raced toward him as if they were all his, simply by means of his presence. Tall and square-shouldered, a face lined by a jaw of stone, a thick crop of dark hair to match burnished, authoritative brows. He was an anomaly. An impassive animal confined by a suit of depthless black, eyeing the wig in Ruby's hand with such quiet disdain, you'd think he was politely refusing a plate of fried bugs.

The girl at his side—a small thing with a wide smile and hair the color of sunshine—laughed with a playful air, tugging on her wig before hooking her arm in his. They were night and day, the light and the dark. The cheer and the sobriety. A juxtaposition, but somehow a whole. When he laughed at something she'd said, it was there in the corners of his smiling lips, that thread that connected him.

His sister, I realized. Or hoped.

Jett nudged me, and I jolted in surprise. “What are you gawking at?”

“Nothing. What are *you* gawking at?” I asked.

“At you gawking.”

Cam laughed and grabbed my hand. “Come on—let me introduce you.”

As she pulled me away, I snagged Jett's hand and towed him along. Because if I was going to face whatever beast waited for me, Jett was coming with me.

We wound our way through the crowd and to the outer edges where they stood, watching everyone—her with a bright, smiling face and him with narrowed, suspicious eyes. Both looked wildly out of place in their expensive business wear among the blond wigs and naked beer guts. I tried to imagine Darcy in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and couldn't fathom it. The whole of him stood in my mind like a paper doll in its skivvies with nothing to wear but a suit or nothing at all.

When we came to a stop before them, their gazes turned to us. Well, hers skipped. His sort of slid.

“Laney, Jett,” Cam started, “I'd like you to meet Miss and Mr. Darcy.”

“Oh, please—call me Georgie,” she said with a smile, sticking out her hand enthusiastically for a shake.

I instantly liked her and wondered if Cam would be mad if I asked her to

be my best friend too.

Smiling back, I took that hand and gave it a good shake, mentally complimenting her solid and honest grip. “Laney Bennet. Nice to finally meet you.”

“I was so disappointed not to get to meet you and your brother at the big staff dinner, but—” Georgie paused, her eyes shifting behind me and sticking there. Her face slackened, her eyes widening. “And who is this again?” She said it as if in a daze, and confused, I glanced over my shoulder to follow her gaze.

Which had locked on Jett.

I moved out of the way, a slow smile spreading across my face as I realized finding a lady for Jett might be easier than I’d thought. “This is my brother Jett.” Who wore an equal look of utter stupefaction on his face.

“Hello,” he said in a velvety voice I didn’t recognize. He offered a strong, square hand, and hers slipped into his palm, nearly disappearing when he closed his fingers.

“Jett,” she said, testing the word on her tongue. “Yes, of course. Cam just said that, didn’t she?”

His smile tilted. “She did. Nice wig.”

A nervous laugh tittered out of her, and she brought her small hand to her head as if she’d forgotten about it. “Quite a party you guys throw.”

“Any excuse to break out my loincloth.”

Another laugh, this one more relaxed, and with that, the two of them took a step closer to each other, then another, and with the last, we had been excluded from their conversation.

Suspicion wafted off Darcy as he watched our siblings, and the realization raised my hackles by an increment. But he didn’t intervene, just stood there with mistrustful eyes and his hands clasped behind his back.

I tried to ignore the beauty and strength of his shoulders by noting the line of elite pride they made, sharp as a knife. Something about him made me feel silly, and the desire to take off my wig to even the playing ground made me feel even sillier.

Cam pulled her phone out of her pocket, frowning. “That’s Tyler—he’s got the baby at home alone. I’ll be right back,” she promised to no one in particular as she scuttled off.

And Jett took Georgie’s hand and dragged her onto the dance floor. I watched them go, smiling.

Leaving me alone with him.

It was then that I noticed the tingling of my nerves, gathering at my cheeks—one in particular, the one closest to him. Instinctively, I turned toward the feeling and found myself pinned beneath the weight of his gaze.

This must be what a rabbit feels before the wolf devours it.

Everything about him was imposing, as if he took up more space than his mass alone required. As if somehow, he consumed all the nearby air to power the rise and fall of his broad chest. I was unable to determine if he was disapproving or just bored. If he was judging me or simply indifferent. All I knew was that the intensity of his observance had disconnected several wires in my brain.

I blinked, flashing a smile before breaking the connection, turning to search for Jett and Georgie in the crowd, finding them bouncing around to “Goodbye to You.”

“Well, they seem to have hit it off,” I said.

“Seems so.”

A hot sensation bloomed in my chest at those two little words. Words that, unlike his demeanor, I could instantly tell without question *were* disapproving.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw Jett dance. He’s better at it than I remember.”

Liam made a noncommittal noise.

And we fell into an awkward, fumbling silence.

I grappled for something to say, anything to fill the noiseless void between us. “And how about you, Mr. Darcy? Do you dance?”

“Not if I can help it.”

I cast him a look. A disbelieving sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff escaped me, but he just stood there, stoic and stern, watching the dance floor like if he concentrated hard enough, he could conjure up the great secrets of the universe.

Before I could respond, Cam was back, grabbing at my arm.

“The baby has a fever,” she said, and I thought she might be about to cry. “Tyler’s on it—I mean, she just has a little low-grade fever—but I just want to talk to him for a minute longer, and Fabio’s here. Will you make the announcement so I don’t cry like a crazy person all over the microphone?”

I chuckled, pulling her into a hug. “Of course, and don’t worry. She’ll be fine.”

Cam sniffled. “God, I’m the worst. Thank you, Laney.”

The second I let her go, she hurried off again.

Eager to get away from my uncooperative companion, I turned back to excuse myself.

But he was gone.

I brushed away an unexpected streak of disappointment and headed to the stage with my chin up, which coincidentally raised my nose in what probably looked like snobbery. How I hadn’t snubbed *him* first escaped me.

If Liam Darcy didn’t want to talk to me, I would happily oblige, and if I were lucky, I wouldn’t see him for the rest of the night.

Too bad I’d never been one of the lucky ones.

THE VERY LAST PLACE

LIAM

I could remember few times in my life I'd been so uneasy.

It wasn't the crowd, although I hated those with unbridled passion. The wigs didn't help, nor did the Whitesnake ballad, the combination underscoring just how much I did not belong. My sister slow-dancing with a guy wearing rabbit furs and leather would have been my first real guess, but even that was a situation I could influence. A situation I was unhappy about, but a temporary one.

My gaze caught one face in particular, one unaffected by the blond Fabio wig or the atmosphere of the ridiculous party. One ablaze with colored lights and unrestrained exuberance as she talked to a friend.

Laney Bennet.

I studied her for a long moment through the end of "Here I Go Again" and into "Pour Some Sugar on Me." In her Fabio wig, I couldn't find anything particularly remarkable about her—except her eyes, which were such a vivid shade of blue, I could see them perfectly, even in the low light. But she had no gravitas, though her tongue was sharp enough. She was nothing like the women I knew.

Maybe that was why I couldn't stop watching her. She and her friend bounced into the crowd like rubber balls, singing along with her mouth open so wide, I couldn't figure out how she could still be smiling. She knew every word, which was equally baffling, pantomiming some of the lyrics and air-guitaring through the solo.

It was infectious. Were I a different man, I'd have met her out there,

soaked up some of her joy.

But I was who I was. Freedom of that kind was unknown to me.

I took a sip of my scotch, which I'd procured on exiting the unpleasant conversation with Laney Bennet. Not because *she* was particularly unpleasant, but because I'd found myself lacking things to say. In part because I couldn't stop watching her lips as she spoke.

An enigma. One I needed to leave unsolved.

With no small amount of force, I shifted my gaze to my sister and the other Bennet. Their hips were locked together as they swayed, singing to each other through the end of the song. But as "These Dreams" came on, they slowed. Her arms looped his neck as best they could for their height difference, and as she drew closer, his hands slid from her waist to span her back. But more worrisome than the placement of his hands was the look on their faces as they talked, turning in a small circle to the beat of the song.

The hiss of a fuse lighting in me was dangerous, one I'd dealt with more than a few times in regard to the safety of my sister's heart.

Georgiana was all I had in this world. When our parents died a decade ago, the responsibility of everything fell on me—the estate, our family's place at the ad firm, Georgie—and I picked up the yoke with the relief that came with something to do when you'd lost everything. What I'd thought my life would be, all that I'd imagined, crumbled and fell. But rather than excavate, I picked up the first brick and built on top of the wreckage.

She became my focus, the one person I had left. A daisy in a crack of concrete. Eternal sunshine. And I lived in the shadows cast by her shine, a silent guardian. Every time she cried, each time I held her in my arms, I felt her pain as if it were my own. No—*instead* of my own. I didn't cry when they died. Instead, Georgie cried, and I felt everything through her.

Perhaps I'd sheltered her too much. She trusted others with blind faith, an unfathomable trait. I trusted no one, and she trusted all. She had the scars on her heart to prove it.

The last mistake, she'd nearly married. I learned at the last possible second of his intentions ... two weeks before her wedding. The betrayal was total, her breakdown complete—so complete, I wasn't sure how to pull her out of it. It'd been a year since then, and she hadn't dated anyone, convinced she couldn't be trusted not to trust.

But he was one in a string of men who weren't good enough for her, who saw her for her status and not for the gift she was, and I wouldn't give her up

for anything less. The man who would win her would have to go through me.

Somehow, I doubted the shirtless bookstore manager with his hands on her had noble intentions. We'd be at Wasted Words often enough, and I'd find out. Maybe he'd surprise me.

But earning my trust wasn't easy, and once lost, it was lost forever.

I looked around the bar so I wouldn't burn a hole in Jett's back, then turned to wander around. The concept of the place confounded me—a bookstore with a bar? I couldn't find the appeal. They threw parties like this often, singles nights with themes, luring people in with drink specials and the promise of making a love match. Bars had never been my scene, nor had drinking as a sport. Themed parties to meet someone? Never in a thousand years. I had no regrets about leaving the offered wig at the door, not at all caring that I was the only person in the establishment without a Fabio wig on other than Fabio himself.

But that was why Georgie had brought me—my lack of understanding. And by brought, I meant forced. She was the account executive, the organizer and liaison between the firm and our client. *She* got Wasted Words and insisted I had to get it too. I, on the other hand, reminded her I didn't have to understand it to sell it. But here I was anyway because Georgie had asked me to come, and now that I saw her with Jett, I made the unilateral decision to be here with her every chance I got, even if I didn't have to be.

As the creative director, my job was behind the scenes, where I was most comfortable. I ran our team, building out plans, presenting work, creating ad and marketing concepts. We were opening new book bars in five major cities. And since Laney Bennet was the in-house social marketer, she was now part of *my* team—by request of the owners.

I was even less sure about that unfortunate fact than I had been before I walked in tonight.

Georgie made her way over to me, her cheeks high with a smile.

“What are you doing way back here?” she asked, taking my drink from my hand for a sip. “Come dance with us.”

“You know I hate dancing, especially in a place like this.”

“Anyone ever told you you're the worst kind of snob?”

I shrugged, taking my drink back. “Know thyself.”

“Well, I think thyself needs to get out there and cut loose. You're not going to really understand this place if you don't participate.”

“I think I'll manage.”

“What about Laney Bennet?” she asked, ignoring me. “You could stand to get to know her better.”

A jolt shot up my spine at the thought of dancing with her. “What, with my hands on her hips?” I hedged as she backed me toward a metaphorical corner.

“They don’t *have* to be on her hips. Come on—let’s go find her so you don’t have to stand on the edge of the dance floor alone with your scotch and boring hair,” she joked, taking my arm.

I didn’t budge. “Georgie, I’m going to say this once—Laney Bennet is perfectly tolerable. But she’s not like us. She’s not the kind of girl I would *ever* ask to dance, especially not in a bar to a Lionel Richie song. *Ever*. Do you understand?”

Georgie had gone stiff and still, I thought in response to the edge in my voice, sharpened by her insistence. But then I realized she wasn’t looking at me. She was looking behind me.

I followed her gaze and locked eyes with Laney Bennet, who was close enough to have heard what I’d said.

We shared a long look—mine hard, hers first bright with hurt, then hot with fury.

“Well,” Laney started with mock cheer, her cheeks flushed pink. Her smile cut like a razor. “Lucky for both of us, I only dance with men who think I’m sufficient or better. I wouldn’t want you to suffer unduly, Mr. Darcy, *especially* not to Lionel Richie. We both deserve better than that.”

And she turned on her heel to walk away.

Georgie sighed. “Way to go, Liam.”

“Me? You were the one who wouldn’t take no for an answer. When was the last time you successfully forced me into anything?”

She gave me a look and motioned to the bar.

“I don’t have to be friends with Laney Bennet to work with her,” I noted, knowing it was so far from the point, it was on another continent.

At that, Georgie looked so disappointed, something in my chest twisted.

“No, you don’t have to be friends with her, but you could stand to keep her from hating you. I’m going to go dance. Have another drink by yourself and brood for a while. I’ll find you when it’s time to go.”

I didn’t form a response quickly enough—she was already gone, swallowed up in a sea of blond wigs.

BUT REALLY, THOUGH

LANEY

“I think I hate him.”

I scowled up Amsterdam the next morning as Jett and I walked toward work.

Jett laughed. “I don’t think he’s nuts about you either. But if it’s any consolation, I’m pretty sure he hates me more.”

“Then he must be a terrible judge of character.”

Jett gave me a look that I ignored. “If some dude in a loincloth was dancing with *you*, I’d have to fight a deep impulse to turn his face inside out.”

“So it’s a brother thing that makes you turn into apes when you see your sister with a guy?”

He shrugged. “We know how guys think, and we don’t want anybody thinking *that* about our sisters.”

“Oh, so it’s safe to assume all you thought about Georgie was lewd?”

“Of course not. I mean, I won’t say I didn’t have *thoughts*, but they weren’t what he imagined. I can guarantee that.”

“I can’t believe the two of them are related,” I said. “She’s so easy to like, and he’s almost impossible to. How that rude, elitist ass comes from the same genetics as that sweet, smiling girl is beyond me.”

“Fuck that guy for not wanting to dance with you. And for insulting you. Maybe you’re right—he must be a shitty judge of character.”

The slight still stung, though I couldn’t guess why. No one liked to be insulted, sure, but something about that judgment from *him* weighed more. Maybe it was in how he had looked at me, like his favor, when bestowed,

was a minor miracle, and if anyone enjoyed a challenge, it was me. Or maybe it was that command that rippled off him like radio waves, bending everyone in the vicinity to his will, impossible to resist.

Either way, it sucked.

“It doesn’t even matter,” I said. “I couldn’t care less whether or not he likes me or would dance with me. Who said I would have danced with him anyway? I mean, could you even imagine him dancing?” A laugh burst out of me as I did just that. “I bet he’d just stand there, frowning, wondering what the hell to do with his hands. At least he’s in no danger of ever getting laugh lines. But I bet with a little dirt, you could plant something in the creases between his eyebrows.”

Jett snickered.

Realizing I’d been talking about Darcy too long, I shifted the conversation back to Jett. “Georgie danced with you all night. I don’t think I saw her even talk to Liam for the rest of the party.”

“I would have kissed her too, if her brother wasn’t hovering. Can’t blame him, though.”

“I’ll blame him for the both of us.”

Jett watched me for a beat. “Man, he really got under your skin. You haven’t stopped talking about him since last night.”

I cut him a look. “He insinuated we were beneath him, Jett. He insulted me behind my back and was rude to my face, and now I have to work with the asshole. So maybe I’m not feeling very charitable about him. I think I’m entitled.”

He pulled open the door to Wasted Words and held it for me. “Well, you’d better find a way to put it away so you can work with him. Otherwise, your mouth is gonna get you in trouble.”

“What’s new?” I asked as I passed.

Jett snorted a laugh, but as we walked inside, his stride broke when he saw Georgie sitting next to Cam at the bar.

He recovered quickly, his smile tugging up on one side—the male Bennet survival trait passed down from my father, used regularly to charm their way through literally anything, particularly trouble. I was glad he’d gone for dapper this morning and wondered if he’d known she would be here. I didn’t miss him smoothing the thin navy tie he wore with a sky-blue plaid tailored shirt, the sleeves cuffed to his elbows. The color, along with the contrast of his dark hair, made his irises reflect such intense a shade of blue, they looked

illuminated.

Oh, he definitely knew.

This was confirmed by the look on Georgie's face.

She was so pretty, a wisp of a thing with long blonde hair and a face touched with optimism and hope. Something about her sparked an instinct to protect—I felt it just as much as Jett did, which as far as I could tell from observance was a lot. Begrudgingly, I admitted to myself that Darcy must have felt it tenfold.

Even worse—the realization that he was so protective of her made him infinitely more attractive, that jerk.

“Oh, good, you're here,” Cam said. “Laney, do you have time for a little impromptu meeting?”

“Sure,” I answered with a smile as we approached.

“Great. Let's sit in a booth. Greg, will you make Laney a cup of coffee?”

He nodded. Cam gathered her things, and Georgie did the same, but as Georgie slid off her stool, she lost her balance and *actually* slid.

One step, and Jett caught her with an arm around her waist. She looked up at him with flushed cheeks, her lips parted. His still wore that tilt, but it faded a little as his eyes caught on her mouth, and I realized they were a breath away from kissing.

Cam and I averted our eyes and headed to a booth, the motion snapping the two of them out of their moment. She laughed and made excuses for her clumsiness. He said something clever. It was all very charming, and Cam and I ate it up, lips pursed to keep us from smiling or laughing at the sheer pleasure of seeing a girl under Jett's spell. A good one, for once.

I felt like I'd been waiting on this forever. I just wanted to see him happy with someone who appreciated him. Who saw his giving heart and protected it rather than taking his love without returning it.

When we'd all moved home, Jett had taken the role no one wanted. With Mom's hands and joints gnarled from her arthritis, she couldn't cook or clean, and without even asking, he stepped into the kitchen, donning one of her ridiculous aprons to feed the entirety of the Bennet clan. He kept the house tidy, and helped Mom with anything she needed, and he'd done it all without being asked. He'd never once complained, even under the oppressive teasing from our brothers.

Jett was a giver, and he'd never been with anyone worthy of his affection. But I had an undeniable suspicion that Georgie would see the man in front of

her for all he was, even if she didn't fully realize what she had just yet.

I frowned, wondering if Liam Darcy would get in the way of that.

Subsequently, I wondered exactly how I'd ruin his life if he did.

Georgie slid into the booth next to me, and Cam turned to Jett.

"Come sit with us. Have a cup of coffee."

But he smiled. "Nah, I'll leave you to your work. That inventory isn't going to count itself. But I'll check back in before you're finished." He and Georgie shared a look that indicated exactly who he was speaking to.

Partings were exchanged before he left us, and she watched him walk away.

I thought Cam and I might actually climb out of our skin at the sight of them.

"So," Cam started, opening a folder, "last night was a huge hit. It was on the higher end of our mixer profits. I'm so glad you were there, Georgie."

"I've been dying to come to one since I first heard about them," she said. "This launch is going to be a piece of cake. Wasted Words sells itself, but throw in the mixers, and you've got yourself a ringer."

"Your brother didn't seem to share the sentiment." I meant to sound light. I really did. But I felt like a jerk when I saw the look on Georgie's face that said I'd failed.

"I'm sorry. Not only for his lack of enthusiasm, but for what you overheard."

Now they were both watching me.

I smiled. "Really, it was nothing," I assured her. "But I'm not convinced he's interested in working with us."

"Trust me when I say that although it may appear that's the case, it's not. Liam has never been one to show enthusiasm for anything, even though he feels quite deeply."

"Oh, so he's not made out of marble and disdain?" I joked.

And thankfully, she laughed. "Oh, he is. But there's a gooey center deep down that, if given entry to, is the safest place in the entire world. Don't worry, I won't make you go looking for it. Just know there's a reason I'm the liaison and he works with the team. He's brilliant, so long as he doesn't have to be social or meet new people."

"I'm surprised he came last night," Cam said lightly.

"Only because I made him," Georgie admitted. "I thought if he saw Wasted Words in action, maybe he'd get it. Somewhere in the labyrinth of his

brain, I know he did. Thank you, Laney, for handling him with so much grace.”

A laugh shot out of me. “Grace? I insulted him.”

“Because he insulted you. You could have done much worse. He deserved to be put in his place, and I hope you’ll keep doing it—I could use the backup. It’s been a long, lonely battle.” She offered me a conspiratorial smile.

“I get permission to tell Liam Darcy off when he’s out of line?” I asked. “Well, that certainly changes my perspective on working with him.”

Cam eyed me. “Within reason,” she warned.

I held up my hands in surrender. “I’ll be the picture of grace, by Georgie’s definition.”

Cam shook her head and changed the subject. “So what happens from here, Georgie?”

“Well”—she flipped open her portfolio—“the new locations will be ready for launch in six months. Our team has been working on preliminary plans and proposals, customized for each location by region. Since Laney will continue her social marketing here in the store, we were thinking we would have her two days a week at the firm in addition to relevant meetings. Would that work for you two?”

I didn’t frown or wrinkle my nose at the suggestion, which was a big deal. It’d been my idea to work with the team—how else could I make sure they didn’t botch the whole thing?—but I had all the doubts now.

Two days a week in a pencil skirt downtown was bad enough, but with Darcy as my director? I could think of myriad ways to better spend my time. Like being waterboarded or rolling around in broken glass.

The things I would do for this store knew no bounds.

“It works for us,” Cam said, speaking for me.

I wore a thin smile of submission.

“Great. So, just to explain a little about our roles, I’m your liaison, your primary contact for the project. Anything you need, any questions you have, I’m here for you. I’ll manage pitch meetings and briefs, and I’ll come here regularly to update you between meetings, check in, make sure you don’t need anything. The owners told me you’d be the liaison here, is that right?” she asked Cam.

“That’s right. Cooper has his own full-time career, and Rose is out on maternity leave, so I’m your girl.”

“With as much money as your store makes, I’m surprised he’s working anywhere else,” Georgie said. “Honestly, I’m surprised he works at all. I still remember when he was one of New York’s most eligible bachelors.”

Cam laughed. “Billionaire playboy, all settled down and married with kids. He’s mostly just an investor here. Rose normally runs the day-to-day, when she’s not on maternity leave. Which feels like every fourteen months lately,” she joked.

“Well, I for one am excited about what we’re going to accomplish together,” Georgie said with genuine enthusiasm. “We have a big creative meeting day after tomorrow, and the team is dying to meet you, Laney. Can we count on you to be there?”

“Tell me you’ll be there too,” I practically begged.

She chuckled. “I can be.”

“Then I’ll be there.”

Darcy or no Darcy.

HEREDITARY INSUFFERABILITY

LANEY

Jett and I climbed the subway steps that evening in Greenwich Village, laughing over photos from the Fabio party on social media, which had gone mildly viral.

The day had gone by swiftly. Georgie stayed until after we opened, sipping coffee at the bar in a spot that was both visible and accessible to Jett. As he went about his duties, he'd made it a point to stop and talk to her, his attempt to appear casual thin.

"You are so into her," I teased as we headed toward Mom's. "Super-duper into her."

"I'm super-duper into lots of things, *Elaine*."

"Like romance novels, *Julius*?"

"So I like a happy ending. Sue me."

I laughed. "You're an anomaly."

"Any guy who makes fun of romance has never read a good one. That's all I'm saying. Oh, that reminds me ..." He reached into his bag and pulled a novel out, extending it to me. "New rom-com just came in about a group of friends who swear off men. I thought you'd like it."

"Am I really that transparent?" I joked, inspecting the cover.

Jett shrugged. "I liked it. It made me think of you. Because of course their little pact doesn't stick. I like the thought of being proven wrong, you know? The idea that you think you know what you want when, in reality, you have no idea."

"You're a hopeless romantic. I mean, you look like you walked off the

pages of one. And with a name like Jett?”

“It was either that or Jules. No way was I going by Julius. Not my fault I got the worst of our nicknames.”

“Mom and her Roman names.”

“We all hate you for getting a normal name, you know.”

“Except for Marcus.”

“Yeah, well, we hate him for it too.”

“Kassius would have gotten Kash stuffed in just as many lockers as Julius would have.”

“None of us ended up conventional, did we?” he mused. “Well, except Marcus.”

“And note he’s the only one without a nickname.” I turned the conversation back to him. “Anyway, stop deflecting. Did you ask Georgie out?”

“Anybody ever tell you you’re nosy?”

“Daily. It’s hereditary. When was the last time you did anything without Mom knowing about it?”

“Never once. How much you wanna bet Luke’s already told her about Georgie?”

“I don’t take bets I know I’ll lose. I don’t think Luke’s kept a secret since he was in diapers.”

He sighed. “I’m into her, it’s true. But she mentioned something in passing that I’m pretty sure wasn’t in passing at all. Did you know they’re not allowed to see their clients? Or in this case, employees of clients?”

My frown was magnificent. “What? Why?”

“I don’t know. I think normally it’s an unspoken professional rule, but their firm has policies against it.”

I snorted a laugh. “Isn’t Georgie the boss’s niece and heir to the company? She’d couldn’t *actually* get fired, could she?”

Jett cast me a look. “So she should defy the rules and put her aunt in that kind of position with the rest of their employees, or worse—get fired? Come on, Lane. As romantic as that is, it’s not real life. And anyway, I’m sure their family would think it was tacky. And they’re the kind of people who avoid tacky at all costs.”

“Wouldn’t have been able to tell by Darcy’s standards. Rich as he is, he has terrible manners. I’d go so far as to declare him The Worst.”

“Look at the bright side—now you don’t have to worry about him trying

to date you.”

I didn't laugh. I cackled. “Darcy. And me.” Another rip of laughter. “He wouldn't even agree to dance with me, I'm so beneath him. We're not *like them*. As if where we came from matters.”

But Jett didn't laugh. His lips were a sober line. “It does to them. Do you have any idea where *they* came from?”

“Upper East stock. Poor little rich kids. Elite prep schools and Ivy League colleges. They're privileged. We all know the type.”

Jett shook his head. “Their aunt runs one of the top ad agencies in New York. When their parents died, I'm pretty sure they inherited more money than our upper-middle-class brains can comprehend. With their legacy? They're New York royalty. It's no wonder Liam Darcy didn't put on a Fabio wig and take his shirt off. I just don't get why you're so pissed at him for being stuck-up. I don't even know him, and it feels on-brand.”

“Seriously? Am I wrong to think people should treat each other with common decency and respect? Georgie is nothing like him, and she's got to be just as wealthy as him.”

“Darcy was in college when their parents died. Georgie was in high school. I figure he had to grow up pretty quick, and I also figure Georgie escaped that burden.”

“That's a lot to assume.”

But he shrugged. “It's what I would have done for you, if the tables were turned. I'm not saying he's not an insufferable dick, but give the guy a break, Laney. Just try.”

He managed to make me feel more than a little ashamed, though my irritation with said insufferable dick still held more power.

“I'll try if he'll try. Georgie practically asked me to give him a hard time. And can anyone say no to her?”

“I cannot imagine they do.”

We walked in silence for a moment.

“I'm sorry you can't ask her out.”

“Me too. But maybe it's for the best.”

I made a face. “Ew, Jett. Ew. It is *not* for the best that the first decent—no, *spectacular*—girl you've come across can't date you. Frankly, that's bullshit, and I'm offended you're so calm about it.”

“Why get upset when you're mad enough for the both of us?”

With a huff, I punched him in the arm. He didn't even flinch—just

laughed as we trotted up the stairs of the Bennet family stoop.

The brownstone had been in the family since it'd been built in the 1800s, one in a strip of homes on Bleecker, owned by the first set of Bennets to set foot on American soil. We'd sold all but the one we still occupied and the house next door, which housed our flower shop, Longbourne. In the courtyard out back stood our greenhouse, with another on the roof that my brother Kash used to breed rare flowers. Of course, we weren't big enough to grow to our demand, but with supplements from farms in Long Island, we could get just about anything we needed within a few hours' notice. We'd grown up in that greenhouse, running around barefoot with dirt under our nails. And when Jett opened the front door to the house, that familiar feeling of home slipped over us and drew us inside.

The Bennet house was chaos, as it ever was. In part, it was that so many of us were typically here at one time, and none of us other than Marcus were tidy people. We were too like our mother—strong-willed and with far more important things on our minds than putting away our shoes. Although unlike our mother, we usually remembered where we'd left them.

Laughter and conversation drifted into the grand foyer from the kitchen, and it sounded like everyone was there. It had been a long year since we'd all come home, the fate of Longbourne and our legacy up in the air after a string of detrimental business decisions, courtesy of Mom. But somehow, we'd managed to save it all, thanks to my brothers. All I did was work on our social and try to get the word out. They were the ones who put in all the elbow grease. But I didn't think anyone was surprised.

It had always been this way.

As the only female Bennet child, I was the expected heir of Longbourne. When I was a little girl, Mom would cart me around the greenhouse, teaching me everything she knew. But I didn't want to grow flowers—I wanted to draw them. She never understood. For generations, the legacy had been passed down the female line, but that stopped with me. And she didn't let me forget it.

The pressure was off now that my brothers—other than Jett—had found their matches, and *those* potential female Bennets gave her hope for everything, including the grandchildren she was so desperate for. Marcus's wife, Maisie, had slid right into my empty spot at the company, shouldering the day-to-day corporate management of Longbourne with Marcus. Mom's partnership with Maisie was everything Mom had ever wanted from me, but

from a willing participant.

Every once in a while, I caught wind of the sentiment that I'd rejected what she wanted strictly because she wanted it of me, which was silly. Granted, I did not like being told what to do, and I had no small problem with authority. But even as a little girl, it wasn't what I'd wanted. And closer to the heart—I was never given a choice.

Either way, we all seemed content. Mom had gotten her Bennet heir and the potential for three sets of grandchildren. And Jett and I escaped to the Upper West, where she couldn't keep trying to matchmake us with every able-bodied human of our preferred gender.

Didn't stop her from giving us shit about it anyway.

The kitchen was packed with people waiting for dinner, which Maisie had put in the oven, judging by the apron she wore over her burgeoning belly and her position with Marcus next to the stove. She'd taken on Jett's role around the house, since she and Marcus lived a few houses down. Honestly, I didn't think Jett would have left if not for Maisie's insistence that she'd take care of Mom and my insistence that we had to get out of this house and put enough blocks between us that she'd quit making me go on dates with zeroes.

I did miss Dad, though.

He sat at the head of the table behind a newspaper, pretending not to listen to everyone talking. His snowy-white hair was visible over the top of the news, which lowered just enough to catch the spark of his blue eyes when they met mine.

We were greeted with *heys* and hugs and made our way around the kitchen, starting with Marcus and Maisie. Then Luke and Tess at the table with Kash and Lila. I kissed Mom's cheek, and she cupped my jaw, inspecting me proudly when I backed up.

"Oh, Elaine. Sometimes I forget how beautiful you are. Memories pale next to the real thing."

I smiled down at her. "Are you hinting that I should come home more often?"

She shrugged, but mischief was in her smiling eyes. "Well, it wouldn't hurt. How's work?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Jett cut me off.

"Laney met a guy."

Our faces swiveled in his direction. I should have kicked him in the shin the second I saw his smug smile.

“Really?” Mom nearly gasped. “Come sit down, Julius, and tell me about him.”

“Well,” he started as he sat, “he’s got more money than the Rockefellers —”

“Jett met a girl too,” I interrupted, taking the seat on the other side of her.

She turned back to me with her face as bright as Christmas morning. “Both of you? I must be dreaming.”

“Luke didn’t tell you?” I asked, glancing at him. He shrugged. “Should have taken that bet with Jett after all. She’s so pretty, Mom,” I baited, all moony. “Your grandbabies are going to be straight out of a Gerber commercial.”

Jett scowled. “He’s an ad executive. Liam Darcy. Have you heard of him?”

Mom’s jaw unhinged, and she swiveled once again back to my stupid brother. “Liam Darcy? He’s worth eighteen million a year in interest alone.”

I steamed like a teakettle.

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that, Mother,” Jett said. “But yes, that Liam Darcy.”

“However in the world—”

I interrupted again. “Jett met his sister, Georgiana. They danced *all night* last night. Don’t let him fool you—Darcy wouldn’t even speak to me. But Georgie, on the other hand ... well, when she came to Wasted Words for an ad meeting this morning, I could have *sworn* she swooned when she saw him.”

That was all it took. Mom officially forgot I existed as she took one deep breath and began machine-gunning questions at him.

If someone could blow someone else up with their minds, Jett would have done it right then. I gave him a mocking smile and turned to Dad.

He’d folded his paper and set it on the table, watching us spar with quiet amusement.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hello, daughter.” He flicked his chin at Mom with a smile on his face. “It’s cruel, the way you two tease her.”

“Well, she’s already settled three out of five of her children. I really did think she’d let up, not realizing she’d just have that much more energy to expend on us.”

He chuckled. “So Darcy, huh?”

“Intolerable ass. He’s very rude and very intense.”

“And very handsome, if your mother is to be believed. I think he’s in the top five on her list of potential husbands for you.”

“The worst ones are always the prettiest, aren’t they?”

Lila and Kash sat across from me, and Lila leaned in. “My event firm did a De Bourgh party last year—that’s the Darcys’ aunt, right?”

“That’s their firm,” I said. “De Bourgh and Associates. Or Douche Bags and Asses. Whatever’s your preference.”

Lila shook her head. “Those people are something else. Catherine is heading the firm now? Do I remember that right?”

“You do,” Jett answered. “I doubt we’ll meet her, though. We’re way below her pay grade.”

“Count yourself lucky,” Lila said. “I would not want to cross swords with her. Working for her was hard enough, and everything went so smoothly—partly because I was terrified into my best behavior. She still had plenty to say about it, and none of it was particularly kind.”

“So being an uppity jerk is genetic? Huh. Must have skipped Georgie.”

“I’ll have you know,” Mom said with her nose in the air, “that Liam Darcy is one of the most eligible bachelors in New York. Surely he’s just waiting on the right girl to settle down.” She bestowed me with a pointed look.

“And I’ll have *you* know that, bachelor or not, any man who called me ‘tolerable’ and suggested Jett and I were beneath them isn’t someone I’d ever refer to as eligible. Not for anything but a fist in his eye.”

Mom blinked. “He said ... are you sure you heard him right?”

“Oh, I am most definitely sure. He doesn’t think much of us and *definitely* not of me. So please, do me a favor and cross Darcy off your list.”

To her credit, she tried not to pout. “I’ll asterisk him.”

I sighed.

The conversation picked up when, mercifully, Tess launched into her and Luke’s plans for the next shop window installment. Once she got Mom going, Tess and I shared a look, and I mouthed, *Thank you*.

They carried on, and I leaned back in my seat, unnaturally silent as I thought about Darcy, peeking into the box I’d stuffed him into. The splinter of humiliation was still there in my heart, and pain flared at the memory. His face, carved with contempt. His tone, biting and superior. He hadn’t even looked sorry when he saw me—there was no remorse, no care for me or my

feelings. Only a look that said, *I'm not wrong, and you know it.*

Until that moment, I hadn't known it. I never thought of anyone above or below me, but having now been the subject of his scrutiny, I felt the acute sting of that particular cruelty.

But it didn't matter what he thought of me. I could tolerate him just as he'd proclaimed he'd tolerate me. We could find a place of neutrality as long as he kept his insults locked in his brain.

And I wouldn't be held responsible for what I did if he didn't.

TELL ME HOW YOU REALLY FEEL

LIAM

“**A**re you going to play nice today?” Georgie asked from the other side of my desk, her arms folded and eyes accusing.
“I’ll play like I always play.”

“So no.”

“I wouldn’t alter myself for anyone, Georgie. I’m surprised you’d even suggest it.”

“You owe Laney Bennet an apology.”

“You’ve mentioned that.” I hadn’t exactly agreed to it. But I hadn’t told her no, either.

“She works for our client. It’s not up for discussion, Liam. Smooth it over. If not for her, do it for me—I’d rather not spend all my free time sweeping up whatever trouble your mouth gets us into.”

Georgie might have said it with a teasing air, but I saw through her. It went deeper than that—she wasn’t just talking about our standing with the client or the firm. There was a motive under the motive.

“You can’t see Jett Bennet.”

Her cheeks flushed. “I know that.”

“Aunt Catherine would never sanction it. She’d punish you for it and me for not stopping you. And that’s without the fact that you’d be breaching company policies.”

“I *know* that. I said I won’t, and I won’t. But I’ll be at Wasted Words a lot. Are you sure you’re not going to go all ... *Liam* about it?”

“Did you just use my name as an adjective?”

She gave me a flat-browed look. “You know how you get. Don’t make me spell it out.”

“No, really—how exactly do I *get*?”

A huff. “Overprotective. Presumptuous. Invasive. *Rude*.”

My chair squeaked as I leaned back, mirroring her pose. “Forgive me for trying to protect my sister. Pardon me for not wanting to see you hurt again.”

“Oh, you like to think you’re the white knight, but really, you just locked me in a tower and threw away the key. I’m a big girl. If *he* taught me anything, it was that I’m a terrible judge of character. But I’m still an adult. My decisions are still mine—they have nothing to do with you.”

A defensive fire swept through me. “They have everything to do with me, George. Your feelings *are* my feelings. When you’re in pain, so am I. Neither of us wants to see you there again—not after what *he* did. We could stand to be cautious. Suspicious. But I don’t want that for you. I don’t want you to dampen your happiness. I don’t want to see you turn into a cynic. So leave the cynicism to me, but don’t get mad when we fundamentally disagree. Trust me.”

She sighed, resigned, even though her eyes swept the ceiling. “I do. You know I do.”

Before either of us spoke again, the door to my office opened, and Caroline Bingley strutted in.

She was a preening white peacock with porcelain skin, wearing a pencil skirt and tailored satin shirt a shade of snow. Her flaxen hair shone, arranged in a flawless manner to match the rest of her. But it was the shrewd smile on her face that spoke the truth of her nature, which was not nearly as pure as her carefully cultivated exterior suggested.

“I thought I’d find you two in here. Conspiring again?”

Georgie offered her a false smile. “You know us. Always sneaking around.” She stood, heading for the door. Georgie hated being in confined spaces with Caroline, and I couldn’t blame her. Caroline could suck the joy out of a room in under a minute. “See you at the meeting.” Her eyes snagged mine and leveled me with a warning. *Be nice to Laney Bennet*, that look said.

Only for you, mine said back.

Satisfied, she left.

Caroline rounded my desk and hitched herself half onto the surface, seeming to enjoy the few inches of height it gave her over me. It was a game she played, an unveiled offering I’d never accept. I’d seen her unhinge her

jaw and swallow people before, and though I'd be a tough bite to swallow, I wasn't interested in that fight.

"Did you need something, Caroline?" I asked without making eye contact, jotting in the planner I kept on my desk—the hard copy to match the digital one.

"Just wanted to make sure you were ready for the meeting. Is there anything you need before we start?"

"I think I've got it under control, but thank you."

"Any idea what we can expect from the bookstore's little social media girl?"

A foreign feeling flickered in my chest. I ignored it, crossing off a few tasks I'd completed. "I don't."

She waited for me to elaborate. When I didn't, she prompted me. "You met her at their party the other night, right?"

"I met all the store's employees."

Another pause. "And what did you think of her?"

The memory of what I'd said flashed in my mind. *Perfectly tolerable*. I didn't know why I'd chosen those particular words to describe her. I only knew that I'd wanted Georgie to give up the push to get me to dance, and she wouldn't until I made sure she knew how serious I was. But what did I really think of Laney? Over the last few days, I'd considered the question enough that I should've had an answer.

"I only spoke to her for a few minutes, so I really couldn't say."

"You are the worst gossip on the planet, do you know that?"

I closed my planner with a snap and sighed through my nose, annoyed. "Gossip is for the weak and insecure, nothing but speculation and hearsay. It is, by nature, subjective—there's no truth, only a spewing fountainhead of opinion. I can't imagine why you'd think I'd want to participate."

"You're a robot," she answered on a laugh, sliding off my desk.

When I stood, she took my arm as she often did—a territorial gesture I'd endured since we were teenagers—but I separated us at the first opportunity. This time, it was at the opening of my office door, which I held so she would pass through first.

Our offices bustled with activity, from a galley of cubicles to glass offices of drafting tables and conference rooms. Three generations of de Bourghs had run the firm, each more powerful than the one before. The Darcys constituted the *associates* on the placard, joining in with my grandfather,

which was how Catherine had met my uncle—our familial ties. When my uncle died years ago, everyone thought she'd pass the mantle to someone else. But they had no children, and I wasn't old enough to step into her shoes—even now I was in the midst of working my way up. She had also been groomed for this job but chosen the life of leisure once she married my uncle, but when he died, she took his place and had been captaining the ship with success ever since.

Unlike my uncle, Catherine had made no friends in the office—her ways were direct, strict, unbendable. Her word was gospel and her time more valuable than any of ours. Everyone in the office was afraid of her, as she'd been known to fire her employees on the spot for any reason. Questioning her in a meeting was almost certainly fatal. One word of gossip about her, you were out, whether you'd said it or not. Of course, she also cherished those who licked her boots, particularly if they were from the right family, like Caroline.

Just another of the many reasons to abide by her rules.

She lorded over the company with all the humility of a queen, though Georgie and I had insulation. When we had no one, we had Catherine, the last of our family. Cold and humorless though she might be, she made every Christmas special, every birthday unforgettable. She smiled most around Georgie and me, was always there for us, day or night, and would do anything short of murder for those she loved. We had lost our only family within a few years of each other, first her, then us, and loneliness and love bound us. I didn't know how I'd have survived those first years without her.

Her frigid, unsmiling demeanor aside, she'd shown us love through a time when we needed her most, forging our bond in steel.

Not that I was one to talk—Georgie was the only person on the planet who truly made me laugh. No one else dared get close enough to break that particular barrier. Not even Caroline, and she'd tried harder than just about anyone.

But she had no idea what that entailed. If she did, she wouldn't care to try.

Caroline talked on about something or another as we made our way to the conference room, where our team waited. But as we approached, my eyes caught the back of an inky cascade of black hair, and I couldn't look away. Slight shoulders in a tailored shirt of blue so deep, I imagined Laney's striking eyes shone like gems. Her head turned just enough for me to see

the tip of her nose, and her hand slipped into her hair to touch her neck, as if she sensed my attention. As I entered her periphery, her face turned to mine, and our eyes met with a click, holding for a moment.

I broke the connection to open the door for Caroline, who strutted in like she owned the building and took the seat to the right of the head chair.

My chair.

I stood in front of them as they quieted. Laney's hands were folded in her lap, fingers fidgeting with a thin-banded watch around her wrist. She was nervous.

That unfamiliar pang in my chest stopped me again, this time with recognition. It was some strange mixture of sympathy and sorrow, a flickering regret.

Her anxiety was my fault.

She was nervous because of my behavior. I had insulted my subordinate and now stood before her with a demand for respect when I hadn't given her the same courtesy.

Georgie was right. I owed her an apology.

When Georgie and I met gazes from her seat next to Laney, she looked borderline triumphant, recognizing my concession.

I shrugged it off, telling myself any amends made were for the good of my team, nothing more. But that twist in my rib cage tightened at the determined set of Laney's chin, the brightness of her challenging eyes, all coupled with that little tell of her unease that belied her fearlessness.

"Good morning, everyone. Before we get started today, I'd like to introduce Elaine Bennet, the social marketer for Wasted Words."

Everyone turned to face her, offering small smiles and nods. The slightest color smudged her cheeks.

"Please, call me Laney. I'm only Elaine when I'm in trouble."

A chuckle rolled through them.

"Laney is here to advise, so please, do your best to help show her the ropes."

Laney's brows clicked together. I'd said something wrong.

"Let's start with a roundup," I continued, proceeding to make my way around the table, gathering reports from the heads of our creative team and media teams, running down broad strokes for social media, print, and advertising. Concept design and production. But the most important thing—and our starting point—was tagline and messaging creation. We'd need at

least two concepts to pitch to the client—three if we didn't come up with something spectacular—complete with a graphic presentation. And once decided, we'd move into discussing media buy to propose to the accounting team.

Laney took rapid notes as everyone gave an overview as to their focuses and overall ideas, and once finished, it was my turn to present some ideas of my own. But before I could take over, Laney raised a finger, and I nodded, giving her the floor.

She wore a courteous smile, but her eyes sparked with excitement. "I wanted to bring up something no one mentioned, in terms of messaging. Our biggest market strategy to get people in the door? Our singles mixers." She flipped back a few pages in her notebook. "We earn sixty percent of our revenue on mixer nights alone, and that brings patrons back during the day for coffee and to shop. No one suggested using this as an angle, but the parties are the easiest and most profitable campaigns we've run. I have a lot of ideas—"

"So you propose we put our marketing weight behind themed parties?" I asked without wanting an answer, my hackles rising not only from her premature suggestions and unwelcome timing—she was here to observe, not to offer opinions—but for my elemental opposition to the idea. "While kitschy and profitable, mixers won't introduce the store's concept to a city."

"I disagree. If you'll take a look at some of my ideas, I think—"

"While unsurprised that you disagree, Miss Bennet, this isn't the appropriate time for concept discussion. We currently have a plan in place that we've been developing for several weeks, and while I'm *sure* on your scale it's been a success, please forgive me if I ask that you trust the expertise of this firm and my team."

At my second interruption, the angry flush on her cheeks rose, the contrast of her eyes sharp and bright as diamonds. "I have been the sole marketer in Wasted Words for a full year, and I held the position of CCO at Connor & Cook in Dallas. I've helped elevate the bookstore, establishing a presence beyond word of mouth. I've seen what works, and I've seen what doesn't, and this, Mr. Darcy, is low-hanging fruit."

My jaw clenched so tight, my teeth squeaked. "Duly noted. Anything else?" It wasn't so much a question as it was a dare.

She glared at me for a second, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Georgie was practically screaming at me to shut up with her eyes,

but I ignored her in favor of refusing to blink at Laney.

Laney didn't answer, sitting back in her seat to mark her abdication. But she held my gaze until I looked to the team and continued the meeting to present our next steps.

The fork had three prongs—the romance novel angle, the comic book angle, and the book bar angle. Over the last few years, these kinds of shops had cropped up all over the country, the demographic primarily women, a large percentage of them visiting in groups, mostly book clubs or girls' nights. So that was our focus too. The male comic demographic was simple—all they needed was a location and selection of rarities, and that they could drink beer at the same stop was the *real* low-hanging fruit.

Laney kept quiet for the rest of the meeting, scribbling notes and burning holes in the pages given the intensity with which she stared at them. I wondered absently if she was doodling murderous stick figures in my likeness and determined she must be when Georgie looked over her shoulder and stifled a laugh.

The meeting came to a close, and everyone stood, gathering their things and dispersing. I stepped back, nodding as they passed, though I wasn't looking at them. I was watching Georgie talk to Laney.

"You were right—she's got a mouth on her," Caroline said from my side. "How terribly rude, speaking out of turn, challenging you in front of your team. She's mannerless. And I have a suspicion she's not going to be easy to work with."

The words were a bucket of ice down my back. Caroline said what I'd been thinking in the moment, but from her lips, I heard just how disparaging, how *wrong*, they were. That foreign feeling of shame rose. Again, I'd insulted Laney, belittled her in front of a room of peers, and undercut her own expertise. I was certain someone had told me of her previous position with Connor & Cook, but it'd been long enough that the only subject we'd discussed—her job at Wasted Words—put the knowledge beneath the thick layer of disdain in having someone of unknown caliber on my team.

Which left me with more to apologize for.

Laney straightened out, seeming to collect herself before turning from Georgie to march toward the door. I assumed she'd ignore me and watched her openly, noting the length of her neck, the strong angle of her jaw and chin. The line of her nose and the bow of her lips. I watched her so openly, in fact, that when her eyes cut to mine, a jolt shot through me at the boldness

and the sheer beauty of her, even in her fury.

Especially in her fury.

The black look lasted until she reached the threshold of the conference room and stormed away. And there was only one thing I could do.

Follow her.

I passed my very angry sister on my way to the door. "I know," was all I said, turning in the direction she'd gone.

I caught a flash of blue round a corner down the hall and went after her, not sure what I'd say but confident I'd come up with something. My pace caught the attention of a few people as I blew in her direction. Why catching her felt urgent, I didn't know. It wasn't as if she were leaving or that I wouldn't see her again. But when I rounded the corner and saw her duck into the women's restroom, I nearly reached for the handle to follow her. Stupidly, I stood in front of the door, staring at the plastic placard.

Go back to your office.

What if I can't find her later?

She works here. You'll see her.

What if it's too long between now and then?

For her or for you?

Both.

What if she doesn't forgive you?

My frown was so complete, my eyebrows almost touched.

I was still standing there, arguing with myself, when the door swung open, and Laney looked up at me, surprised. Her hand flew to her chest, her hair aloft from the draft of the heavy door.

"Jesus. What are ..." She glanced around, confused. "What are you doing?"

My shoulder blades drew together, squaring my shoulders. "I wanted to apologize."

She stilled, her eyes narrowing. "In front of the women's restroom?"

My mouth opened. Closed. "I realized my mistake, and I'm sorry."

"Oh, did you?" Her arms folded. "What mistake is that?"

"I shouldn't have challenged you in the meeting."

"No, you shouldn't have. That's twice now that you've held your status over me."

"You can't deny we're different. Our worlds don't cross."

"Why? Because mine wasn't built on an inheritance? Because my job

wasn't given to me because of legacy? You're cruel by default, Liam Darcy, and it's no secret how highly you regard yourself."

I was stone, cold and still. "That's what you think of me?"

"Am I wrong?"

"If I said yes, would it change anything?"

"It wouldn't. Because any man who would humiliate another human being like you've done to me is no gentleman. There is no honor or dignity in it, and I'm left wondering why. What have I done to offend you so deeply? Or is it not me at all? Maybe what everyone says is true—you're just so cold and callous, you're incapable of considering anyone but yourself."

The cut sliced deep, deeper than I'd ever allow her to know. "Don't presume to know me, Miss Bennet."

"I know enough. Look at you. You don't even know how to apologize." She sidestepped me, pausing when we were shoulder to shoulder. "Do your job, and I'll do mine. No one ever said we have to like each other. So next time you plan to apologize, please do us both a favor and don't bother."

And with a gust trailing the scent of magnolias, she was gone.

COMMON ENEMY

LANEY

I wasn't exactly angry.

Well, I take that back, but I wasn't *only* angry. I was furious. I was annoyed, with a hefty helping of frustration and disbelief—that was true. I wouldn't say I felt ashamed or less-than, not because anything he'd said held a modicum of fact. But humiliation bred shame, particularly when it was thrown down in front of a room full of people I'd be working with for the foreseeable future.

He'd used his power to quiet me, and out of deference for his position, I did as he wanted. But once out of that room, all bets were off.

The weirdo even chased me to the bathroom to *apologize*, which was its own oddity. I wondered how many times the spoiled, self-important asshole had ever apologized and bet I could count them on one hand. But he'd stood there, hovering over me like a tornado in a bottle—a vortex of dangerous darkness with nothing between us but a thin husk of glass.

Thankful I didn't technically *have* to be here for the day, I flew to the temporary desk they'd given me and gathered my things, shooting a text to Georgie as I beelined for the elevator, apologizing for not saying goodbye and telling her that I was leaving before I committed homicide in their building. She gave me her blessing, apologizing back and promising me she'd get him in check, that she didn't know what had gotten into him, etc., etc. I was too mad to offer anything but the verbal equivalent of a thumbs-up.

In a haze of red, I left the building, earbuds in and rage rock blaring. Twenty minutes of train solitude didn't calm me down. And by the time I

walked into Wasted Words, a rant had built so much pressure in my throat, I was either going to breathe fire or puke lava the second I unscrewed the clamp that was my jaw and spoke.

Greg saw me from behind the bar and frowned, his hand pausing its circular track on the bar top. Then Beau behind him, his brows sliding together. And just beyond the bar was the person I really wanted to see—Jett, with a stack of books under his arm and another in his hand. He stopped when he saw me, his face shifting from confusion to unadulterated fury to mirror mine.

His long legs got him to me faster than I could have gotten to him. “What happened?”

“Darcy happened.” I took off my bag and slammed it on the bar. “Beau, a Sazerac, please.”

He and Jett shared a look to communicate their alarm at my deficit of fucks. Jett set his books down.

“What did he do?” he asked darkly.

“Shot me down in front of the whole team for suggesting we push the mixer angle. Not only did he not hear me out, but he successfully subdued me at a conference table and managed to insult me along the way. Oh, and then he tried to apologize and couldn’t do it. Like, physically incapable. I don’t think anyone’s ever told him off before.”

“And you volunteered to be the first.”

“Somebody had to. Thank you,” I said to Beau, picking up my potent drink and taking a delicate sip. If I’d ordered whiskey like I normally did, it would have turned into three so fast, I’d end up hammered before lunch.

It was then that I unleashed the wrath, recounting everything until I had all three of the guys on the edge of their proverbial seats. When I finally took a breath, followed by a sip of my drink, I realized Cam had pulled up to the conversation with a guy I didn’t recognize by her side.

His eyes met mine. Held. We smiled.

He was handsome in a classic way, tall and lean and made of appealing angles. Cool eyes assessed me, the shadow of golden scruff sharpening his jaw. His roguish smile was higher on one side, and something about him promised something to me. I instantly wanted to know what that promise was.

Cam looked more than a little worried at my account of the meeting. “So it went well, then?” Her default—sarcasm.

I exhaled, feeling lighter, having vented off the pressure of my rage. “It’ll be fine. I think we made a truce. Well, I told him we were trucing. I didn’t give him a chance to refuse.”

“That explains the calls I missed from Georgie.”

The guy shifted. “So Liam hasn’t changed, I see.”

My brow quirked. “And who are you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Cam started. “Wyatt Wickham, this is Laney Bennet. Wyatt is with *Forbes*.”

“Fancy,” I teased, extending my hand. “Nice to meet you, Wyatt. How do you know the Darcys? Has Liam made it his life’s mission to make you miserable too?”

“You have no idea.” A sigh through his nose, his lips together in a *not the whole story* sort of smile. “Liam and I went to Columbia together.”

“Oh, so you’re a friend of Cooper’s too?”

“I am. His call is why I’m here. I’m doing a piece on the expansion.”

“Well, I’m sorry you had to hear my rant. It was a long train ride. I almost spewed it to the unsuspecting bum trying to nap across from me.”

Wyatt chuckled. “I’m sorry he got to you. Don’t let him know, though. I think it’s how he feeds.”

I laughed, realizing everyone was watching us with a little too much curiosity for my taste. “Care for a drink? I know it’s not even noon, but if we’re going to start an anti-Darcy club, I think we’re going to need booze. That is, if you’re finished. Or when you’re finished. Or whatever,” I rambled.

“Oh, we’re finished,” Cam said with that wily smile she wore when she was trying to set somebody up. “Have your drink, and Wyatt—you should come to our next mixer. If you really want to see us in action, that’s the time and place.”

“I’ll be here,” he said, looking straight at me with that smile.

Finally, a nice guy. I sighed again, my faith in the universe restored.

Jett watched with suspicion before sticking his hand out for a shake, which he gave with a little too much force to be considered completely casual. “I’m Jett, Laney’s brother.”

Wyatt nodded with understanding. “Pleasure. Care to have a drink with us?”

“If I wasn’t on the clock, I’d happily sit between you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t you have books to shelve?”

“I do. Right over there.” He nodded with meaning to a bookshelf just

beyond the bar area, where he would not only have a clear view, but a short enough distance to potentially eavesdrop.

“Well,” Cam said with an abundance of cheer, “we’ll leave you to it. Won’t we, boys?”

They nodded and dispersed, leaving us about as alone as we could get in a bar.

“So a journalist, huh?” I took a sip of my drink as Greg dropped off Wyatt’s beer.

“Ever since I was a kid. My school didn’t have a paper, so I made one myself.”

“You didn’t,” I said on a laugh.

I watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed, unsure why that knot was so sexy. “Did too. When the principal shut it down, I ran a First Amendment protest. Got the whole school to stand silently in the cafeteria with gags on, holding protest signs. The next semester, an official school paper was formed, and yours truly was the editor in chief.”

“How resourceful.”

“What can I say? I’ve come up with all kinds of creative ways to get what I want.”

There it was again—that promise. I laughed to cover the hot blush on my cheeks as he took another drink.

“How about you?” he asked. “What do you do?”

“I’m in marketing—a social marketing director. Unlike you, I did not birth any movements, but I’ve always loved art and aesthetics. If my mother had her way, I’d be running our family’s flower shop.”

“Flower shop? Wait, Bennet ... you’re one of the Longbourne Bennets?”

“You know who we are?” I asked, amused.

“Sure. We covered the whole Longbourne-Bower feud through to the end. You guys are low-key famous, didn’t you know?”

“That is so weird.” A chuckle. “But yes, I’m one of those Bennets. I actually did their marketing until the big corporate team took over.”

“You couldn’t head it up?”

His curiosity wasn’t judgmental, but I felt the prickle of defensiveness all the same.

“They had things well in hand, and Wasted Words needed somebody. So Jett and I moved to the Upper West to be close to work, and here we are. Now I’m part of the marketing team for our expansion. I mean, in theory, at

least.”

“Ah, hence the connection to Darcy. Cooper called that one in too, huh?”

“Yet another resourceful guy. I don’t know how he does it all. The other owner, Rose, is on maternity leave, so I’m afraid you won’t meet her. Unless you’re planning on sticking around?”

“You know, I think I just might.”

I watched him tip his pint glass, the golden liquid disappearing past lips I found myself very much interested in. When he set the empty glass on the bar, the foam slid down the walls to the bottom as he stood, grabbing his bag.

“If I wasn’t gonna see you soon, I’d ask you out.” He laid a twenty on the bar, but his gaze was on me.

“Well, tell me when so I can print up pins for our new anti-Darcy club.” My heart fluttered in my rib cage like I was a teenager.

“The mixer. That is, assuming you’ll be there.”

“And if not?”

“Then I need to know so I can ask you to dinner.”

“You can ask me to dinner anyway, you know.”

His head bobbed side to side in mock thought. “I could, but this is more exciting, isn’t it?” With that smile firmly in place, he backed away. “See you there.”

“I suppose you will,” I answered. He walked backward a few paces, before turning for the door.

And I smiled down at my drink, undeniably optimistic despite Liam Darcy’s best efforts.

INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

LIAM

Georgie didn't utter a single word the entire car ride home. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye as we sat in the back of the Mercedes and found her in the same immovable position she'd been in since we'd climbed in—arms folded and jaw set, her fiery gaze locked somewhere beyond the window.

And just like her, I maintained my silence, knowing she'd blow up on me when she couldn't keep it to herself anymore. Asking her what was wrong—especially since I knew *exactly* what was wrong—would be a fatal mistake, one I'd made enough times to know better.

So the silence continued from Midtown and up the length of Madison Avenue. Even when we rounded the block to Fifth and pulled up to our building, she said nothing, only beat the doorman to opening the car door, making sure to slam it in my face before I could follow her. With a sigh, I opened it again. The doorman took it from me, offering his apologies, which I assured him were unnecessary. And I followed my sister inside.

She'd gotten enough of a lead on me that I barely made it into the elevator with her. Her nose was in the air, her cheeks rosy and lips flat as she studiously ignored me up fifteen floors, the only sound the dinging demarcating each one. Once at our floor—the top floor—the doors opened, and she blew up to the front door, unlocking and throwing it wide.

Hands in my pockets, I followed her at a distance. By my estimation, we were about at critical mass. Her heels clicked on the hardwood as she headed for the stairs, but I turned for the kitchen in search of the liquor cabinet,

knowing she'd be right behind me.

Halfway up the stairs, her footfalls stopped. Stomped back down. Clicked in my direction. I'd just put the topper on a decanter of scotch when she flew into the kitchen and leveled me.

"You were supposed to apologize," she shot, slamming her purse on the island.

"I tried," I said simply, taking a sip of my drink.

"Unsurprisingly, you somehow managed to upset her even more. What did you say?"

For a moment, I didn't answer, staring into my glass as I swirled the amber liquid around. "She's a difficult person to apologize to—she wouldn't stop talking long enough for me to explain. Everything I said made her mad. How do you talk to someone like that?"

"You listen, you wait, and then you try again."

"She stormed off before I could wait or try again. But I did listen. She was right about some things, wrong about others."

Georgie exhaled in a loud, controlled sigh. "You have to fix this. She is an employee of our *client*, not some girl you met in a bar."

"We did meet in a bar."

She made an impatient sound. "What has gotten into you? Why can't you show her common professional respect?"

My brow quirked, my eyes back on my drink. I answered both questions with three words.

"I don't know."

"You've never been what anyone would call charming, but you've crossed the line on this one."

"She and I seem to fundamentally disagree, but rather than keeping it to herself, she reacts without thinking. She's rude, quick to fight, and can't stop herself from voicing the multitude of feelings she has on any given topic."

"So what you're saying is that she's too much like you. Except for the feelings thing."

"We're nothing alike, George."

She laughed, a full-blown burst from the bottom of her belly. "Sometimes, I wonder how it's possible that someone so successful could be so clueless. I am so mad at you—*so mad*—and you are in the biggest trouble. You degraded her in front of a room of colleagues, which made *you* look far worse than her—the team has been gossiping about it all day. So you need to

come up with a way to smooth things over. Dig deep and get over yourself so you can work with her. She's not going anywhere, and I don't care if Cooper Moore is a buddy of yours or not—he's going to be unhappy if you continue to mistreat her. And if Aunt Catherine hears you've potentially put an account of this size at risk, she's going to flay you."

None of it was untrue.

"Figure it out, Liam. Take a second to recognize that her traits—the ones that make you act like an animal—are alive and well in *you*. Maybe if you focused more on your similarities instead of getting twisted every time she opens her mouth, you'll see you could be an excellent team. But either way, we're not having this conversation again. Okay?"

I made a noncommittal noise rather than answer, taking a drink.

With a huff, she turned to leave. "You're exhausting."

She'd just disappeared from the threshold when she swore under her breath, reappearing to snatch her purse off the island, tear open the fridge for a bottle of wine, and grab a wineglass before flying off again.

"I'm taking a bath and drinking this," she called from the stairwell. "Do not disturb."

Again, I said nothing, but a smile tugged at my lips. She hated when I said nothing, though I didn't do it to upset her. I just found that I didn't have the chance to say the wrong thing if I said nothing at all.

With a shift, I looked out over the dark patch of Central Park inside a frame of shadowed buildings. This was the house we'd grown up in, the house I'd inherited when our parents died. I remembered Georgie riding her tricycle around the terrace. Thanksgiving meals at the dining table. Georgie and I lounging in the library on rainy days—me sneaking into Dad's comics and Georgie raiding Mom's romance shelves.

I remembered the night of the call about the accident, but other than that flash of memory, everything else was a blur. By the time we got to the hospital, they were gone. The drunk driver had injured three other pedestrians when he blew through the crosswalk. He'd been apprehended and ended up in jail without much effort. I remembered getting Georgie home, the two of us sitting silently in the living room until the sun came up. And then it was a different kind of blur.

Lawyers and funeral plans, informing distant relatives and friends. And I'd done it all without blinking, without thinking, without feeling. Georgie felt enough for both of us.

Neither of us wanted to be alone, so we took to sleeping in the living room without ever agreeing to it. It was a month before we slept in our beds and well over a year before we touched their room. It was Georgie who suggested it was time, and though it was unbearable, I helped her go through their clothes and things. We packed things away, stripped it of linens and furniture, spreading pieces throughout the house and putting the decor in places where we could admire them and remember. And then Georgie redecorated it for me, moved me in, and claimed my old room.

Their empty room had been a void in the house to reflect the void in our lives until then. And when we filled it, we were finally able to move on. Or start to.

So I finished college and started at De Bourgh. Georgie finished high school and started at NYU, joining me when she'd gotten her bachelor's. And that, as they said, was that.

I knocked back the end of my drink and poured another, taking it upstairs with me as I pulled at my tie. Laney Bennet appeared in my mind without preamble or warning, as she was in the habit of doing. Georgie had given me the final directive before what I was sure would be an ultimatum, and she was right. I had to figure myself out before it was too late.

But when I stopped and looked for the why of it all, I knew.

Laney was one of very few people who called me out with such ferocious truth. She was unafraid of me, unaffected by me, unlike most people, who sputtered and stammered in my presence. Georgie said I had two expressions—frowning and scowling—and the result didn't endear me to many people. I'd told her not to take me to that mixer at Wasted Words. Because if there was one thing I couldn't do, it was fake it. I couldn't pretend to be amused by their party or even to understand it. I couldn't feign a good time and drink and laugh with a bunch of strangers in a hot, crammed bar. I couldn't take a bartender seriously who wore a loincloth any more than I could give my blessing to a shirtless bookstore manager who had his eye—and hands—on my sister.

But there was something else about Laney. I saw something in her that I'd never seen before, some spark of rarity beneath her hard exterior. And I supposed Georgie was right again. Laney and I were much more alike than I wanted to admit. But rather than contain herself like I did, she bared it, exposed herself in a way that although was defensive, was vulnerable too.

It was foreign to me. And a quality I found not only merit in, but envy. I

only wished I could be so free. But I was incapable. Ask anyone who knew me, and they'd agree without hesitating.

I left the lights off in my room, crossing the space to stand in front of the tall windows overlooking the park as a thought dawned on me with such heat, it burned through the fog of unfamiliar feelings she evoked.

I admired her. Inexplicably, she roused something in me, like a beast asleep for a thousand years, shaking off the dust of time. She saw me, and though she didn't like what she'd found, she challenged me to answer. To rise to the occasion and meet her as an equal. Because despite our many differences, when it came to the fabric of our characters, I had a suspicion we were much the same.

And though I didn't know what exactly that meant, I gathered a plan to find out.

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1813

LANEY

Regency nights were my favorite.

Two or three nights a year, we partied like it was 1813. And our regulars went all out.

Five-dollar wells for everyone in costume inspired people to participate, and it expanded our regulars to reenactment groups, of which there were *far* more than I imagined there would ever be in Manhattan. Ruby sewed as a hobby, and we added her services in our announcement newsletters for costumes. She'd made a killing on dresses and velvet overcoats, even taking to reselling top hats and bonnets and gloves—a one-stop shop for all your regency needs. And since we threw these parties regularly, people invested.

Honestly, people loved an excuse to dress up. They were just as eager to put on spandex for our superhero or villain parties as they were to don a corset and cravat.

They would also do anything for cheap drinks.

I sighed, smiling at the fantasy of the evening. Rather than use our dim bar lights, battery-operated candelabras and a massive chandelier lit the dance floor and bar. Although not authentic, our regular DJ knew how to keep people happy, playing songs that kept bonnet feathers bobbing and everyone singing along, throwing the occasional slow song in to encourage people to get into each other's personal space for the good of love.

I'd spent the last few days avoiding the Darcys and thinking about Wyatt, looking forward to tonight like a teenage girl anticipated prom. It'd been a long time since I'd met a guy I liked. New York wasn't really a place to meet

somebody outside of Bumble or Tinder or whatever the app of the minute was. I had access to men at the bar, and though I'd talked to more than a few, none of them went beyond a date, if they even went that far. But Wyatt had charmed me. And I scanned the crowd again for him, trying not to be disappointed when I didn't find what I was looking for.

The bartenders were decked out in breeches and beautiful coats with tails, cravats, and vests, and once again, groups of tittering women in empire-waisted dresses fawned over them.

Cam slid up next to me with Annie, Greg the bartender's fiancée, on her arm. It was impossible to dislike Annie—she was sunshine in a bottle, her skin peaches and cream and her hair the color of wheat. She had those eyes that drank up the world, big and wide and sparkling green. You couldn't not to look at the long purple scar down the center of her chest that disappeared into her neckline—one of many battle scars, courtesy of her heart condition. She wore the scar with such pride, it was more a badge of honor than a reminder of pain.

On approaching, we greeted each other, complimenting the other's dresses and accessories. It was true what they said about party dresses—the more you wore them, the less special they were—so most of us had a couple in rotation, not only for this, but for other themed nights, like Austen night or *Come As Your Favorite Literary Heroine* night. Annie's was an emerald affair with incredible golden detailing embroidered on the hem and up the front, mine was a deep royal blue, and Cam's was red as blood.

A female chorus of delighted noises came from the bar where the three gentlemen bartenders were performing some kind of toast with shot glasses in their hands. We were too far away to hear what they were saying, but I knew no less than three of their little performances, plus two old-timey drinking songs they sang to rev up the crowd. The girls pressed up against the bar were thirsty—and not for booze. I wouldn't be surprised to see a pair of knickers fly in their direction.

I shook my head, laughing. “They're shameless. How do you stand all those girls coveting Greg?”

But she shrugged. “I don't know. I should be jealous, shouldn't I? Maybe it's because he sneaks off to come kiss me when the guys think he's going to restock beer. Or that I know his *real* smile, and *that* is not it.” She pointed in his direction, where he did in fact wear a smile that only seemed genuine if you didn't know him.

“Oh my God. How have I never noticed it before?” I asked.

“He’s really good at his job,” she teased. “I don’t know what he’s going to do when the new stores open and he’s supervising all of their bars too.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll manage,” Cam said as her husband, Tyler, approached.

He was a giant at six foot six, and when side by side with his wife—a whopping five foot two with shoes on—they bordered on comical. Tyler also wore a coat, his vest the same red as Cam’s dress and his neck swathed in his cravat. He slid his hand into her waist and kissed the top of her head. She leaned into him and sighed.

“Look at you two,” I said. “Hot night on the town with a babysitter and everything.”

“Kids are hard,” Cam said. “Fortunately, part of my job involves parties where I get to dress him up like my own personal duke.”

“And fortunately, your duke doesn’t mind so much.”

“It’s true.” She smoothed the chest of his coat. “I can’t imagine many of your football buddies would be caught dead in a top hat.”

“Depends on whether or not there was a promise of women. And here, there’s always a promise of women—and the good stock too.” It could have sounded sleazy if he hadn’t said it with such affection, his eyes on hers and hers on his like a couple of schmoops.

Feeling like I was intruding, I glanced at the door again before scanning the room for Wyatt.

“Looking for someone?” Annie asked.

My cheeks warmed. “Actually, yes. A reporter I met here.”

“Thanks to me,” Cam interjected.

“Thanks to Cam,” I echoed. “He said he’d be here, so we didn’t exchange numbers. And now I’m wondering just how big of a mistake that was.”

“I’m a big believer in fate,” Annie said with conviction. “If he doesn’t come, I bet there’s something better in store for you.”

“I wish I had your faith,” I snarked, just before the fine hairs on the back of my bare neck lifted. The sensation was electric, the most intense point in the center of my neck, at my spine.

Absently, my fingertips sought that spot, brushing it as if I expected to find something foreign there. I’d had this feeling before, the latest at that abominable meeting with—

I whirled around, somehow both staggered and unsurprised to find Darcy

standing several yards away.

He was as dark as a gathering storm, his eyes charged and jaw hard.

Does he always look furious? I wondered. Was his brow ever smooth? Did his lips ever soften? Was there ever a moment when his body wasn't immovable stone, stubbornly planted in the current of a river?

Although he really did look furious, I didn't know that he actually was. There was a spark in his eyes like lightning, a rumbling power in him like thunder. But I couldn't be entirely sure that it was fury or rage, not when the draft of his storm curled around me, drawing me toward him.

I'd taken two steps before I realized what I was doing, and at that point, it'd have been worse to stop and admit my mistake. So I strode toward him, my chin in the air to cover my incredulity on marking his apparel. Because instead of a suit, he wore tails and breeches and Hessian boots. His vest was a deep gold, his shirtfront and collar white. And around his neck coiled a cravat, the knot just where his Adam's apple would be if I unwrapped him. The tails billowed, tucked artfully in the top of his buttoned vest.

He'd dressed up. A curious smile brushed my lips.

I stopped a few feet away, and for a moment, we just kept on watching each other as a Leon Bridges song came on.

"Would you care to dance, Miss Bennet?"

Stupified, I answered with a word I wondered if I'd regret, "Yes."

He offered his hand, and I slipped mine into his palm, astonished to find it warm and smooth when I'd imagined it cold and coarse. He led me to the dance floor and turned me, pulling me into him by the waist and taking my hand again, holding it casually to the side.

I hadn't had a choice. He'd taken command, relieving me of any responsibility of decision—my body moved with his simply because he willed it. Our bodies were flush, and this close, caged in the steel of his embrace, I felt like a porcelain doll, small and delicate and priceless. He smelled of amber and oak, of earth somehow, which couldn't be right, not given where he'd come from. I looked up, my heart rate doubling when I found him looking down at me. I could have counted the creases in his lips or the clusters of black lashes framing his dark eyes.

When I found my voice, I broke the silence with levity. "I have to admit, I'm shocked to see you in costume."

"It's a suit. I always wear suits. Fabio wigs, however, are a hard limit."

I laughed despite myself. "I'm also surprised you're here. After the last

party, I didn't think you'd ever step foot in here without Georgie dragging you."

"I don't know that I would have if I didn't have an apology to make."

He spun me around in three steps, the movement so sudden and fluid, all I could do was hang on to him.

"An apology, huh? Have you been practicing in your mirror? I know you must stare at it often enough. Might as well be productive while you admire yourself," I teased, hoping for the first time that he didn't accidentally take me seriously.

It was only a flicker, but I swore I saw the corner of his lips tick up. "Just a little practicing. I've heard I'm terrible at it."

"It goes without saying."

"Except you seemed happy to say so."

I flushed. "I'm sorry. It was rude and out of line."

One of his brows arched. "Are you stealing my apology?"

An embarrassed chuckle escaped me. "You're full of surprises. Where did this new, amiable Mr. Darcy come from?"

"He was born of a little humility, thanks to someone who wasn't afraid to say what they thought."

"If there is one thing you can count on from me, it's that."

He made a noise that was almost a laugh. But when he looked back down at me, his eyes were warm, even though the rest of him remained eternally cold. "I'm sorry, Laney. I've behaved badly, not only for suggesting you were somehow beneath me, but for disregarding you in the meeting. It won't happen again. Will you forgive me?"

The temperature in the room rose by degrees, and I did what I had to do to break whatever was crackling in the air around us.

I cracked a joke. "So you'll *never* disregard me in a meeting? Even if I suggest hiring out a herd of elephants for a promotional event?"

He frowned. "We can't hire endangered animals to—"

"Or maybe one of those party busses with stripper poles inside for a client briefing?"

He opened his mouth, then shut it, that infinitesimal smile back in place when he realized I was kidding. "Even then."

"Ooh, what power you've given me. You should hope I use it for good."

"I suppose I'll have to trust you."

"Yes, I suppose you will." A pause as he turned me in a circle. "So we've

called a truce, then?”

He nodded once.

“Does that mean we can have a real discussion about adding the mixers to our strategy?”

The small softness in him tensed. “It’s not a viable rollout strategy. Getting people to come to parties comes *after* we open.”

And the heat between us blew away with an icy gust. “You still don’t get it, do you? You dressed up and everything, came here, where all you have to do is look around you to see just how *viable* it is. And still, you don’t get it.”

“I didn’t dress up because I approve. I didn’t come here because I suddenly decided it was a good idea.”

“Then why did you?”

We’d stopped dancing, though we were poised to. The song came to a close. We separated.

“You know, I’m not quite sure anymore,” he said coolly.

My spine stiffened, my chin lifting. “Then excuse me. I have a date tonight, and I’m sure he’s looking for me.”

His eyes narrowed. “A date? With whom?”

He would be the kind of man to use whom correctly. “Wyatt Wickham. I think you two are acquainted? He seems to have about as charitable an opinion about you as I do.”

I thought I’d seen him cold. I thought I’d understood what it was like to be frozen out. I thought I’d seen him angry.

That was nothing compared to the shift in him at the mention of Wyatt’s name.

“He always did have something to say. The trick is to know how much of it’s true.” His spine was straight as a yardstick. “I hope the rest of your night is more pleasant than this was.”

Darcy turned and walked away like a prowling beast, leaving me standing on the dance floor, alone.

LIAM

Through a curtain of red, I walked away from Laney Bennet, cursing the both of us.

I'd come here tonight for her. I put on this ridiculous costume and came to this ridiculous party as a gesture, a vehicle to make my apology. And if either of us knew when to quit, it would have been a success. But in an unsurprising turn, the whole thing burned to the ground, leaving nothing but floating embers and ash.

For a moment, that fire hadn't been frustration or disdain—something else had burned between us, something that even upon memory had me thinking about what it'd felt like to hold her in my arms.

And to think, I'd almost kissed her.

Georgie would have loved the breach of the rules, leverage with which she would campaign to see that Bennet boy. She'd been dancing with him since we walked in, the two of them staring at each other, all moony-eyed. But rules were rules, and even to consider breaking that particular rule only spoke to the depths that Laney Bennet had burrowed into my brain.

And as if that wasn't enough, she was supposed to be on a date with *him*.

Once my best friend. Now my sworn enemy.

I wondered if he knew Georgie and I were here. Maybe he'd show up to taunt me and torture Georgie. Knowing him, he'd set the whole thing up to make fools of all of us.

I caught sight of Cam and beelined for her with a dozen questions on my tongue. When she saw me approach, she stiffened into business mode.

"Liam," she said in greeting. "Look at you. Having a good time?"

"Might I speak with you?" The words were dark, tight.

Her brows drew together. "Of course." She took my arm and led me away. "What's the matter?"

"I'd like to ask a question I have no right to, so please don't answer if I'm crossing some line."

Her frown deepened. "Okay."

I drew a breath so hot and controlled, my ribs shuddered. "Wyatt Wickham. Is he writing a story about Wasted Words?"

"Yes," she answered, confused. "Why?"

"It's not relevant to our business relationship. Did Cooper call him in?"

"He did. Liam, what's this about?"

Goddammit, Coop. "Is he supposed to come tonight?"

"Well, he was, but he texted to say he was indisposed."

Relief washed over me like rain. The band around my ribs came unbound. "Good. That's good."

“Is there something I should know about him?”

“No. He’s a great journalist, and the piece will be valuable press.” *Don’t let him near Laney*, I wanted to beg. But it wasn’t my place. Laney wouldn’t believe me if I told her the truth about him anyway.

“Are you sure?” Her face quirked.

“Absolutely sure. Thank you, Cam. I’m sorry to interrupt your night.”

“It’s no trouble. Anything you need, all right?”

I nodded and sent her back to her people before drifting into the shadows to observe. To think.

Two people in this world sparked fierce and untethered reactions from me. One stood on the edge of the crowd, talking to Cam, her face falling when she no doubt learned that coward wouldn’t be coming. The other was the coward himself. The swindling opportunist who cared for nothing but himself and what served him. If he was going to be around here, would he cross paths with Georgie? Did he want to? I didn’t know what game he was playing, but one existed. He’d told Laney he’d be here tonight, immediately breaking the first of many unfulfilled promises.

And then there was the matter of what to do with Georgie. Did I tell her that the man who had nearly broken her was working with Wasted Words? That there was a chance she would not only see him, but see him with Laney? Or did I keep it to myself? Let her live in that blissful state of ignorance or tell her with the certainty that every time she stepped foot in this place, she’d worry he would be here too?

I couldn’t tell her, I realized. She’d be mad as all hell if she found out I knew and didn’t warn her, but I could endure that if it saved her from the sleepless nights his potential presence would trigger. And though I told myself it was to spare her feelings, I wondered if it was to spare mine too.

I watched Georgie dance with Jett, suddenly aware that he could be so much worse. I didn’t trust him, but if he was anything like his sister, he was as opaque as cellophane. Georgie couldn’t see him anyway, so the truth was that all of this was harmless. Just as harmless as whatever had just happened between me and Laney.

She was the embodiment of whiplash with all the predictability of a tornado. Her volatile nature made her impossible, impertinent, and for some incomprehensible reason, I felt the compulsion to storm over to where she stood, whip her around to face me, and force her to see reason by way of my lips, words or no words.

It would take the arrogance of a king to believe I could ever tame that particular tempest.

And contrary to her opinion, I'd never be so bold.

HERO DEFICIT

LANEY

M*en are jerks.*

I blew across the surface of my coffee, annoyed that it was still too hot to drink.

With a clink and a sigh, I set it back on its saucer. Wasted Words was bustling with people that morning, but like my overly hot coffee, the crowd annoyed me. The noise annoyed me. The stupid sunshine and the dumb, happy faces annoyed me.

But mostly, men annoyed me.

Darcy and his arrogant, judgmental face. Wyatt and his lying smile. Jett was okay, I supposed, though my other brothers made it their personal mission to badger me and thus could be included by default. Even Greg had gotten the hairy eyeball from me for making my coffee too hot.

Stupid jerks.

I opened my laptop, looking for a distraction, too irritated to even read my book, which irritated me more. But in my inbox was an email from Liam “The Dick” Darcy with a last-minute meeting. Tomorrow. And I had to be there.

With a huff, I slammed my computer shut.

For a brief, blissful moment, I imagined what it would be like to walk away from the project. I daydreamed of a life without Darcy and his know-it-all attitude, his general lack of empathy. His certainty that he was the only person in the entire world with a good idea and the hearing defect he had when it came to listening. What a wonderful world it would be if I could

walk away from him forever, forget he ever existed. But then there would be no one to speak for Wasted Words in their meetings, and someone very clearly needed to be there to intervene, lest Darcy make any more moves in the wrong direction.

Typical alpha-jerk stuff. I felt sorry for any girl who would end up with a man unable to do something so simple as to listen and compromise.

There had to be some redeeming quality about him. Georgie was so absolutely lovely that were he truly horrible, she'd never put up with him. I had to admit that for a moment when we were dancing, I'd understood. Beneath that hard, cold shell was a charming and clever man. A man who'd made me laugh, who held me in his arms and spun me around the dance floor with the confident stride of an expert. I could still feel the heat of his body, the strength of his arms, the rumbling of his voice in his chest. I could still imagine the whisper of his elusive smile, one I had only seen in full bloom when he was with his sister.

But that man was a stranger to me, if he was real at all. Maybe I'd only imagined him, fabricated the moment out of denial that anyone could be so merciless as Liam Darcy.

"Bad day?" came a voice from my elbow, a voice that inspired such a deep urge to cringe, I barely caught it in time.

"Hi, Collin." I tried not to sound bored. I really did.

Not that he noticed. Or had any personal boundaries, nor did he possess the ability to see when someone wanted to be left alone. He hopped up on the stool next to me—actually hopped—flagging Greg for a coffee.

"What are you working on?" He reached in front of me to try to open my laptop, and I intercepted, closing it with force.

"Oh, you know, this and that." I slid it off the bar and into my bag. "Aren't you working?" I asked in the hopes he'd leave.

"On my break. I thought I'd come sit next to you." His brows waggled in a way that I'd think was funny, except that he was serious.

Collin was one of the comic department managers, and from the second he'd started a few months ago, he'd been a constant, harmless buzzing, following me around like a fly that couldn't stop kamikaze-bombing you in the face or getting itself stuck in your hair.

Harmless. But annoying nonetheless.

The quintessential comic geek, Collin was about my height, weighed less than me, and hadn't had his hair cut in probably six months.

And here I thought I'd paid my karmic dues on men by enduring my brothers.

When it rains, it pours, I guess.

"I looked for you at the party last night—I wanted to dance, especially with you in that dress." He whistled. "But every time I saw you, you were with that guy. The angry one. I wanted to save you from him, but"—he shrugged—"I'm a lover, not a fighter."

I had on the most fake smile in history, but I was just too irritated to even attempt to adjust it. "Oh, I don't need saving, especially when it comes to him. But thanks."

"Oh, come on, Laney—it's okay to need somebody to swoop in and whisk you away."

"That's sweet, but I bet there's a girl out there who would *love* to be swooped and whisked by you."

He wore a knowing expression. "You don't always have to keep your guard up, you know."

I took a sip of my coffee so I wouldn't respond, but I burned my lip, swearing under my breath. "Jesus, Greg—where did you get the water for this latte, hell?"

He rolled one shoulder like a dumb, stupid man-jerk.

"I have tickets to a panel tomorrow night with some of the best Marvel comics to ever walk the earth. One for you, one for me. I figured we can go get ramen first."

My eyes narrowed in confusion. "That's sweet, Collin, but—"

"It really *is* sweet. Thoughtful too. I mean, who doesn't love Marvel? Everyone loves Marvel—*everyone*. And if they don't, they're wrong. Especially those DC hosers. Don't even get me started, or I'll keep you here all day." He smirked in my direction. "Then again, maybe I should."

Fuck it. I grabbed my coffee, braced myself, and slammed it. In a searing shred of body tissue, it screamed its way down my esophagus. I coughed, lips together, into the back of my hand, my mouth a wasteland. I wouldn't be able to taste anything for a week.

I glanced at smirking, clueless Collin. *Worth it.*

"That's really too nice of you. But I have plans tomorrow night," I said with a husky voice as I slid off the stool and snagged my bag. "You should ask Ruby! Gotta run. See you later."

He smiled in a way that told me he had no idea that I'd blown him off,

raising his hand to wave, but before he completed the motion, I hightailed it for the offices.

When I made it safely into the back of the bookstore, Cam looked up from her desk. When she caught sight of me, her face fell.

“What happened to you?”

I dumped my things in the love seat. “Men. Men happened to me.”

She leaned back in her chair, putting her Converse up on the desk. “Is this about Darcy?”

“No. I mean, yes, but no. He’s unbearable and drives me crazy, but he’s just one of the many. Like Wyatt standing me up last night. Or Collin, who will not take a hint.”

“Ugh, not again. You know Ruby’s got a thing for him, right?”

The red-headed cashier popped into my head, but when I tried to fit her with Collin, I couldn’t. “She is so out of his league.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants. He’s just too hung up on you to notice her.”

“I ignore him whenever possible.”

“He probably thinks you’re playing hard to get. Don’t worry about Collin. I’ll fix him up.” She rubbed her hands together with a devilish look on her face.

With a huff, I flopped down on the couch. “Are there any good men left?” She opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. “Married guys don’t count.”

“There are good guys left. Like your brother.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t exactly date him, can I?”

She gave me a look.

I pouted, staring at the leg of her desk. “For a minute, I thought Darcy and I were actually going to be able to get along. And then he had to go off and be a dick again.”

“It’s his default. But he means well, and he’s the best at what he does.”

“Oh, he’s all but told me himself. I’m pretty sure he repeats his merits to himself on a loop.” A pause. “I don’t know that he respects me as a colleague at all. What am I supposed to do, sit there like a good girl with my hands in my lap, nodding at every idea he has?”

“Could you do that without spontaneously combusting?”

“No. I mean, I haven’t worked on a team in a couple of years, but I’ve never worked on a team like *this* before. It’s so ... stiff.”

“Well, think about it. You’re new to them. They have their own dynamic

established. A new person always changes that. And Darcy doesn't strike me as the type to embrace change."

"No, he doesn't."

"I guess it's probably too much to ask you to go with the flow?"

"It'd be easier if he didn't berate me every time I opened my mouth. Oh, and get this—he called a meeting for tomorrow. Like I'm just at his beck and call. Like I don't have anything else to do."

"Do you?"

"Not the point, Cam."

She laughed.

"I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to do there, and he certainly hasn't told me."

"Maybe it's just a matter of coming at him from a different angle."

I perked up. "You know, that's not a bad idea. Maybe if I have something to present to him, he'll listen."

"Maybe. You're a genius, so I'm inclined to say that if he doesn't listen to you, he's not as smart as everyone gives him credit for. Although, oh my God—he looks damn good in period clothing. That cravat, though!"

"Don't remind me. And ..." I stopped, shaking my head. "Never mind."

"Come on. This is a safe space, Laney. And if there's some tea about Darcy, spill it."

Inside my rib cage, a mysterious ache blossomed. "I don't know. When we were dancing, he was ... different."

"Different how?"

"I don't know. I mean, he was clever and witty, and he even smiled. But it wasn't just that. Maybe he's just too intense to get that close to. I felt like he was going to absorb me or something." I shook my head. "It sounds so stupid. But he's the human equivalent of a black hole. If he had kissed me, I would have let him."

The look on Cam's face was still and dubious. "Ew."

I chuffed a laugh. "Trust me, up close, with his eyes on you like that? There was nothing ew about it. It's not fair that he should be that gorgeous. It makes it so much worse when he's an asshole. I bet he was just messing with me. It feels like he's *always* messing with me."

"Well, you know what they say. God doesn't give with both hands."

I chuckled. "Speaking of guys who get too much credit, what the hell happened to Wyatt? I can't believe I was dumb enough to think I'd found a

nice guy.”

Cam’s brows quirked. “You know, Wyatt texted me to let me know he wasn’t coming, which was weird enough. But then Darcy blew over like a thunderstorm and asked about him. He wouldn’t tell me why.”

“Wyatt didn’t say what happened with him and Darcy, only that he wasn’t a fan—an admirable trait. Darcy didn’t tell me either, but that’s no surprise. Honestly, part of me wishes Wyatt had shown up just so I could have seen the look on Darcy’s face.”

“You’re assuming he has more than one expression in his repository.”

That earned her full-blown laughter, but it faded into commiseration.

“I’m sorry about Wyatt. I bet he had a good reason for not showing, Laney.”

I sighed, still—and probably forever, since I was being dramatic—annoyed. “Who even cares? I shouldn’t even be surprised about anything but being dumb enough to get my hopes up. What’s one more thrown onto the pile of worthless men who’ve crossed my path? Maybe we can have a bonfire. Or have a Viking funeral for my love life. Push it out into the ocean and shoot flaming arrows into it until it catches fire.”

“Sounds brutal,” came a male voice from the doorway.

In a flash of motion, Cam’s feet were on the floor, and I popped off the love seat like it was made of lava. Because in the threshold of the office was Wyatt himself, somehow managing to look sheepish with a smirk on his face.

My cheeks flamed, rising with a nervous smile.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he started, scratching at the back of his neck. “Greg told me to just come back.”

“It’s all right,” Cam assured him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t show last night, Laney. Let me make it up to you. Or at least explain. Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“I just had one, and I’ve got the third-degree burns to prove it. But I’ll sit with you while you have one, if you want.”

“I’d like that very much.”

I nodded, glancing at Cam. “Be right back.”

But she was already back in her chair, feet on the desktop and smile on her face. “Take your time.”

Wyatt smiled that sad, apologetic sort of smile, his hands in his pockets. When I approached, he turned to meet my stride.

“I really am sorry,” he started, his eyes on the floor ahead of us. “I was all

dressed up and ready to go, but then a buddy of mine texted a picture Georgie posted on social, and I ... I couldn't see her. Especially not with Liam here."

I frowned. "What happened with you two?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"Since when does Liam tell anyone anything?"

He chuckled, gesturing to a booth. "Fair point."

We sat across from each other, and I waited for him to settle in and just *tell me*, for goodness' sake.

He drew a heavy breath. "Georgie and I were engaged."

A tingle of shock slithered down my spine.

Once he knew I'd registered the statement, he continued. "We'd been together for a year, never had any problems. You have to understand—Liam was my best friend. We met at Columbia, and even though I came from nothing and earned my degree on a scholarship, he brought me into the group without thinking twice. I loved Georgie what felt like forever, from the first time I ever saw her. But I couldn't act on it, not without his blessing. And he gave it to me, even though he took it back in the end. Truth is, I don't think anyone will ever be good enough for Georgie, not in his eyes." He shook off the thought. "A couple of weeks before the wedding, he made sure she knew exactly what he thought about me—I wasn't good enough, and I never would be—and bolstered his campaign with three things: the lies he told to turn her against me, the threat that he'd cut her off if she stayed with me, and the lie that he'd paid me off and I'd accepted."

I swallowed the sticky lump in my throat.

"She didn't have a choice. Neither of us did. I couldn't stand between her and her legacy, her only family, even if Liam is the devil himself. So he won—Georgie is locked in her cage, just like he likes it. I just ... I couldn't face them. Especially not in front of you."

My fingertips rested on my lips. I could see it clearly in my mind, the perfect alignment of what I knew of Darcy. Ultimatums and control, bending everyone around him to his will, forcing them to their knees. Separating two people in love just weeks before their wedding simply because he didn't approve of the man his sister loved.

Wyatt put on a smile. "Please, don't fault either of them. I never did belong with them. Their world is so ..."

"Stuck up and starched? Colorless and cold?"

"It's their way. But I'm better off, you know? Plus, there are upsides."

“Oh?”

“I wouldn’t have met you.”

God, that smile had the power to melt anything in its vicinity. He reached across the table and covered my hand where it rested.

“I guess that’s one thing we can thank Liam for,” I noted. “Even if it’s the only thing.”

Wyatt turned my hand over with his eyes on my palm, inspecting it as if it were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. “Let me take you out. We can forget all this mess, if you’re willing. Because I think I want to know you, Laney Bennet.”

I waited until he met my eyes, offering a smile. “Just say when.”

“When.”

I laughed. “Walk me home at six? We can grab pizza on the way.”

“I’ll be here.”

With a happy sigh, I watched him, this man who had been so mistreated by Darcy. It was a thing we had in common, though my troubles with Liam were nothing in comparison to what Wyatt had been through.

Darcy knew no bounds, held himself above the rules, above everyone else. And he’d robbed his sister of happiness just to soothe his own ego. I was left with the dreadful premonition that he’d do it again. But this time, the victim of Darcy’s designs would be my brother.

And I couldn’t let that happen.

ANTE UP

LIAM

“None of these ideas are going to work.”

The team deflated at my statement. Of the dozen taglines they'd presented, the best was *Get Your Drink On*, but the nonspecific nature of the phrase put it firmly in the *no* column. I admitted to myself that though I had known the concept wouldn't be easy to wrap into a single line, I'd hoped someone would have an epiphany. The answer was there—I could feel it just out of reach, like a word on the tip of your tongue—but we had definitely not hit it yet.

“Let's brainstorm,” I said as I stood, heading over to the whiteboard in the corner. “Word association. Let's go.” Spread out on the board, I wrote the words *book bar*, *romance*, *comics* and circled them, waiting for suggestions to make a web.

The easy ones came in fast, but they began to slow until they trickled and stopped. I turned to find the team still with silent concentration, all except one. Laney's jaw was set, her hands a white-knuckled knot in her lap. And behind her eyes were a thousand words just waiting for an invitation to spill.

I didn't offer one. Instead, I turned back to the board and started calling out connections, writing them in a column I'd sectioned off at the edge of the board. After a few minutes, we were quiet again. I stepped back and eyed the board from a distance, as if some space would allow me to see it more clearly.

It didn't.

“There's something in here. Take pictures of this, and let's hit the

drawing board again. I want five new taglines tomorrow.”

Their discontent was thinly veiled. I knew I was exhausting them—this was the third round of slogans, and it was becoming clear the typical avenues weren’t going to bear fruit. You could only come at a problem from the same angle so many times before the rut was too deep to escape. They needed a change of scenery. They needed—

“We have five hours left in the day, and I want you to get your things and head to Wasted Words. I’ll call and let them know you’re coming. Drink. See the store and concept you’re promoting. And brainstorm. Come back tomorrow with something we can actually work with.”

That frustration they’d been wearing disappeared—their faces cracked open with excitement. Well, except for Laney. She was a pot of boiling water with a lid that didn’t fit. But I wouldn’t take the bait for a fight from her any more than I would my sister.

Sometimes, you just had to wait until the lid flew off.

The team had a spring in their steps as they exited the boardroom, and Caroline stood with her crimson lips set in a smile.

“That’s the best idea you’ve had in weeks. Want to ride with me over to the bookstore?”

“I’m not going,” I answered, closing my portfolio.

Her manicured golden brows slid together. “Why not?”

“Because they can’t effectively work with me in earshot, and they can’t cut loose if I’m within a block of them.”

“How about we go to The Polo Bar for a drink instead? Maybe we could brainstorm,” she added, seeing the word *no* on my face.

The Polo Bar was notorious for celebrity sightings, and there were always photographers outside, leaving me with the distinct suspicion that she was more interested in being seen with me and the rumors that might fly as a result.

It had been like this since I’d known her. In high school, she’d conjure up reasons for us to be seen together, fanning even a spark of a rumor to her favor. We ran in the same circle and had been through a lot together—including the loss of my parents in college—but I’d never been interested in her, and she’d always been interested in me. I cared for her enough that I didn’t want to hurt her. She was a fixture in my life, closer to a cousin than a friend.

Sadly, she didn’t feel the same way, and no matter how many times I said

no, she wouldn't leave it alone.

"No thanks. I still have work to do."

She sighed. "You really could stand to cut loose too, Liam."

"So I've heard."

I gave her my back, not realizing that Laney was the last one out of the room. I fell in just behind her, close enough that I could smell her soap, the intoxicating scent of magnolias I'd come to associate with her. When we stepped into the hallway, she turned for her cube, and I turned in the opposite direction for my office.

The flash of regret I felt when she didn't speak up surprised me—a little part of me wanted to know what was on her mind, even though I knew she was angry and we'd likely end in yet another argument. Whatever it was, I was almost certain that I'd patently disagree, and if it was about the goddamned parties again, I'd be mad. I couldn't imagine what else it could be, not unless I'd once again said something I didn't realize had upset her.

It was a common mistake of mine across the board. If you asked my sister, she'd tell you more than you ever wanted to know on the subject.

In any event, I reached my office without interruption. It had been my father's when he was about my age, with floor-to-ceiling windows on one side and mid-century bookshelves across the back wall. In fact, it was all mid-century vintage—Eames office chair, Wegner chairs opposite a Juhl desk. My grandfather had been a collector, and my father collected in kind. I didn't know much about furniture or art, but I understood how it made me feel. The crisp, clean lines of my office felt very much like *me*. Stark. Quiet. Subtle, with simple symmetry and unpretentious curves. It didn't have to try. It just *was*, and when you caught sight of that secret beauty, you were granted with a rush of discovery that struck a reverent chord of recognition.

I set my portfolio on the desk, but before I could take a seat, Laney knocked on the threshold of my open door.

I paused, hand on the back of my chair, assessing her for signs. She looked mad, but that was one of the two standard looks she wore around me—the other being disdain. But there was still that tight containment she'd worn in the meeting, obvious in the stiffness of her spine, her elevated chin, the square of her shoulders. Tucked in the hook of her arm was her laptop and a manila folder.

"Laney," I said in lieu of a greeting, taking the opportunity to sit as I prepared myself for whatever thunder she'd successfully bottled up through

the meeting. “What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to speak with you privately, since there doesn’t seem to be space in meetings for me to bring anything up.” The subtle bite of sarcasm—another default. “May I sit?”

With narrowed eyes, I nodded to the chairs.

“Thank you. I wondered if we could have a real conversation about the mixers. We can’t seem to talk about it constructively, can we?”

My jaw clenched in defense of that being my fault. *Be nice*, I practically heard Georgie say in my mind. She wasn’t going to blow on me, not yet, at least. Because she wanted something from me. The least I could do was listen quietly for a few minutes before telling her no. Again.

“Go ahead,” I said.

There—a little smile at the corners of her mouth. “Thank you.” She opened her laptop and typed. “I realize I’m being persistent—”

I stifled the urge to scoff.

“—but I really do feel that this is an important opportunity we’re missing. I’m not suggesting we throw everything behind it, but I think there’s a way to come up with something comprehensive that includes this branch of advertising. You’re planning grand-opening events, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, these parties are grand-opening energy, but every week. They don’t just greet the people involved in the process—they make a space for the public. Automatic engagement in exchange for discounted liquor, which we already have a hundred percent markup on. But more than that, they *invest* in us, not only emotionally, but with their credit cards.”

She turned her laptop around, and on the screen was a mock-up of a bus shelter ad in flat, minimal colors. A faceless man in nineteenth-century clothes stood proudly, leaning on his cane against a background of pale salmon pink. Beneath him, in bold white letters, were the words *Your Very Own Rochester Is Waiting*, and beneath that sat information on the regular singles night, the store’s social media handles, and a QR code.

It was clever but vague. The design was clean, clear, appealed to the demographic, but this wouldn’t work any better than *Get Your Drink On*.

But rather than say any of that, I answered her hopeful look with, “No one knows who Rochester is. Because no one’s read *Jane Eyre* casually in a hundred years.”

Just like that, the soft hope on her face tightened until it was wiped away.

“First of all, you’re wrong—plenty of people read *Jane Eyre* or have at least seen the movie. Secondly, this is just a concept. We could do something similar for the comics. Use the literary themes to first catch their eye, then bring them in with the promise of meeting someone.”

“I realize that you have data to support what you’re suggesting. But Laney—and I need you to hear this, *really* hear this.” I paused to make sure she was listening. “We are not using this direction for our launch. A campaign like this is stage two. Once the store is established and running. But not before. I know you’ve been in high positions at other firms as well as being the sole marketer at the bookstore, but this is not your team. This is not your company. You are not an employee, but you are still my subordinate. And I don’t expect to have this conversation again.”

The words had been firm but not condescending, clear without pushing her. Or so I thought—the flames beneath that boiling pot licked at the sides, the lid clattering and hissing with steam.

“I’m not allowed to speak during meetings. I’m not allowed to speak to you privately. Apparently, I’m not allowed to have ideas or suggestions. Why am I even here if you’re just going to do whatever you want, regardless of my opinion?”

“You’re here to be a pass-through. A gut check. You know what the client wants, and it was my impression that you were to be present without interference.”

“Interference?” The color in her cheeks flared. “I’m the one person in this building who knows Wasted Words inside and out. I think you just don’t want ideas that aren’t yours. I saw you in that meeting—you shot your team’s ideas down just as swiftly as you did mine. How long until you push them all out of the way so you can do it yourself?”

“Did you think their ideas were good?”

“That’s not the point. You’re just so certain you’re the only person who can come up with answers that you won’t even let anyone else try. So how about this, Mr. Darcy? Put your money where your mouth is. We need two full concepts to propose, so let’s split up. You come up with your grand and perfect campaign, and I’ll come up with mine. We’ll split the team between us—you can have Caroline, since she seems just as impossible as you are.”

I spent a moment puzzling out how this woman had ever survived in a corporate environment, and the only thing I could surmise was that her dogged determination and that fire in her belly produced results. But she was

wrong about one thing—beneath her sarcasm was the subtext that she thought I couldn't do it. I wondered if she knew I'd worked my way up the ranks just like anyone else. I'd fought inside of a creative team to have my ideas recognized and produced, and that was where *my* strengths were. In the fight. Those tools might have been a little dusty, but they were as sharp as ever, and the thought of proving her wrong held an intoxicating appeal.

But agreeing wouldn't just be childish—it'd be unprofessional.

"No."

A pause. "No?"

"No. This is juvenile, Laney. I don't have to prove anything to you or anyone."

"Then let's up the ante. If you win, I promise to be your perfect *subordinate*. I'll be quiet. I won't argue, and I won't challenge you for the remainder of our time together."

"Are you physically capable of holding up your end of the deal?"

She shrugged. "You're not going to win, so it doesn't matter. But if you won't play, then I won't have any motivation to keep my mouth shut."

Tempting. "How did you get to be so shrewd?"

"I have four brothers. As the only female, I had to have an advantage, and it wasn't going to be brawn."

I watched her. "You're not at all afraid of me."

"Why should I be afraid of you? Your height or your strength? Because you have authority? Power? Or because you're unbearably rude? You're imposing, Mr. Darcy, but no. I'm not afraid of you."

Something in my heart eased at the admission, some liberation. Few people were comfortable in my presence, and to know she wasn't intimidated by me was novel. Beyond that, as I traced the shape of her resolute face, I saw that she wanted a chance to prove herself. It was a display of scrappy underdog moxie, a hunger that bred winners. And for the first time, I recognized her drive as a strength rather than an irritation. She would lose, of course, and I would win not only the pick, but compliance and sweet silence.

Laney Bennet, compliant. In theory, it sounded like bliss. But I wondered if it would drain her of all that made her who she was, if it would douse her fire, and found myself surprised at the aversion I felt at the thought. Laney Bennet without fire was a bird with no wings.

But beyond my personal gains was the truth—the team was struggling, and we were on a timeline. I'd been considering how I could motivate them,

and a competition would up the ante, as she'd said. Pitting them against each other would produce results, and who knew—there might be ideas we could pull from to shore up one of the campaigns enough to bring it to the top.

And so I decided.

“Keep the stakes between us, and I'll consider it.”

The look on her face was pure triumph. My eyes flicked to the ceiling.

“That's all I was after,” she said as she stood, “your consideration.”

She had no idea how much she'd been considered since I met her.

“If we do this,” I started, “I'll need you in the office daily, if the shop can manage without you.”

Her face quirked in thought. “Four days? I think I need at least one in-house.”

I nodded once. “I'll have an answer for you tomorrow. No need to come in—I'll be in touch.”

She smiled, nodding once right back at me before turning to leave.

And I watched her go, wondering if my sister would praise or pummel me for agreeing to Laney's terms.

Because we all knew I already had.

IMITATION SUPERHERO

LANEY

I was on *fire*.

Music played at Wasted Words the following evening, and I sat at a booth in the bar where I'd been for several hours, working on the campaign I wanted to pitch to the team. If Darcy would just give the green light already. He'd promised me an answer today, but today was very nearly over, and I'd heard nothing.

I didn't know what had possessed me to challenge him yesterday. Maybe Cam *should* have told me she'd fire me if I didn't do what Liam said. But the freedom of knowing there would be no consequences had made me unreasonably bold. And now all I wanted to do in the whole wide world was prove him wrong. I wanted to best him so badly, something in me crackled like electricity at the thought of winning.

I'd been in a design hole for hours, a hyperfocused vacuum of creation. When I looked up, my beer had been replaced again without my noticing Greg approach, so I just gave him a wave across the bar and got back in it.

Darcy had been right about the campaign I'd proposed—it was too vague, and the average joe didn't know who Rochester was—but I had a new idea, one that elevated the campaign to a height he would take seriously. The campaign would be similar to what I'd already come up with, but rather than the long, clunky tagline, I'd tightened it up to this slogan: *Meet Your Next _____*. We could use it for everything. Meet your next *book*. Meet your next *superhero*. Assassin. Zombie slayer. Duke. Viking. Sports stud. And the best part? It worked for both the bookshop *and* the mixer. Not only could we use

words like *first date*, but even the other illustrations were relevant. There were mixers when somebody *could* meet a zombie slayer or assassin or duke. It was the multitool of ads. I could have my cake, eat my cake, *and* stuff the cake in Liam's face when he lost.

Really, it couldn't have been more perfect. I'd been working on illustrating people who resembled famous comic heroes and heroines without infringing copyright. Like a faceless girl in a tank and cargo bootie shorts, with a long braid hanging over her shoulder and a gun strapped to her thigh. In her hand was a grappling hook. Everybody knew who she was with *treasure hunter* in the blank rather than *Tomb Raider*. Thor, he was easy too, being a Norse god and all. The superheroes were hard, though. I couldn't exactly draw Batman and expect to get away with it, but with some creative gymnastics, I had all kinds of options. Tomorrow, I'd start on the romance side. I just had to finish the Not-Elektra assassin I was working on, and I could pack it up and head home before the bar started to get busy.

I was deeply entrenched in drawing Not-Elektra's hair when someone slipped into the booth across from me. Bleary-eyed, I looked up, smiling when I saw Wyatt.

"Ooh, fries," he said, reaching for the mostly empty basket.

"Ew, those are cold."

He popped one in his mouth and shrugged. "Still good. Mmm. Salty." Dusting off his hands, he said, "Aren't you going to ask why I'm here?" His smile tugged up on one side.

"Wyatt!" I said with dramatic flair. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"Glad you asked. I knew you'd been here through what should have been dinner and figured you needed to be fed something more nutritious than cold fries."

"Well, they weren't cold an hour ago."

"So I was thinking we should get shawarma."

I laughed. "The healthy choice."

"I was going to suggest pizza, but we had that on our last date."

"Date, huh?" I asked, amused. "The way I remember, we ate pizza on the walk to my place, talked on the stoop, and you wouldn't come up. Is it a date if you don't get kissed at the end?"

There was that sadness again, the one that came and went like a comet. "I haven't dated much since Georgie."

The admission struck me with regret. "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't ... I

didn't even think."

"It's okay, really," he said in a way that was impossible not to believe. "But I'm calling it a date. I *did* buy your dinner."

"You did," I said on a chuckle, saving my work once more before closing my laptop. "What time is it?"

"Eight. What are you working on?"

"This campaign for work. Get this—Darcy wouldn't listen to my ideas, so I challenged him to a competition, and if he accepts, I'm going to annihilate him."

"I hope it's humiliating."

"Me too, if for nothing more than to see the look on his face. I can't imagine Liam is a graceful loser."

"You're right about that. Once, he—"

I waited when Wyatt stilled, his eyes narrowed and trained behind me.

When I followed his gaze, it landed on one very unexpected, very beautiful Liam Darcy. But he wasn't beautiful in the peaceful, reverent way the word was usually used, a thing to be quietly admired and worshipped. He was beautiful destruction, a tempest conjuring mountains from waves and putting out the stars with his fury, leaving the world beneath him heaving in the dark.

He'd stopped a few yards inside, a pillar of shadows. The black of his hair, of his eyes, of his glare. The long, inky double-breasted wool coat, the kind that only rich men wore, swathing him in a vacuum of color. And though the two men were twenty feet apart, the air cracked and sizzled between them.

And then he laid those impenetrable eyes on me.

The weight of that gaze crushed my lungs, leaving them devoid of air.

Confused, I blinked and hitched a shallow inhale, sliding out of the booth. Wyatt moved to follow, but I stayed him with a hand. And I crossed the space between us, suddenly uncertain of everything.

I stopped in front of him, and though I was a few feet away, the heat of him licked at me, as it always seemed to. "What ... what are you doing here?" I asked. "And at eight at night?"

For a handful of heartbeats, he looked down at me, his eyes piercing. Again, my lungs ceased to function.

"I considered your challenge, and I accept."

Still baffled, I stared back at him. "You could have emailed me."

One of his brows ticked up.

“Or called. Or texted.”

“But I came here. So now you know.” His eyes shifted back to Wyatt, and the temperature dropped ten degrees in a breath. “I’m sorry to interrupt.”

What is even happening right now?

He ruined Georgie’s life and Wyatt’s along with it. Let’s not forget that.

I stiffened. “Well, you’ve delivered your message.”

“Yes. I suppose I have.” He took a step back, and I felt a strange void in the empty space. “I’ll need you in the office tomorrow to announce the competition to the team and reassign them.”

“I’ll be there.”

A slight nod. A glance at Wyatt. A sling of daggers. A final look at me, and he turned to go.

For a second, I just stood there, staring at his back. When I caught myself, I headed back to Wyatt, looking over my shoulder before I sat to catch a sliver of black disappearing into the night.

“What did he want?” Wyatt asked through his teeth.

“He accepted my challenge.”

A pause. “And he came here to tell you?”

I sighed. “He is not a normal guy. I couldn’t tell you what he wanted or what his motive was. The man is a mystery in a designer suit.”

“He’s simpler than you might think,” he said darkly, but with some internal snap of self, he smiled. “Come on—let’s go get you some shawarma before you disappear.”

“Only if you promise to come up this time.”

He considered it, looking at my lips as a smile rose on his. “Deal. If you play your cards right, you might even get that kiss.”

I laughed as we headed out, flustered at the thought of kissing him. “Who even are you?”

“Just a guy who doesn’t want to screw up again. That’s all.”

At that, I smiled, lips together and face soft. “Well, you’re safe with me.”

And when he wrapped his arm around my shoulders, I felt safe too.

Safety—a thing I so often took for granted. At the thought, Liam’s dark eyes flashed in my mind, a portal to a bottomless chasm. Those eyes were dangerous, an unpredictable depth, a pool of black water. They struck me with a primal sort of fear that if I reached out, if I breached the surface, there would be no smooth rock bottom, no boundary, no limit, no end. A hand

beneath would wrap itself around mine, pulling me in. And I would be lost forever, swallowed up by the darkness, leaving not even a ripple on the still, glassy plane.

And the thought left me wondering if I'd care.

WHO KNOWS BETTER

LIAM

The night was cold, the bite in the air sharp, but I marched into Central Park despite the chill, the sting only registering from a distance.

The fire of my fury was enough to keep me warm.

Wickham's face burned a negative in my consciousness, the smug smile he'd given me when Laney wasn't looking. It had been a long time since I'd laid eyes on him, long enough that I'd never have guessed I'd react this viscerally to his presence, even if only from across a bar. I knew I wasn't over his betrayal—I knew myself well enough to know I would *never* let go of that—but the urge to feel the bone of his nose crack against my knuckles was just as intense as it'd been when he abandoned my sister weeks before their wedding.

But it wasn't just that, I realized as I stormed across the park toward my building. It was that he'd been there with *her*.

From the moment Laney left my office yesterday to the second I walked into the bar, she'd occupied my thoughts. Her proposition tumbled around in my mind, and though I knew I'd accept, the thing itself held my attention like a puzzle I'd almost solved. I'd given some thought as to why she'd suggested a challenge. This type of thing wasn't unusual—I'd been in my fair share of wagers and competitions inside of a creative team over the years. But coming from her, and considering the volatility of our relationship, my curiosity was too much to deny. How would she rise to the occasion, and what would it produce?

But my preoccupation with her went beyond campaigns and marketing

strategies. It went beyond the cut of her words or the friction between us. She drove me to madness, and I gladly returned the favor, but I couldn't help but wonder if that wasn't a symptom of something deeper, something bigger than what it appeared.

I couldn't describe it, not exactly. Couldn't pinpoint a word for the way she felt in my arms. There wasn't a phrase to convey the way her hand fit in mine or the tempo of my pulse when her chin lifted to meet my eyes, when her smart smile beamed up at me. Her lingering presence was a constant companion, even when she infuriated me, even when all I wanted was for her to stop talking, willing to quiet her with my lips against hers where I could swallow her words. I was in her thrall, caged and captured, haunted by a ghost of what could be, of what would never be.

Not only did she despise me, but she was expressly forbidden. There was little I could do about either point, particularly gaining her favor. We were made of substances that didn't mix, didn't mingle—her of golden oil and me of aged vinegar—watching each other through an impenetrable barrier. There had been moments between us that shook the bottle, transforming us into something new. But her wall wouldn't be breached. She'd made that much perfectly clear. So the moment would pass, and we would settle back into our space—mine dark, hers light—forever in opposition.

I would accept that, just as I'd accepted everything I'd been handed, well accustomed to not having things I wanted. But seeing her with Wickham had set a fire in me, and that fire was hungry for destruction.

There was little I could do beyond seethe, unwilling to stoop so low as to interfere—I'd done that once, and though I'd do it again for Georgie's sake, the fallout had been cataclysmic. But Laney wasn't mine to protect. My comfort was in trusting her intuition—she was too clever and suspicious to fall for his game. And Wickham was most definitely playing a game, just as he always was.

Even if I did tell her the truth about Wickham, I doubted she'd believe me when I told her *why* he left Georgie. If he was good at one thing, it was convincing everyone around him that he wasn't a thieving, lying bastard. He was a wolf in sheepskin, hiding his teeth and fur.

It was how he'd convinced Georgie they didn't need a prenup. And if it wasn't for my suspicions—despite the fact that Wickham and I had been friends for a decade—I wouldn't have discovered his gambling debt or the frequent trips to Atlantic City when he was supposed to be traveling for

business. I'd thought I knew him, and maybe I did. But addiction had changed him, twisted him into something unrecognizable, insatiable. My objective hadn't been to break them up—I wanted to force the prenup, with the addition of an allowance provision, and the written agreement that he'd get help. But he refused and implemented plan B—convince Georgie that I wanted to control them, break them up. Persuade her that I believed him beneath us and would say anything to remove him from the picture. He called me a liar, promised her it had all been fabricated, insisting that if she loved him, she'd leave with him and abandon me.

When she didn't, his anger twisted him into a creature of resent. But despite it all, when it was over, I gave him the money to pay his debts with his promise he'd never show his face again. Last I heard, he'd blown every penny.

And now here he was, with Laney.

The thought of her broken beyond repair like Georgie sent a roar tearing through my chest.

Fucking Wickham.

The park was dark and quiet and cold, and by the time I reached our building, I couldn't feel my fingertips. Judging by the doorman's face, I must have looked as angry as I felt, and by the time I spanned the warm lobby to reach the penthouse elevators, I was hot and cold all over. Beads of sweat gathered on my brow as I pulled off my coat in the elevator, but my hands and feet were ice. The thought of my treadmill brought me some relief—I wanted to run until I couldn't move. Until I was so tired that I wouldn't stare at my ceiling all night, so exhausted that I wouldn't dream.

The house was well lit, the sound of Billie Holiday floating into the entry from the kitchen along with the scent of garlic and spices.

“Liam?” Georgie called from that direction. “Where have you been? Are you hungry?”

My stomach twisted in answer. The encounter with Wyatt fought for a way out, but I wouldn't burden Georgie. Barking about Wickham would only serve me—she'd be left shaken, and upsetting her without cause wasn't something I was willing to do. Really, what I wanted was to be alone where I could burn off my anger, but it'd been too long since I'd eaten to run as hard as I planned to. So I strode into the kitchen and set my things in a chair at the island.

Georgie smiled over her shoulder at me, absently nudging chicken around

in the pan as I pulled off my coat. She looked so young without makeup, her hair piled on top of her head in a bun so messy, I wasn't exactly sure how it stayed in place. A gigantic sweater hung off one of her shoulders, adding to the teenage effect she wore. And when that smile of hers hit me, the tension thrumming in me eased just a little. A long breath left me, taking a pound of rage with it.

"Your nose is all red," she noted, her brow quirking. "Did you walk home?"

"From Wasted Words."

At that, she was smiling again, and I didn't miss the flush of her cheeks. "What were you doing over there?"

"Laney Bennet and I are splitting up the team to compete for the campaign win."

Her smile froze in a strange sort of confused expression. "You're what?"

"She proposed it yesterday after the meeting. She was pushing the parties *again*—"

"Because it's a good idea."

My face flattened. "Not you too."

A shrug. "It's wise. Half the team thinks so too."

"Good. She can have that half."

"How in the world did she convince you to step down from your throne to get in the dirt with the lackeys?"

"I'm not. I'm just giving her a throne of her own."

Georgie shook her head. "You realize that's even weirder, right?"

"She promised she'd quit making my life difficult if I win."

"God, she is so smart." She set her spatula down and moved for the wineglasses. "Have any big ideas?" she asked as she pulled a bottle of wine out of the fridge.

"I always have ideas. And if I'm being honest, I'm looking forward to getting my hands dirty. It's been a while since I've flexed those muscles."

She gave me a derisive laugh. "Please. You practically do it all yourself anyway." As she sipped her wine, her snarky eyebrows didn't let up. "So why were you at Wasted Words?"

I started to speak but stopped myself, calculating my words. "Just to tell Laney the competition was on."

"Interesting."

"Trust me, it's not."

The way she inspected me told me she didn't believe me. "You guys will be working together. A lot. She'll have to be in the office more, I figure."

"I don't know what that has to do with anything."

"*Very* interesting."

"What's for dinner?" I jerked my chin toward the pan, and she allowed me to change the subject.

Georgie didn't let anything go unless she wanted to.

"Chicken piccata. I'm glad you went to the bookstore. The more time you spend there, the more you'll get it."

"What's there to get? It's a book bar. Pretty simple concept."

"Tell that to your creative team."

"You're on a roll today. I can almost hear the rimshots."

"It's Cam's fault. After hanging out with her today at Wasted Words, I might have absorbed some of her sass."

Like the flip of a switch, the tension was back, drawing my shoulder blades together. "You went to the bookstore today?"

"Yeah. I took Cam to lunch, and then we hung out for a while at the bar."

"And?"

"And what?" she asked innocently, prodding the chicken.

"I told you, I'm coming with you to the bookstore."

"And I told *you* that A, it's part of my job to handle briefings and customer relations—which means going to the bookstore regularly—and B, I'm an adult and don't need a chaperone."

"Was Jett Bennet there?"

Her bare shoulder rolled. "Maybe."

I stared at her profile for a long moment, long enough that she met my gaze with an angry one of her own.

"Liam, you're being ridiculous."

"Am I?" I rounded the island, folding my arms. "He likes you."

The flush climbed up her neck, deepening in her cheeks. "You don't know that."

"I have two eyes, a pair of ears, and something between them. I *do* know that."

She huffed. "He's never said anything to me about it. And even if he does, why does it matter?"

"Because you like him too."

"Oh, for God's sake, Liam. I'm not a teenager. I'm perfectly capable of

maintaining a professional relationship with a man I'm attracted to."

"So you admit it."

She groaned like the teenager she'd just said she wasn't.

"You can't see him."

"I know that."

"Then why do this to yourself?"

A pause. "The project won't last forever."

There it was—that temporarily quiet anger I wanted so badly to run off, and I didn't have the good sense to walk away. Instead, I threw myself into the volcano and burst into flames. "You cannot see him. Even then."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure I can." She pressed the chicken until it hissed.

"Jesus, George. I don't fucking get it. Why? Why do you always pick guys who are set out to hurt you?"

"Because that's what love is. No one walks into love without knowing it's going to hurt."

"But you're determined to bat a thousand when you pick guys with every reason to. Can't you find a man in our station?"

She turned to me, her face twisted up in anger, spatula in hand at her side. "And why would I want one? I know enough of those men—I have been surrounded by them my entire life. Men more worried about their image and their money and their mistresses than loving anyone other than themselves. The fact that you would even suggest that money be a factor in who I choose to see is almost unbelievable, if I didn't know better. But somehow, I'm always shocked at how you can be so thoughtless, so cruel."

That word. It stung just as badly as when Laney had flung it at me. "I only mention it," I said with as much control as I could muster, "because when you choose men without means, they have motive beyond loving you."

"*That is not for you to decide!*" she shot. "Just because I misjudged someone once—"

"This has happened more than once, and Wyatt isn't just *someone*. You almost fucking married him, George," I shouted, not meaning to, unable to stop it. "He tried to take everything from you, and he would have if—"

"If you hadn't stuck your goddamn nose where it didn't belong!"

"Because I was trying to *protect* you, not choose who you marry."

"What's the difference? You're still missing the point, Liam—you *don't get a say in this.*"

My fire flamed so hot, it could have melted cold steel. "I don't see why

not—somebody’s got to pay attention. Admit it. You’re not the best judge of character. How many times have you brought home some fucking loser who wanted to get into your wallet more than they wanted to get in your pants?”

The second the words left my lips, regret gripped me. And when Georgie jerked back in pain, guilt struck me like it was me who’d been slapped.

“I ... I didn’t mean—”

Her eyes shone, her jaw set but chin flexed. “You asshole,” she breathed.

“Please,” I begged, stepping closer. “I didn’t mean that. I’m just ... I’m sorry. I can’t stop worrying about you, about this. You’re all I have, George, and if something happens to you ...” I shook my head, looking away. “What happened with Wyatt can’t happen again, because the next man who hurts you is going to land him in the hospital and me in jail. I know I’m overbearing—”

She let out a single *ha* as a fat tear slid down her cheek.

“But I’m the cynic so you don’t have to be. Remember? It’s my job to look for danger, and you having feelings for a man whose income relies on a retail job is dangerous.”

She sniffled, refusing to look at me as she uncrossed her arms to swipe at her cheek.

“The more you feed that want to see him, the worse it’s going to get. And then what’s going to stop you? If Catherine finds out, she will tear you open. Take you off the project. Punish you, maybe even fire you. And God knows what she’ll do to him.”

The acrid smell of burning meat hit us both at once, and Georgie swore under her breath, hurrying to save dinner.

Once salvaged, she kept her eyes on the pan and her spatula moving the chicken around without purpose. “Objectively, you’re right. I shouldn’t even be friends with him, which is all we are, just so you know. But Liam, I am not going to even pretend like I’ll follow your edict about the financial position of the men I see or date or fall in love with. You’re going to have to trust *me*, because what was cute when I was sixteen doesn’t work when I’m twenty-six. You can’t choose for me forever.”

I hated that she was right, no matter how desperately I wished she wasn’t. I didn’t know how else to protect her from men like Wickham.

“I saw him.” The words blurted out of me, unbidden. “Wyatt.”

The spoon paused over the skillet. “Where?”

“Wasted Words. With Laney.”

Slowly, she turned. “Are they seeing each other?”

“I think like they might be,” I said darkly.

The thought hung between us.

“I’ve known since the mixer.” When she didn’t respond, I continued. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you—I’d hoped he wouldn’t come around. But if he’s around the bookstore, you should be prepared to see him.”

Still, she said nothing.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine—I don’t love him anymore. But Laney ...”

“We can’t interfere.”

“You sure are eager to tell me all the things I can’t do tonight,” she snapped, but sighed. “But you’re right. I don’t think I could do it, sit and badmouth Wyatt to her. I always hope people judge me based on my merits, not by what others say, and ruining someone because of what happened between us just...I can’t do it. We don’t know—maybe things are different. Maybe he’s changed.”

We exchanged looks.

“If she asks me about him or I find a window to gently warn her, I will. But I won’t stop them from being together. I know all too well how that feels, and I’m not about to put that on someone else.” She straightened up and turned back to her task. “I won’t lie to you—if the timing were right, I would be dating the hell out of Jett Bennet, and when the job is over, he’s fair game. The contents of his bank account don’t matter to me. His character does. And he is one of the most genuinely good men I’ve ever known. Aside from you. Although unlike you, he’s not an asshole,” she teased.

“He’d better not be,” I warned, still unconvinced of his merits.

She chuckled.

I watched her for a moment. “I promise I’ll try harder to trust you. And I’m sorry I’m like this.”

Georgie sighed, moving the pan off the burner. And when she turned to me, there was such sadness on her face, witnessing it broke something inside of me.

“Don’t apologize for who you are. You’re like this because it’s me, and for so long, I’m all you’ve had. Just like you’re all I’ve had. You’ve always taken care of me, and I know you always will. In fact, I’ll even give you some control. You have my permission to fully vet all potential boyfriends, if it makes you feel better.” Her lips tilted in a smile.

“Good, because I’d do it anyway.”

At that, she laughed, stepping into me for a hug. “But I still get the veto.”

I wrapped my arms around my little sister, resting my chin on top of her head. “I don’t want you to get hurt again”

“I know. But trying to stop it is like trying to make a waterfall fall *up*. You can’t change gravity, no matter how badly you want to. I’m going to get hurt again. And the best thing you can do for me is be here when it happens.”

“Always. I’m always here.”

“And promise me one more thing.”

“Anything.”

“Find someone to love.”

It was a sad resignation, an empty space in my chest I knew would never be filled. I knew without question that I was an observer to that particular luxury.

But I went ahead and promised her anyway.

WISHY WASHY

LANEY

A week later, the Bennet family dining room rang with the happy sounds of home. Dominated by male voices, there was a constant low rumble, punctuated by my mother's singsong tone. The mix of the three women my younger brothers had settled down with were welcome, bringing a new melody to the noise that was the Bennet brood.

Last year, Mom had instructed Luke to put the leaf in the dining table where we currently sat, and she watched him install it with such pride, you'd have thought she'd won a Daytime Emmy. That leaf had been waiting in some long forgotten closet for the moment when her children found their match, the wooden slat a symbol of her hopes and dreams for us.

She said, at least. We all knew they were *her* hopes and dreams, which revolved less around us and more around the number of grandchildren we would supply. Twelve chairs stood like sentinels around the table. Ten of them were full. And filling the final two rested on the shoulders of Jett and me.

Dinner was well underway, though eating never stopped conversation. It was never quiet, not even in the dead of night, thanks to white-noise machines. It was a tic we all possessed—the inability to happily sit in silence. Growing up in this house so full of people and bedlam, if things were quiet, someone was about to get in serious trouble.

Wyatt had been gone a week for work, but we'd texted some while he was away. I liked him enough that I might call it smitten. The last time I'd seen him was the night at Wasted Words when he and Darcy had their

showdown, and Wyatt had come home with me, as promised. Mostly, we sat on the couch while the TV played nothing and we talked and laughed over it. Before he left, he'd bestowed upon me a kiss that was one for the books, complete with a chin-grab and a hair-tuck when it was over.

A good guy with a stitched-up heart, a great job, and enough wit to keep me a little bit obsessed with him.

Things were looking up.

"How's it going at De Bourgh?" Lila asked over the din. "Have you met Catherine yet?"

"Not yet. I don't think she often lowers herself to wander around with the rabble."

"And how's your Mr. Darcy?" Mom asked cheerfully.

"Well, we still hate each other, and I think he's a terrible person. But he's been more manageable since we started the competition."

"You'd think he'd be *worse*," Tess said, dunking a slice of French bread into her stew.

"You'd think. But if I've learned one thing about Darcy, it's that he's unpredictable. No one knows what goes on in that man's head, but I imagine it's terrifying."

"And what about that other boy?" Mom asked. "Wortham? Weston?"

"Wickham," I offered. "He's been out of town for a story for Forbes."

"A reporter," she mused at the recall of his profession. "How exciting. When will we meet him?"

"Mom, we've kissed approximately once. So at this point, probably never."

Her lip slipped out just a touch. "Well, a mother can hope. To think, my oldest children are the last to settle down. Are you sure you won't let me help? I met a man at the grocery store yesterday I think you'd love."

Jett frowned at her on my behalf. "The groceries get delivered. What were you doing at the store?"

"Oh, just picking up this and that." She kept her eyes on her hands as she adjusted and smoothed her napkin in her lap.

"Mom," I warned, "did you go to the grocery store to set us up?"

"Don't be silly, Elaine," she said noncommittally.

"That wasn't an answer," I noted.

Jett's brows came together. "Please tell me you weren't hanging around in the produce department, looking for eligible men for Laney."

“Of course not! I was looking for girls for you too, dear.”

Everyone but Jett and me laughed.

“Yuk it up, you guys,” I said, pointing at them with my spoon. “Better to have Mom soliciting strangers for us than keeping a calendar of your cycles.”

“It’s not a calendar,” Mom argued. “It’s really more of a list.”

Now the laughter came from Jett and me while the rest of them groaned and blushed.

“What’s the update on Longbourne?” Jett asked in the direction of Marcus and Maisie, who had taken over the corporate end of things.

“They miss you two working with us,” Mom answered before they could, making hard eye contact with me. “I’ve seen their team’s marketing, and it’s beautiful, but it could use your touch. No offense, darling,” she added, smiling at Maisie.

“None taken,” she answered with a smile of her own. And she was genuine—we all knew Mom knew jack about marketing and probably hadn’t seen anything. She just wanted me to be involved in some context, any context.

“I’m sure they’re doing perfectly fine on their own, Mom.”

“But they would be doing *better* with you.”

“Mom—”

“I’m only saying that you’re so talented, dear. And you’re off working for the bookshop and now with that big firm. And I’m not the only one who feels like you’d rather work with everyone but your family.”

Half of everyone looked into their soup, and the other half glared at Mom. The argument was so worn out, I didn’t have it in me to fight.

“Longbourne’s team has it well in hand, Mom, and Wasted Words had no one before I started there.”

“Don’t they have the Darcy’s now? I still don’t understand why they need *you* so desperately.”

“Because I know how the shop works, what its clientele wants. I’m an advisor, and I really enjoy—”

“I’m only suggesting that they don’t need you as much as *we* do,” Mom said. “I understand that you don’t want to work in the shop and you don’t care about the greenhouse—”

“That is not true—”

“—but you are part of this family, Elaine Bennet. Everyone contributes in their way.”

“Jett doesn’t,” I argued, “and I never hear you on his case about it. Why am I the lucky one? You’ve always favored the boys”—I stopped her from speaking with a gesture—“and don’t deny it. I know I’m a disappointment, Mom, but please, stop making it a topic of conversation at the dinner table.”

For a handful of seconds, it was dead silent in the room as Mom and I locked horns. But her face wasn’t angry—it rarely was. Instead, it was full of the quiet disappointment of a mother’s dashed hopes.

“Maisie, the stew was delicious. Was that fennel in it?” Tess asked, breaking the silence.

And with the change of subject, dinner was over. Kash pushed back his chair and began gathering up bowls while Luke and Marcus cleared the table of what was left of the meal. Jett and I would take the dishes tonight, and I was glad we could hide away in our corner of the kitchen, where Mom would hopefully leave me alone to do our work. Because once that was done, we could get the hell out of this house so I could breathe again.

I grabbed some glasses and fled to the kitchen, lining them up next to the sink so I could prep, first filling one side with hot, soapy water. Then finding fresh towels for Jett and me. I felt him approach and threw it in his direction without looking.

“Oh!” Mom squeaked her surprise, and with niggling dread, I turned to her.

I’d apparently hit her square in the face, and she laughed, her twisted, arthritic hands gathering up the towel to hand it back.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, taking the dish towel.

“I am too.” She paused, tracing my features with her gaze. “I shouldn’t go on like that—I know I shouldn’t, and I’m always breaking my promise to myself not to bring it up. But I can’t seem to help myself.”

I offered a resigned smile.

“When you were a little girl, I always imagined you would be a miniature of me. That you’d love what I loved, see things the way I see them. But instead, you went in a direction all your own. I’m proud of you, Elaine. But I’m still mourning that dream that you’d carry on the tradition. Longbourne has always been a family affair, and to have you and Julius missing from our business isn’t easy for me. That’s all.”

I took one of her hands, thumbing the fine bones on the back. “I know, Mom. And I love you, but you have got to let this go.”

“I will. Someday, I will. But in the meantime, I’ll start with banishing the

topic from dinner.”

I chuckled, opening my arms for a hug. Mom gave the best hugs. I didn’t know what it was about it. The splay of her hands or the squeeze that was somehow the perfect amount of pressure to make you feel both safe and loved. Maybe it was the shift of her hand as she rubbed my back or the hook of her chin on my shoulder. But I felt her heart in every second, knew that no matter what, she loved me without condition, even if I’d gone my own way.

She didn’t let go until I did—another of her magical hug traits. She cupped my cheek and smiled. “I love you, Laneybug. And I’m proud of you, even if I am a greedy old lady and want you all for myself.”

“I love you too,” I said on a laugh. “Can I come early next weekend? Maybe we can wander around the greenhouse and get together a few bouquets.”

“It’s a date,” she said with a wink.

And with a final squeeze of my hand, she shuffled back into the dining room.

Only then did the rest of them file in, arms laden with dishes. Once Jett’s arms were empty, he put on one of Mom’s aprons—the turquoise one with the giant red roses on it—and tossed me the one with all the marigolds backed by a shade of pink so bright, my eyes burned if I looked too long.

“You okay?” he asked, reaching into the soapy water for a dish to scrub.

I sighed. “It’s really not fair that she never gives you shit for working somewhere else.”

“She does. Just not at dinner. If I have to hear another word about how badly the shop needs a manager, I might actually snap on her.”

I made a mocking noise. “Please. You never snap on anybody, least of all Mom.”

“It’s not just her. You needle her too.”

“Because she drives me crazy.”

“The ones we love almost always do.” He handed me a plate, meeting my gaze.

Our eyes were the thing everyone noted about us, but that was just the quality they noticed first, our hair being the second, which was black as midnight. Sometimes, I wondered what we’d all look like when we were gray, like our parents. But we’d still have those unmistakable Bennet blues. If you looked closely, Jett and I had similar smiles, and though mine tilted in the same smirk, it rose on the opposite side, as did that one eyebrow. We had

the same mannerisms, the same inflection on our words. But that probably had more to do with our closeness than it did genetics.

We'd always been inseparable, but after college, I took off for a job far enough away from New York that I couldn't hear my mother calling me home. Luke left for California, and Jett headed to the Upper West—close enough, but far enough too. But once Longbourne had gotten back on its feet and everyone found their places inside, all I wanted to do was run again. And the sad thing was that I had a feeling Jett wanted to stay and manage the shop like Mom had asked. But he'd left, and I was pretty sure it was strictly so I wouldn't be alone.

I should just leave. Move away, I thought as I dried the plate. But selfishly, I didn't want to go. I didn't want Jett to come back here and fall in line any more than I wanted to fall in line myself. And that was so terribly unfair, my stomach sank like a stone at the realization.

He bumped my hip with his, a dripping bowl in his hand. "I think that one's dry."

Inspecting it, I said, "Look at that. I think you're right." I set the dry bowl on the counter and took the wet one.

"You okay?" he asked again.

"Yeah, I told you, I'm fine."

"No, not about that."

I didn't look at him—he'd know too much if I did. "I'm just thinking about what it'd be like if we *did* hang back and commit to the Longbourne life."

"Loud."

"And meddlesome."

"Definitely that. It wouldn't be so bad, though. I like being here."

"I'd like it more without the nagging."

"If you came back, she wouldn't nag you."

I gave him a look.

"Fine, but she wouldn't nag you about *that*."

I was quiet for a second, stacking the bowl and taking the next. "Do you think they really are okay? Do you think they need my help?"

"I don't know. Maisie would, though." He scrubbed at a spot in the bottom of a bowl. "Think you'd come back if they needed you?"

"I came back to New York, didn't I?" I teased. "It's not even a question. I'll always help out, you know that."

“I do.”

I changed the subject, eager to put that away. “How’s it going with Georgie?”

He let out a sigh and handed me a bowl. “Same as ever. We’re *friends*.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the worst. Are you sure the whole work thing is real and not just something her brother made up to stop her from seeing you?”

“You’re giving him an awful lot of credit.”

“Well, he *did* break up her wedding. Have you talked to her about it?”

“A little, but she didn’t say much, just that that she realized he wasn’t the man she was supposed to marry. They were too different, had different goals. It was pretty clear she didn’t want to talk about it in detail, and I don’t blame her. I wouldn’t want to unpack all my baggage either. Plus, she knows you guys are talking and I don’t think she wants to interfere.”

I made a noncommittal sound.

“Anyway, I’m sure the company policy is a real thing. And Catherine de Bourgh doesn’t let anything slide,” he said in a snooty, overdone British accent.

“I guess that’s where Darcy gets it.”

Another sigh. “Honestly, Lane? I don’t know why I’m torturing myself. I keep telling myself it’s enough that we text and talk and she comes to the shop when she doesn’t have to—I think just to see me. We dance at parties and ... God, do you know how many times I’ve almost kissed her? But that’s not what she wants.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I can just tell.”

“But you don’t *know*. Why not make a move and see what happens?”

“Because I won’t put her job in jeopardy just because I want her for myself. But I’m ... I don’t know what I’d call it. Lovesick, I guess. I think about her all the time, watch the door through my shift hoping she’ll walk through it. My best days are the days I see her, but they’re my most miserable too. Because I can’t have her.”

“Listen—I get it. It’s forbidden. But it’s not like she’s a nun. Or your high school teacher. Or your stepmom.”

“Gross.”

“What I mean is, it’s not like you’re breaking some vow or law or social rule. You’re not exactly the client, are you? So I really don’t get what the big deal is. If grumpy old Cathy wouldn’t approve, don’t tell her.”

“And what about her brother?”

“Well, extra fuck that guy.”

He snorted a laugh.

“She’s a grown woman—surely, Darcy will back off. Probably after a full background check, but you’ll pass that, and then he won’t have anything to complain about.”

One of his brows jacked up as he handed me a bundle of spoons.

“Fine, he’ll always complain, but hopefully not about you. Much.”

“I don’t know, Laney. She told me from the jump, without directly saying that we couldn’t be anything more than friends. Isn’t it kinda shitty to just come out and tell her what I want when it betrays what she said in the first place?”

“I don’t know how anyone walks around without saying how they feel, so I’m probably the wrong person to ask.”

“So you’re saying I should go for it?”

I shifted to face him, resting my hip on the counter. “When it comes to what you want and what makes you happy, I’m always going to tell you to go for it. Don’t let anyone or anything stand in your way, not even your fear of what might happen to her. That’s for her to decide, not you. What’s the worst that could happen? She says no? You can handle that. But I’m pretty sure she won’t say no.”

“Let’s hope,” he said with the smallest of smiles.

“And if Darcy gets in your way, he’ll rue the day.” I held up the spoons. “Rue the day!”

The family had been in and out while we talked, but they’d begun to gather at the smaller table in the breakfast nook, like we did when we weren’t eating. But it only worked when a few people sat on laps, which was no problem for my brothers. The three of them sat side by side with their loves in their laps like a scene out of a musical, gazing at each other with those dumb puppy looks on their faces.

It was the cutest thing I’d ever seen.

I wondered, as I often did, if I’d ever be there with them, content and in love. I imagined Jett in one of the empty chairs with Georgie in his lap and could picture it without even trying. A stir of rightness in my chest brought with it a flare of protection over Jett. Because he should get what he wanted. He deserved a love who loved him back. And I wanted that for him more than I wanted it for myself.

I'd probably end up the crazy aunt who took all my nieces and nephews to Disney World and bought them all the things their parents said they couldn't have. I'd get some cats, even though I'd prefer dogs, really punch up the whole *independent woman of a certain age* bit. It wouldn't be so bad.

I ignored the rush of fear that came with the thought of Jett moving out and moving on. But that was what we were supposed to do, and logically, I knew *this*—the single companionship—wouldn't last forever. And though I'd never forgive him for leaving me alone to contend with our mother, the thought of seeing him happy was too much to resist.

And I'd do anything to help him get there.

DEATH BY CHANEL NO. 5

LIAM

It had been a week and a half since we'd started the competition, and my team and I hadn't turned up anything of worth.

All we had to show for long days in a conference room was a pile of terrible ideas, and on seeing Laney's team working happily together, I had a bad feeling we were well behind them. And the initial presentation was next week. We kept coming back to *Get Your Drink On* because it was the closest we'd gotten to the heart of what we were trying to say, even if it was stupid and would never work.

But on that third night, as I lay in bed not sleeping, something struck me. Something so simple, I knew it would work.

Get Lit.

It covered books and booze in two little words. Get your literature. Get hammered. A campaign rolled out in my mind so hard and fast, I turned on the light, reached for my notebook, and started sketching. A stack of books with a scotch on top. An illustration of a regency duke with a bourbon in his hand. I paused, pencil in hand, wondering how much of the idea had come from Laney's, but it was the only thing that made sense. Literary heroes with liquor in their hands, like Mark Twain. But I pushed myself back to romance and comics, given those were the shop's big sellers.

But with this concept, the team would turn out ideas—I didn't doubt that for a second. So I put it away and shut out the light, my mind still racing with ideas when I finally fell asleep.

So this morning, the first thing I did was brief my team, brainstorm with

them for a bit, and then we split up to work on some design concepts. At the moment, I was waist deep in fonts, digging into my coffers for something that would fit the direction I had in mind.

Otherwise, there was very little to report. Georgie had begrudgingly avoided Wasted Words when Jett was there in an attempt to put some space between them. I'd barely seen Laney, too entrenched in the process with my team to take my eyes off of what was in front of me. As for Wickham, I'd told myself I'd forgotten about him. But even though he was a void in my mind, he still took up space, held a shape. Despite that, he wasn't the reason I'd spent long nights staring at my ceiling, thinking of Laney.

As the customer relations liaison for the bookstore, Georgie thought it would be a good idea to throw a cocktail party for the Wasted Words staff and our team, and though she said it was to make sure everyone was happy and let them blow off a little steam, I had a strong suspicion it was more about mending some fence between me and Laney, though I didn't know how she thought a party would improve *my* mood. When it came to Laney, things had gotten better by degrees—she'd been able to tolerate me in new and promising ways now that she'd been given a voice, a team. The respect she'd craved—the respect I'd inadvertently stripped her of—she'd regained. And I knew without a doubt that I should have listened to her from the start.

Put it on my tab.

I had intentions to dance with her again at the cocktail party, but with different results. Weeks after we'd danced the first time, I could still remember how she'd felt in my arms, what the warmth of her smile had done to me. And this time, I would end it on *that* note, not a fight.

A flicker of caution in my chest stopped the thought. I didn't want to dance with her just to smooth things over. I wanted her in the circle of my arms where I could keep her, even if only for the length of a song. I wanted to bask in that smile. So I did what I always did—I gave myself permission to want those things because she would never want me, and I could never have her.

I could indulge myself because nothing would ever come from it.

A knock against my doorjamb startled me, but my heart stopped when I found Laney standing in the doorway.

She was beautiful whether she wore jeans and band T-shirts and sneakers or a pencil skirt, simply because there was something so quietly elegant in the way she wore it. Something in the way she carried herself, the lines of her

hands and fingers when she gesticulated, which she did often. Or maybe it wasn't anything she did so much as that she just *was*. She was confident in the most genuine way, so true to herself that even the smallest action felt meaningful. There was no pretense with Laney Bennet, only the truth of her, just as she stood before me now.

She was a vision framed in the black threshold, wearing wide-legged navy pants with a high waist that gave the illusion that she was taller than her height. I'd noticed she favored blue and wondered more than a few times if it was because of the effect it had on her eyes, amplifying them to a shade so vibrant, it was almost unnatural. Her white button-down might be satin—it held a radiant sheen, highlighting the shape of her.

But perhaps the best part was her smile, a smart, tilted expression that elicited a tug at the corner of my lips in answer.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked.

I closed my computer. “Not at all.” I gestured to the chairs.

“Thank you,” she said as she walked in and took a seat. After a deliberate inhale, she said something I didn't expect. “I know we've had our differences, but I wanted to thank you for giving me a chance.”

At that, a tug at my lips persisted. “You bet me. Using bait you knew I'd take.”

She gave me a nonchalant shrug. “I didn't honestly think you'd take it. You're not an easily persuaded man.”

“No, I am not.”

“Anyway, your team is talented, and it's reminded me of what I've been missing since leaving Connor & Cook. So thank you for trusting me with them. I hope you won't be mad when I win.”

A laugh burst out of me before I could stop it.

She just kept on smiling, though her forehead quirked in some combination of amusement and assessment. “I don't think I've ever heard you laugh before.”

“Commit it to memory,” I said with the remnants of laughter on my face.

“Already done. Are you guys still stuck?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?”

“I really would.”

“Then I guess it's going to be a long week for you, Miss Bennet.”

She sighed for show, flicking her eyes to the ceiling. “Well, at least I tried.”

For a moment, we watched each other, the silence pregnant with unspoken thoughts. When she stood, so did I.

“Thanks again, Mr. Darcy,” she said, and oddly, I found myself disappointed she hadn’t said my first name.

“You’re welcome,” I said, walking around my desk. “And you should know, I’m sorry too. For my behavior. I’m ... unaccustomed to meeting new people, in part *because* it never seems to go well.”

“I can’t for the life of me imagine why,” she teased. Her eyes were on mine, our gazes locked with such intensity, when she moved to step away, she bumped into one of the chairs and wobbled, tilting dangerously in my direction.

Without thinking, my hands shot out to steady her—one cupping her closest elbow and the other her closest hand. It was only a second, maybe less. But I felt the silk of her shirt, warmed by her skin. The lightness of her small hand in mine. The soft flesh of her palm and the long shape of her fingers. I could smell the crisp, quiet floral of her soap and see the silver flecks in her irises until they were swallowed up by her pupils.

“*Oh!*” she breathed as a blush smudged her cheeks, and she righted herself.

When she stepped back, my hands fell to my sides, my thumb stroking my palm where her hand had been.

“Excuse me,” came a sharp voice from the direction of my door.

Laney whipped around like we’d just been caught *in flagrante*, and I glanced around her to find my aunt in the doorway.

Catherine de Bourgh was stiff and starched as always, her nose with a permanent upward tilt and her eyes cold, assessing, and trained on Laney.

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” she asked in such a way that promised a consequence if the correct answer wasn’t given.

“Not at all,” I said easily, and when she met my gaze, that cold exterior cracked, exposing warmth and care.

She smiled. “I trust we’re all well?”

“Very well, thank you, Catherine. May I introduce you to Laney Bennet, our team member from Wasted Words?”

Laney extended her hand with a lovely smile on her face. “It’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. de Bourgh.”

Catherine’s chill was back with the crack of a whip, her icy eyes on Laney. “Bennet? Where are you from, girl?”

Laney's smile fell with her hand. "I ... Greenwich Village, ma'am."

Catherine drew a breath that brought her chin and chest together. "You're Rosemary Bennet's child?"

It was an accusation disguised as a question.

To her credit, Laney looked more confused than intimidated. "Yes, I am. Do you know my mother?"

"I do," she snapped. "If you'll excuse us, I need to speak with my nephew."

"Of course," Laney said, arranging her face into what I would have called a smile if I'd never seen the real thing. And then she headed out of the room without looking back.

I moved back to my desk, puzzling over some context I'd missed..

The moment she was gone, Catherine approached my desk in a rush of fury and Chanel No. 5.

"A *Bennet*?" she hissed. "What in God's name is *that* doing in my building?"

My eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"A Bennet. As in the Bennets who own Longbourne. The same Bennets that put Evelyn Bower in jail."

Slowly, pieces clicked together. Evelyn Bower, Catherine's oldest friend. I remembered the two women shoving Evelyn's poor, shy daughter, Margaret, in my direction like a prize mare at a number of parties. We'd only endured the setup because neither of us was inclined to talk to anyone—we could silently sit and simultaneously fulfill our duty without saying a word. Catherine and Evelyn had been thick as thieves, running their empires since before such a thing was considered possible—Evelyn at Bower Bouquets and Catherine here at the firm. The news break when Evelyn had been arrested took over the news cycle for a week, even longer when she'd gone to trial.

Catherine operated her business by way of fear and intimidation, but when it came to those she loved, her love and sacrifice knew no bounds. She would do anything to protect those few who made it into her heart. And Evelyn Bower was one of the most important, which explained a thing or two. Just not everything.

"I don't remember the *Bennets* having anything to do with Evelyn's mismanagement of her company."

She rested her palms on the surface of my desk and leaned in with a menacing look on her face. "Well, they did. And now you have one of them

here, in *my* building, while Evelyn rots away in jail.”

I could have laughed—I very seriously doubted a millionaire was rotting anywhere, even prison.

“Aunt Catherine, I’m not sure what you’d have me do.” Or what I was willing to do. “Laney is the only marketing consultant at their shop, and the client requested she be a part of the team.” When she didn’t look swayed, I reminded her, “This is a five-million-dollar account. I cannot remove her from the team against the client’s wishes.”

“Then convince them that she’s a nuisance. Get her fired, if you can manage it.”

At that, I did laugh. “You can’t be serious. You want me to ruin the life of a talented woman because you believe her family wronged Evelyn Bower? An event that not only seems solely the responsibility of Evelyn, but one that has nothing to do with us?”

Gears clicking behind her furious eyes, calculating my words. The answer she reached displeased her.

She stood. Lifted her chin, putting her nose substantially higher in the air. But she smiled, her voice somehow both placating and dictatorial. “Yes, of course. You’re right. I have always admired your integrity, my darling—it is one of the noblest markers of your character. You know me well enough to understand my unhappiness. But there’s more than one way to skin a cat, they say. Now if you’ll excuse me ...”

My brows flicked together with uncertainty—would she take matters into her own hands?—but I brushed the thought away. She wouldn’t jeopardize our standing. “I can’t imagine you came to see me without purpose.”

Caught, she corrected herself. “I wanted a briefing on this account and your progress, but we’ll do that another time. Let’s have dinner. Bring my sweet Georgiana. Friday, eight o’clock.”

“Of course. I’ll let her know.”

“Please do, and we’ll discuss it all then. Goodbye, dear,” she said with all the warmth of a marble statue.

I watched her go, wondering if this was the last I’d hear of it. And I found myself certain it wouldn’t be.

LANEY

Everything about that was weird, I thought as I walked back to my cubicle. I'd expected to thank Darcy, endure an awkward exchange, and leave. Instead, I'd maintained a genuine smile, heard Liam Darcy laugh, and then he'd caught me when I stumbled—a gesture I could still feel the hot remnants of. As if his fingertips had marked me.

And as if that wasn't confusing enough, his aunt had happened.

I liked to think I generally gave a good first impression, but Catherine de Bourgh was very clearly unimpressed by the likes of me. On discovering she knew my mother, I found a little clarity when it came to her disdain, but the vitriol in Catherine's body language and tone were unmistakable. Granted, I also knew she was impossible to please, and most people were low-key afraid of her, so I told myself not to take it personally.

But when I stepped into my cubicle, I caught sight of her leaving Darcy's office. She'd already seen me, and with every step, the glowing coals that were her eyes singed and smoked with contempt for me. When she disappeared into the elevator well, the temperature returned to a comfortable range.

I sat, opening my laptop with a frown on my face. Curiosity piqued—what on earth had my mother done to Catherine de Bourgh that had her so twisted? But I squelched the thought. Truth was, I didn't want to know. In fact, that knowledge might be a liability—at least this way, I had plausible deniability.

Within a few minutes at my computer, I slipped into the stream of creation, going over the designs we were working on for the internal review—a print material spread, signage, ads. But I didn't get far.

“Hey,” a cheerful voice said from behind me.

I swiveled my chair, finding a smile for Georgie. It was automatic when in the presence of someone so radiant.

“Just wanted to check in,” she continued. “Making progress?”

“We are. Check this out.” I opened up a couple of designs. “We have our taglines, and the write-up is almost finished. We're just working on mock-ups, but here's our palette, font hierarchy, and an aesthetic overview.”

“I really like it, Laney.”

“More than Liam's?”

“Nice try,” she teased. “Did you just meet with him?”

“I did,” I answered with a note of wonder in my voice. “He was surprisingly amiable. Your aunt, however, was not.”

“I don’t think there’s a single person on the planet besides Liam and I who would consider her hospitable, so I wouldn’t take it to heart.”

“She knows my mother, so you might be wrong. I love Mom, but the society women she’s acquainted with don’t usually have a favorable opinion of her.” At Georgie’s confused expression, I added, “It’s a class thing. That, and Mom is notoriously oblivious. Most of the time, she doesn’t even realize they dislike her.”

Her brow furrowed. “Well, I hope it’s not that. But I *am* glad my brother was on his good behavior. Look at you two, getting along.”

“He’s much more enjoyable when his hackles are down.”

Georgie sighed her understanding. “It’s a rare glimpse behind the curtain. The man beneath the exterior Liam chooses to show the world is not who you think. He gives all of himself to what he loves, but ... well, he’s a roaring lion with a thorn in his paw.”

“And you’re the mouse who pulls it out?”

“There’s no getting rid of it, only edging close enough to soothe him. To remind him everything is going to be all right. But to get that close, you have to earn his trust, and that is no small task. Few have risked it—fewer have made it all the way through. I’m sure I’m only in by default of genetics. But once you find your way into his graces, he gives everything of himself without question or thought.”

I took a moment to choose my next words. “But hasn’t he hurt you?”

A chuckle. “Sure—he’s still human. But he’s never done anything but try to protect me.”

“What about Wyatt?”

The tightening of her features was almost imperceptible. “Wyatt wasn’t Liam’s fault. I was hurt, yes. But not by my brother. I guess Wyatt told you what happened?”

I nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was for the best.”

“Do you really feel that way though? Liam went so far to stop you. To get between you and what you wanted. It didn’t even happen to me and I’m furious.”

She watched me for a beat. “Liam and Wyatt didn’t end on good terms, and I’m sure Wyatt didn’t have anything charitable to say about my brother. But sometimes—especially when it comes to who we trust with our hearts—we can’t see the truth of the circumstance until someone we love is brave

enough to point out what we missed. That was all it was.”

“If someone tried to interfere with my relationship the way he did with you, I would have done the opposite out of spite.”

She chuckled. “Oh, I’ve defied him plenty. But this time, he really was right. Please, don’t be angry on my account. If I’m not upset, it stands to reason that you shouldn’t be either.”

The truth of that statement sank in slowly, like water on soil so dry, it sat on top of the dirt, unsure what to do with itself. Georgie had not only let it go, but endorsed Liam’s interference. It made me question the why of it, the reason Wyatt had been villainized and Darcy praised. One of them was lying—either Darcy had lied to his sister or Wyatt had lied to me. But even though I couldn’t see Wyatt lying to me, I trusted Georgie, and even though I still thought Liam was an overbearing asshole, she was right. Being mad on her behalf was virtually pointless.

But the conversation struck me—I’d heard half the story from Wyatt, but I’d be willing to bet Georgie had a very different recount of what’d happened, and Liam would have yet another.

In the end, Georgie had forgiven Liam, and I probably should too. For that transgression, at least.

“I can’t really argue that logic, which is impressive. I can usually argue any logic,” I said with a smile. “Is it weird that I’ve been hanging out with Wyatt?”

At that, she offered a gentle smile, but something was hidden behind it. “No. Just because Wyatt and I didn’t work out doesn’t mean I don’t want him to be healthy and happy. But if I’ve learned one thing in life, it’s to make sure those you trust have earned it.”

Something about the way she said it sent a tingling warning whisper down my spine that I didn’t understand. So I widened my smile and changed the subject.

“Fair enough. Now I just need you to spy on Liam for me so I can beat him, and we’ll be all set on the subject of your brother.”

That earned me a laugh as she turned to go. “If I didn’t have to live with him, I just might help you. But alas.”

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

One of our designers interrupted with a question for Georgie, and they walked away, leaving me with my thoughts, which were a jumble.

I’d thought things were black and white.

Darcy, bad. Wyatt, good.

Me, right. Darcy, wrong.

The truth was more complicated than that. It was a web of half-truths and perception, indecipherable as an outsider.

But I couldn't see to stop trying.

DEPENDS ON THE STAKES

LIAM

A few days passed, bringing us to the end of the week and the promise of the weekend. Georgie and I had plans for dinner at Catherine's, but today would be about preparation for next week, when we'd present to Georgie and the other team for a review.

My team meeting had just broken, and excitement crackled in the air—we were going to win. Even not knowing what Laney had in store, we were convinced. But as I exited the conference room and caught a glimpse of Laney at her cubicle, I decided to find out for sure.

Laptop under my arm, I crossed the space to her, feeling the eyes of the other designers on me as I passed. She looked up, smiling when I stopped in front of her.

“How did your meeting go?” she asked. “Are you scrambling yet?”

“Not at all. The team's pretty sure we've got this in the bag.”

“Oh, are they? I hope they won't be too disappointed.”

I chuckled. “I thought we might discuss just that. It's not a competition if you don't know what you're up against. Want to compare? I'll show you mine if you show me yours.”

At that, a laugh bubbled out of her. “How do I know you won't steal my ideas?”

I leaned on the temporary wall and felt a smirk on my face. “You already know this is mine to lose.”

A blush and a chuckle. “All right. You're on.”

“Grab your laptop and follow me.”

When she had her computer and was at my side, I turned for my office.
Again, eyes followed us.

Nothing to see here. She'd rather set herself on fire than entertain the thought of me, you've all seen it.

I wondered briefly if I was convincing them or myself.

At my office, I opened the door and held it for her. Once we were inside, it closed on its hydraulic hinge, closing with a snick. We were left alone, the silence heavy. I should have thought to prop it open, but to turn around and open it now would have given too much away—I couldn't let her know how she affected me.

She wandered to the windows overlooking the city as I walked to my drafting table, lowering it to level.

“What a view,” she said with a touch of wonder in her voice.

When I looked to the sound, I was struck still. The shape of her body carved the span of the bright, sparkling city. The sun hit her at such an angle, she was cast in shadow, the light a gentle halo softening the line of her silhouette, illuminating the very edge of her hair, her skin, the dark fabric of her skirt. I longed to learn the shape of her, to commit it to memory where I could recall it for admiration when she was gone.

“Yes, quite a view,” I said, hearing a touch of yearning in my voice. Before she could respond, I gave her my back, making myself busy with my computer. “Did you miss it? New York?”

“You have no idea,” she said from behind me. “I think I would have taken any excuse to leave Dallas, if I'm being honest. But helping out at Longbourne is always worth it. I couldn't let them try to manage social media on their own—the thought of my brothers on Instagram gives me nightmares.”

I chuckled. “Why didn't you stay with them? Why leave for the bookstore?”

Her approach was quiet, but I heard her all the same. “I ask myself that a lot, more lately.” She paused, seeming to gather her thoughts as she approached. “I'm sure you understand familial pressures, this being part of yours.”

“I do.”

“Well, it's always sort of felt like a cage.” She set her computer on the table and opened it, avoiding my eyes as I watched her. “I don't know if you know this, but I don't particularly like being told what to do.”

“I think I might have caught that.”

“Do you ever feel that way?” she asked, turning to me. “That all of this is stifling?”

“Never,” I admitted. “The opposite, in fact. It’s made my choices very simple.”

“You’ve never questioned it? Never wanted something else? Something *not-this*?”

“This is all I’ve ever known,” I said simply.

Laney watched me quietly for a moment. “I wish I had that devotion.”

“You sound devoted. I know what you did for your family, and you’ve admitted how easy it was for you to come home.”

“I love them, and I’m devoted to them, yes. But I’m afraid committing to the company would be a little death. That it would take away the last of my autonomy.”

“What if it fulfilled you instead? Without committing, you’ll never know.”

Recognition flashed behind her eyes, and I saw her instant shift into levity to close the door when I’d gotten too close to the point. “Pardon me, but are you trying to talk me into quitting?”

“Could I convince you of anything you didn’t want to do?”

“Probably not,” she answered with a smile, turning back to her computer and effectively ending that line of conversation.

“Do you have your presentation in slides yet?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she answered, digging through her files. “One of my people are working on it today.”

“*Your* people?” I gave her an amused, sidelong look.

“You gave them to me, didn’t you?” she challenged. “I think they like me better, if I’m being honest.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. But my job isn’t to make them like me—it’s to get results. Who says we have to be friends to do that? Seems that would only blur the lines, not motivate them.”

“So personal relationships don’t matter with your team?”

The question was posed as a trap I only had a glimpse of.

I frowned. “Why would it?”

“You don’t believe they need any investment beyond the directive of their jobs?”

“What’s your point?”

Smiling, she shrugged. “Consider your sister. Don’t you work harder for her—and vice versa—*because* of your personal investment?”

My frown deepened. “That’s different.”

One of her brows rose. “Is it? Our personal investment drove us to this.” She gestured to our laptop screens. “Even if that investment was largely spite.”

A chuckle. “I’m more likely to motivate my team from spite than love. But really all I ask for is respect.”

“That’s fair. But it wouldn’t hurt to try.”

“What do you suggest? Parcheesi nights?”

“I was thinking Charades. Pictionary, maybe,” she joked, turning to her screen to pull up composites. She paused and gave me a look. “Are you really going to show me yours, or is this some elaborate scheme to just see mine?”

I brought my fingers to my touchpad to do just that, thankful for an excuse to divert my eyes. “I’m incapable of cheating.”

“Under any circumstance? Regardless of the stakes? I find that hard to believe.”

“Have I ever given you a reason to think me dishonest?”

She was silent long enough that I chanced a look at her.

“I suppose you haven’t. But under the right kind of pressure, everyone is capable. Like when someone you love is on the line.”

Georgie. She’s talking about Georgie and Wickham. Did he tell her what he did? Or did he lie?

“So you admit that you’d cheat?” I asked, deflecting. “As brutally honest as you are with your feelings, subterfuge seems out of your skillset.”

She rolled her eyes, but wore a small smile. “Well, Mr. Darcy, you inspire a particular frankness I can’t seem to hold back.”

“Likewise, Miss Bennet.” I stepped back, gesturing for her to take my place at my computer. When she did, I stepped up to hers and paused, surprised.

It was a sweeping campaign with a fill-in-the-blank tagline that was so versatile, it worked for every instance of marketing, including her precious parties. She’d built out campaign sets for each direction in a palette that was both soft and bold—a tonal spread of earthy pinks and creams and oranges, touched with accents of teal for contrast. She’d also built knockout options for the male-directed ads, flipping the palette around to focus on the teals and emerald greens.

It was brilliant.

She was going to win.

Wordlessly, I flipped through her resources, and she did the same.

It was several minutes before she broke the silence.

“You’re going to win.”

A laugh shot out of me at her tone—both resigned and awed, with a side of snark—and her wrongness. And when I looked down at her, I realized we’d drifted closer to each other. Close enough that when she glanced at me, she had to tilt her chin up to meet my eyes, leaving me peering into her face like a wishing well.

Her smile was curious. “What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking the same thing—you’re going to win.”

Still smiling, her brow quirked. “You’re a walking contradiction. Has anyone ever pointed this out to you?”

“No one’s quicker to point out my faults than you.”

“Not even Georgie?”

“Oh, she does, but not with near the enthusiasm or frequency as you do. Have we ever had a conversation where you haven’t noted my shortcomings?”

She blushed but made light. “You make it so easy.”

A single laugh puffed out of me. I don’t know which of us moved, who shifted, who turned. But our hands brushed, the smooth topography of her knuckles grazing the back of my hand. A shock of awareness bolted up my arm and down my spine, and though I took a too-fast step to put space between us, my eyes hung on her lips as her cheeks flushed to match their color.

I turned back to her presentation, eager to move past the feeling, futile as the attempt was. “I mean it, Laney. This is impressive. I did have a thought—what if you used olive instead of teal as your contrast? It would bring the scheme together and is still masculine enough to work for your knockout. For detailing, you could throw in an emerald.”

“I really like that idea,” she said in disbelief.

“Another thing I thought—what if you pulled in a secondary element? Something to tie each directive together. Like incorporating a monochromatic floral for the romance, a halftone for the comics ... just something to give it texture.”

Laney gazed at her screen. “You might have just nailed what I’m

missing.”

A smile ignited in my chest and spread like wildfire.

“But as versatile as mine is,” she continued, “your tagline is too direct, too clear not to win the bid. It explains the concept immediately, but when coupled with the artwork, it’s undeniable.” She clicked through a couple of mine through a pause. “We have a similar style. How ... unexpected.”

“I noticed that too.” The way we approached composition, the detailing and feel of our illustrations could have come from connected thoughts. Though where her colors were a softer set, mine leaned more into deeper tones—blues so deep and warm, they were almost purple. A terracotta shade for contrast. I leaned into the cool, Laney into the warm.

“What if you did a superhero set like I have, but mix it up with not just a drink, but with actual light? You could throw a neon light effect on the text. Put a lightning bolt in Thor’s hand or use flames. A lighter, a ball of magic... play with the lighting part of getting lit.”

The idea sparked thoughts so fast, they leapfrogged over each other and away from me. “I didn’t even think of that. We could even put a pop art effect on some of the comic ads, but in a way that would still tie in with the rest.”

“Oh—that’s good. But don’t you dare touch this color scheme.”

“Deal.”

She smiled up at me in such a way that I realized how close she was to me. How little it would take to touch her.

“Look at us,” she said. “Twice now we’ve talked without me walking away furious. This must be some kind of record.”

“You haven’t left yet—there’s still time for me to make you mad.”

With a laugh, she reached in front of me to gather her computer. I caught the scent of her hair, that sweet, crisp floral she was fond of, sparking a runaway imagining of burying my nose in the silken locks, testing their texture between my fingertips.

What would it be like, to trust her? What would it be to earn her trust?

How satisfying would it be to allow the indulgence, and how fortunate would I be to win her affection?

“Well, then, I’d better quit while I’m ahead.” She clutched her laptop to her chest, still smiling. “Well done, Liam. And thanks for the suggestions.”

I slipped my hands in my pockets so she wouldn’t see me fidget, suddenly flustered. “Same goes. Maybe I *will* beat you, now that you’ve

given me advice.”

“That was your plan all along, wasn’t it? Lure me in so you can figure out how to beat me?”

“Am I that transparent?”

“I already regret it,” she teased.

The door flew open, startling us toward the sound.

Georgie walked in talking. “Liam, have you seen—” She came to a halt, her gaze shifting from me, to Laney, then back again. “Laney. Here you are.”

“Liam was just showing me all his design secrets, not realizing I’m going to use them to beat him.”

Georgie glanced at me, amused.

I shrugged. “I just gave her bogus advice, so the game is afoot.”

“Sabotage makes much more sense than the alternative,” Georgie joked. “Laney, would you meet me in my office? I wanted to discuss our next briefing at Wasted Words. Just need to have a word with Liam first.”

“Of course,” Laney answered, our smiling eyes meeting before she left.

The second the door was closed, Georgie flew across the office toward me.

“Liam Darcy, tell me right now that wasn’t what I think it was.” She wasn’t accusing—she was bubbling with excitement.

“Depends on what you think it was.”

“Do you have a crush on Laney Bennet?”

“What are we, in third grade?”

“It makes so much sense,” she said half to herself. “All the antagonism, the infighting—”

“Georgie, your imagination needs a leash. We were just helping each other with our presentations.”

“Even that!” She motioned to me. “You were *helping* her.”

“How can I beat her if I don’t see what she’s got to offer?”

“You’re a mess, Liam. Wait—” She lit up. “If you’re with Laney, does that mean I can date Jett?”

The levity of the moment sank like an anvil tossed overboard. “You cannot see Jett Bennet, not any more than I can see Laney. Which I’m not. Whatever our current truce is, it’s temporary. No universe exists wherein Laney and I are a thing.”

She watched me, seeing too much. “Is that because of her feelings or yours?”

My face flattened to cover the thunder of my heart. “Does it matter?”

“It matters.” She waited.

“Both.” But I didn’t specify which of my feelings kept Laney and I apart.

She accepted the non-answer as an answer after a moment and a sigh. “We have a meeting with the marketing team in an hour. Are we still going to Catherine’s for dinner tonight?”

“She confirmed earlier.”

“Think she’ll make me play the piano for her?”

“Doesn’t she always?”

Another sigh. “She makes me feel like a little girl.”

“Catherine has a knack for making people feel inferior. We’re lucky it’s just our age she holds over us.”

“True. She can’t exactly fire us, can she?”

But I gave her a look before we parted and reminded her, “Don’t be so sure.”

Hours later, the sun had set on the week, and I found myself in Catherine’s penthouse with a scotch in my hand, listening to Georgie play the piano.

She’d always had a talent for it, though she complained her way through a young lifetime of lessons. When our parents died, the lessons ended, and so did her practice. The only time she played was when we visited our Aunt, and though Catherine never noticed, the sadness in Georgie rose to the surface with every brush of her fingertips on the ivory keys.

But my mind was far away, testing the edges of a place they didn’t belong—Laney Bennet.

Thoughts of her had circled my heart for hours. Days. I wasn’t a man who often wanted what he couldn’t have. I wasn’t a man of longing—I was a man of action. Perhaps the shift had come with the softness that’d arisen between us that week. Maybe it was the slow rise of the possibility of her affection when I believed there to be none. It didn’t change the fact that I wasn’t allowed to have her, even if she was interested. I’d convinced myself she wasn’t—just because she’d put her knives down didn’t mean she cared for me.

But the feeling was awake in me, and I didn't know how to soothe it back to sleep.

The song she played—Chopin, though I didn't know which—came to a close, the last notes suspended in the air until they faded away.

“Oh, Georgiana. How lovely. Thank you for indulging an old woman,” she said with a smile.

The Catherine seated next to me was the one we knew as family. Juxtaposed to the callous CEO of De Bourgh was the more gentle—if not still demanding—woman who had spoiled us at Christmases and was known to occasionally smile, as she was now.

Georgie stood and curtsied before reaching for her gin and taking a seat.

“Tell me how the week went,” Catherine said, somehow managing to look both relaxed and stiff at the same time. “The review for the bookstore is next week, is it not? Are you prepared?”

“We are,” I answered. “We have two strong campaigns for Georgie to review. Strong enough, the client is going to have a hard time choosing.”

“Liam still thinks he's going to win though,” Georgie teased.

Catherine's brows nudged each other. “Win what?”

I shot Georgie a look. “Oh, nothing. Just a little friendly competition.”

“Is Caroline running the other team? I do love a good challenge. It produces the best work when one's afraid of losing.”

“No, not Caroline,” I said, figuring now was as good a time as any. She'd find out soon enough. “Laney Bennet.”

All softness left her. “I thought I was clear regarding my feelings on the Bennet girl, particularly where you and this company are concerned.”

“The competition was already in play by the time we talked. I wasn't aware of your feelings before that.”

Georgie worried her lip.

“To give her such a place in this project? Liam, this is a blasphemy.”

I leveled my gaze. “I think that's a little hasty, don't you?”

“I absolutely do not. When there's a rat in your pantry, you don't ignore it in the hopes it will go away. You exterminate it.”

“With all due respect,” I began, “we've discussed this. We cannot risk the account or our reputation by disobeying their requests. Laney is a part of the team and she will be for the duration of the project, so tell me what else I can do to ease your mind.”

Catherine was flushed, and through a thinking moment, she took a drink

of her scotch. “Here is my request,” she said, setting the crystal glass on the end table. “I will concede to her presence if the two of you will make me a promise.” She pinned me, then Georgie, with a pointed look. “Stay away from the Bennets outside of work. No more of these little parties you go to, no more fraternization.”

“I’m afraid I have a cocktail party planned for the firm and the employees of the bookstore tomorrow night,” Georgie said.

Catherine darkened. “Then do what you must. But from here out, contain your meetings with the *owners*, not the rest of them. And that directive comes from both your aunt and the owner of the company.”

I met Georgie’s eyes. We had a silent conversation.

“We’ll do our best,” I said.

The tension in Georgie eased at my evasion of a promise.

“You must understand that I only want to protect you,” Catherine said gently. “I want your happiness and safety.”

Just not in that order. “We know.”

She reached for my hand with pleading eyes. “Do you? I’m no stranger to the facts. I am not a maternal woman—the reason the universe denied me children of my own, no doubt—and I am not one for empty gestures or overt displays of affection. But I do love the two of you with savage devotion, even when I fail to show you.”

Georgie’s face went soft, and she moved to the floor at Catherine’s feet, laying her hand on ours. “We know. You’ve shown us more than you may realize over the years. However could we have survived without you?”

She laughed, though her eyes sparkled and the tip of her nose was red. “Your brother and I are cut from the same cloth. We do not fail. He would have sorted it out on his own—of that I’m certain.”

I shifted closer, wrapped my arm around her shoulders, pulled her into my side.

We are cut from the same cloth, I said to myself. Was I so much like her? The cool exterior guarding the well of feelings beneath. The absolute conviction with which she believed herself to be right. Ruling by fear like Laney had said.

Yes, Catherine and I were much alike, and there were many merits in that sameness.

But for the first time, I noted the many ways I wish I wasn’t.

WAIT FOR IT

LANEY

The second Jett and I walked into the cocktail party the next night, his eyes found Georgie, and that was that.

Neither of us had come with plus-ones. Jett was alone because of Georgie, even though he was convinced he couldn't have her, and predictably, she'd come alone too. And I'd come alone because the only prospect of a date that I had was Wyatt, and I didn't think any of us would have enjoyed that, least of all Georgie.

The venue was intimate—a bar on an upper floor of a building in Chelsea with a panoramic view of the night city. Squares of light cutting through the dark. The glow from the streets illuminating the buildings from below. It was a reminder of what I'd missed when I moved away, a sight I wouldn't abandon again.

Cobalt velvet couches sat against the windows overlooking the city, arranged in little nooks already housing groups of people not only from Wasted Words, but the firm too. A small dance floor stood at the end of the rectangular room, ringed by clusters of people ready to dance the second someone was brave enough to get out there and get it started. Heels and cocktail dresses, suits and ties, drinks in hand and smiles on lips. Music bumped from the direction of the DJ booth, and I caught sight of Cam wiggling around in a sequined black dress, singing along to Lizzo while Tyler laughed hard enough that he couldn't seem to take a sip of the drink in his hand—the second it reached his lips, a fresh twerk would have him laughing again.

Scanning the crowd, I didn't find Liam, and I scolded myself once for being disappointed and a second time at the skip in my heart when I promised myself he'd be here.

I blamed the newfound equality between us, the surprising respect he'd shown me the last few weeks. All I'd had to do was stand up and demand it, and he complied. And lately, I'd found it difficult to hate him with such devotion as I had before. I'd convinced myself it was temporary, carrying my umbrella in the sunshine. Because at some point, the thunderhead would appear, tear open, and douse me.

It was only a matter of time. Surely Darcy couldn't maintain permanent civility. It wasn't in his nature.

I wished for a moment I did have a date, and my thoughts shifted to Wyatt. He'd only been home a few days, and we'd been too busy to get together, scheduling a date for tomorrow night. I'd been looking forward to his company all week—he made me laugh, was clever and charming, and he was so attentive, being near him felt imperative.

He was the ideal, ticking every box on the list. But something kept me from jumping in, dampening my enthusiasm to contentment. And as much as I wanted to see him, part of me wasn't sure why.

If you have to ask yourself if you want to date him, you don't want to, Jett had said. But he was partial.

Still, I'd been ditched by Jett, and it'd have been nice not to be alone tonight.

Putting on my game face, I headed for Cam, but I'd only made it a few steps when Collin stepped in front of me.

"You're finally here," he said with one of his brows arched and a smirk on his lips. "And without a date, just like I knew you'd be."

"Hi, Collin," was all I said, unsurprised by his blatant lack of manners.

"Glad I was right—would have been awkward if you'd had a date and I would have had to spend the night by myself. Come on, I'll get you a drink."

"I'm actually good—"

He grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the bar before letting me go, which thankfully was only a couple of steps. I'd have hated to get arrested for assault on such a nice night.

"What are you drinking?" He smoothed a hand down the front of his tuxedo T-shirt.

"Nothing. I'm actually—"

He smiled slyly. “You don’t have to work so hard to get my attention, Laney. I’ve got this. How about I order for you?”

I opened my mouth before realizing it was no use arguing, and I really could use a drink. While he ordered, I took a minute to look for an exit route. Georgie and Jett stood close, smiling at each other in a nook of couches. Cam was still busy dancing, and I caught sight of Cooper and his wife nearby, talking to Darcy.

The second his name hit my mind, he looked right at me.

The shock stopped my heart, and when it kicked against my sternum, it was with enough force to hitch my breath. I didn’t know what it was about him that elicited such a reaction from me. His intensity, that was for sure. Never before had I been observed with such weight, it crushed my ribs. When he looked at me, it was as a command of attention—a demand impossible to refuse. The sheer size and darkness of him contributed, every angle and every plane. The hard line of his brow. The strong shape of his nose. The stone of his jaw, the width of his lips. Square shoulders and narrow waist, his black suit cut to perfection. His body language alone charged the air around him, and everyone who ventured too close was subject to his will.

A motion in my periphery broke the connection—Georgie waved, and once she caught my eye, she motioned for me to them.

“I’ll, uh, be right back,” I said to the back of Collin’s head, though I didn’t know if he’d heard me, so entrenched in a monologue regarding the merits of the Tomb Raider game franchise, he didn’t even notice me slip away.

I hurried over to Georgie and Jett, keeping my back to the room in the hopes of dodging Collin, even though I knew it was probably pointless.

“I need you two to do me a favor,” I said when I reached them. “Please save me from Collin tonight.”

Georgie laughed. “Aww, he seems sweet.”

“Wait until he corners you and talks about obscure manga for a half an hour and tell me how you feel.”

“I’m impressed you’ve held him off this long,” Jett said.

“So is he. But social cues aren’t exactly his thing,” I noted, “and I just don’t have it in me to break the poor kid’s heart.”

“How about I go get us some drinks?” Jett stood. “Gin, Georgie?”

“Yes, please,” she said, all googly-eyed.

“And I already know what you want,” he said in my direction.

“Hey, I’m not that predictable.”

“Bulleit Rye, up.”

“Okay, fine. Maybe I am.”

On a chuckle, he headed for the bar, and we watched him go. Collin appeared at the far end of the bar with shots in his hand, and I whipped around, slinking in my seat.

“Does he see me?” I asked.

“You’re safe so far, but I don’t know for how long,” Georgie answered, amused. “I’m glad you guys came tonight.”

My brow quirked. “Why wouldn’t we have come?”

“I guess ... well, I guess I didn’t think I’d see Jett. I don’t know why. Sometimes, I wonder if I just made him up,” she said on a chuckle. “Like one day, I’ll come to Wasted Words and everyone will say, *Jett who?*”

“He really is spectacular, isn’t he?”

“He really, really is,” she answered wistfully in his direction. “I ... I don’t know if I should even say this, Laney ...”

My heart skipped with hope. “Say what?”

She shook her head. “I shouldn’t. If I say it out loud, that’ll make it real, won’t it? And I can’t do what I want. Not right now, at least.”

Through a pause, I sat up and leaned in her direction. “If this is about what I think it’s about, would it change things if you knew for a stone-cold fact that he feels the same way as you do?”

“Does he?” The color in her cheeks rose. “He’s never made a move, but it feels like we’re in a state of perpetual anticipation. Like we’re always just about to kiss. Honestly, I don’t know how much more my nerves can take.” She shook the thought away and sighed. “But I can’t. We can’t. Not without repercussions.”

A protective flash of heat streaked through me. “Says who? If it’s a problem with work, keep it a secret. It wouldn’t be too hard to sneak around, would it?”

“Liam would figure it out. We live together, you know.”

“So? Is he going to tell on you?”

“No, but he wouldn’t approve, and neither would my aunt—she’s sworn us off any Bennet interaction outside of work. Plus, it’s against the rules, and I don’t know if you know this, but my brother has a thing for rules.”

“Who, him? No,” I deadpanned.

“I couldn’t keep it from him,” she said miserably.

“But you could keep it from your aunt and work?” I prompted, my thoughts coming together.

She frowned. “Probably, but—”

“Then it’s just your brother. If he wasn’t a factor, what would you do?” I challenged.

Without hesitation, she said, “I’d march up to Jett and kiss him right here, in front of God and everybody.”

“Then do it. I mean, maybe not in front of everyone—your brother sadly *does* still exist—but go talk to Jett. Throw caution to the wind and go get what you want. Not what anybody else wants—what *you* want. Because you deserve that happiness just as much as Jett does. If Liam doesn’t understand that, you’ll convince him. And your aunt too, if it comes to that.”

Georgie straightened up, her face set in both determination and worry. Her eyes cut to Liam, who was deep in conversation with Cooper a ways off, his back to us.

“Could I really get away with it?” she mused. “Could I hide it from my aunt, from the company?”

“It’s only for a few months. I think you can manage the secret that long.”

“And if it goes the way I have a feeling it will, I’ll tell Catherine as soon as the project is over and deal with her feud with your family then.” She paused, watching Jett’s back. “I should do it.”

“You should definitely do it.”

“I should. And I’ll tell Liam tomorrow when he can’t argue.”

“Future Georgie’s problems. And Right-Now Georgie has a boy to kiss who really, really wants to kiss her back.”

She watched Jett’s back for a second as a smile brushed her lips. “Okay.”

“I spotted a couple of dark hallways behind the bar. I’m just saying.”

Georgie reached for my hand and smiled. “Thank you, Laney. Sacrifice a goat in the hopes this doesn’t blow up in my face.”

“If it does, you’ll have the best guy on the planet to comfort you through it. I promise.”

She stood, looking nervous, and I imagined by her expression that she was giving herself a pep talk. I stopped myself from bouncing in my seat as I watched her talk to him, saw the look on his face and the look on hers. A furtive glance from them both—probably to check Liam’s location—and they took off, hand in hand, abandoning our drinks at the bar.

I got up to gather them and bring them back to our spot, forgetting about

Collin. Two steps, and he slid in front of me.

“There you are. One for you”—he put a shot glass in my hand—“and one for me. Cheers!”

He lifted it and knocked it back. I took the tiniest sip of mine.

“Listen,” he started, “I know I’ve been hinting around that I like you for a while now—”

I legitimately had to swallow a laugh.

“—but you and me? We make sense. You know? You’re single. I’m single. We work together.”

“Collin, that is the extent of things we have in common.”

He laughed, oblivious. “Seriously, Laney. Why fight it? You don’t have anyone else to date, do you?”

I blinked, leaning back in shock. But in a grand display of restraint, I didn’t say what I wanted, which was for him to fuck off. “I’m sorry if I misled you, but I’m not interested in dating.”

He took a step closer and said with a knowing smile, “We don’t have to date.”

Several responses crossed my mind. A swift punch to the nose would stop him, and if my brothers had taught me one thing, it was to throw a successful punch. I considered going ahead and telling him where he could go and the best way to get there. I could throw the remaining tequila in my shot glass in his face in the hopes it would get him in the eye. Or I could just turn around and do nothing, which didn’t feel like me at all.

Before I could decide, gravity shifted in the direction of one very tall, very serious Mr. Darcy.

“Excuse me,” he said to Collin with unmistakable anger beneath the thin veneer of politeness. “I don’t think we’ve met. Liam Darcy.” He extended his sizable hand for a shake.

“Collin.” When he went to shake Darcy’s hand, his almost disappeared. His face tightened, and I wondered over the force of Liam’s grip.

“And what is it you do at the bookstore?”

“I’m the manager of the comic and graphic novel department. The *whole* department,” he bragged.

“The whole department, huh? Impressive,” Liam said with a wry tone. “Pardon the intrusion, but I was hoping Laney would dance with me.”

Collin frowned. “Actually—”

“See, I owe her one. We’ve been caught in a series of misunderstandings,

and I thought this would be a good start in making it up to her. You understand.”

“Hey, man,” Collin started. “I was just about to ask her to—”

“That is, if she’d like to dance with me,” Liam said, watching me with an amused glint in his eyes, his hand out, palm up, waiting for mine.

“Now hang on a minute—” Collin interjected.

“I’d love to,” I answered, slipping my hand into his with just enough friction to feel electric. “I’ll catch you later, Collin. I think Ruby’s over there alone! You should ask her to dance.”

Collin opened his mouth to argue, but Liam was already towing me away toward the dance floor. When we passed a cocktail table, I managed to rid myself of the tequila, and with a quick glance, I noted that Georgie and Jett were nowhere to be seen.

If I wasn’t with Liam, I would have giggled, and maybe even clapped.

The second we reached the edge of the dance floor, he turned me with little more than a hand on my waist, and before I knew what was happening, we were dancing to an Adele song. Thankfully, the crowd had gotten over their nerves—even Cam and Tyler and the rest of them were swaying on the parquet.

But Liam looked down at me, and it didn’t matter if anyone was there or not. One glance, and we were an island.

For a moment, I couldn’t speak, stunned silent by his presence alone. He wore a small smile that did something bright and alluring to his eyes. And though my tongue was a fat and useless thing in my mouth, he seemed unaffected.

His gaze flicked to Collin, I guessed when he said, “I hope I just saved you and that you weren’t waiting for whatever proposition he was about to give you.”

A bout of laughter eased the tension. “You did save me. Thank you—I wasn’t sure how I was going to get out of it. *No* didn’t seem to be working.”

At that, a shadow passed across his face. “He wasn’t out of line, was he?” There was some possession or protection in his voice, and the sound did something warm and tingly to my insides.

“He was, but not in the way you’re suggesting. Collin is harmless. Clueless maybe, but harmless.”

“Good.”

We swayed in a circle, observing each other.

“So was your line about making a misunderstanding up to me just for the sake of the ruse, or did you really want to dance with me?” I asked.

“It wasn’t a line. In fact, I’ve been thinking about asking you to dance tonight for days.”

There again was the shock, but it wasn’t cold. It was hot as the inside of a firecracker when the fuse reached its destination.

I shook it off, covering my reaction with redirection. “And what about the misunderstanding?”

“It seems the two of us have been in a state of *constant* misunderstanding, haven’t we?”

“How so?”

“We’ve been known to only share a handful of sentences before one of us is mad. But then there are the times between when everything feels ... possible. Like now.”

He picked up our momentum, turning us around in wider steps. As we spun, I felt opposing forces try to pull us apart. But he kept our bodies pressed together with his hand on the small of my back, defying the science and logic with nothing more than that palm. And when we slowed again, I was left breathless.

“I know I’ve apologized,” he said, which was good because I couldn’t speak, “but I’ll do it again. And again, if I have to. Because this?” He turned us. “This, I like. So I’m sorry for misunderstanding you. For underestimating you. Has proving me wrong been entertaining, at least?”

“It really has.”

His smile lifted by degrees. “I mean, you’re still going to lose.”

“I thought you said yesterday I was sure to win?” I asked with one brow arched.

“That was before you told me all your secrets.”

A zip of electricity shot through me. “Well, get ready to eat crow when I win. And then you’ll have to endure my unstoppable mouth.”

The air tightened between us.

“I’ve been thinking about your unstoppable mouth for days too,” he said in such a way, I didn’t know if he realized he’d said it aloud. His eyes snapped from my lips to meet my gaze. “Your ideas are too good to keep to yourself. I have a feeling keeping you quiet wouldn’t serve the team the way that letting it run wild would.”

He didn’t mean it like you think he did. He doesn’t want to kiss you, and

remember that you don't want to kiss him either. Not really. Like, not really, really. Stop imagining things.

“You say that now,” I joked, ignoring my fluttering heartbeat. “Remember that I don’t usually agree with you.”

“But what if that’s exactly what I need?”

His eyes were hot and somber, as if the realization caused him unseen pain. It was a longing I saw in the depths of his eyes, an empty space he didn’t know how to fill. And I was struck with the impulse to smooth his brow, to wash away his pain. To fill that empty space.

But before I could speak, he looked away. And what he saw erased the man he’d just shown me. It was the slamming of a door, a wall of steel sliding into place, separating him from the rest of the world again.

I glanced over my shoulder in frustration and curiosity and found a face that shouldn’t be there for a dozen reasons. But inexplicably, there he was, Wyatt Wickham, eyeballing Liam from across the room.

Liam returned the favor.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Liam growled. He actually growled, the words coming from so deep in his throat, there was no other way to describe it.

“I don’t know,” I answered, confused.

“Laney—tell me you didn’t bring him here tonight.”

I backed away, offended. “Of course not. How could I do that to Georgie?”

Another emotion shot behind his eyes, but he schooled it before I could tell what it was. “He told you what happened?”

“That’s too big of a conversation for right now. We’ve got to get him out of here.” I moved in his direction, but Liam outpaced me.

“Yes, we do.”

I cursed under my breath, doing my best in heels to keep up with him, his stride so broad in his hurry, he could have cleared a yardstick.

By the time I reached them, I’d missed whatever question Liam had asked, only catching Wyatt’s response.

“Fuck you, Liam. Whatever you think I’m here for, you’re wrong.” Wyatt saw me and smiled. It was then I noticed his suitcase. “Hey,” he cooed. “I got called out for another story. I’m flying to Chicago tonight.”

Liam let out a singular, derisive laugh. I didn’t know at what.

Wyatt pinned him with a look.

“But you just got back. We had plans tomorrow night,” I noted, confused.

“I know, which is why I really wanted to see you before I left.” He took my hand. “I didn’t realize it was *their* party.”

Liam all but stepped between us. “You need to leave. Now, before Georgie sees you.”

“Jesus, Liam. You can’t let anybody decide what *they* want, can you? You think you’re better than every person in here, but you’re not. Do you get that? *You’re not.*”

“Oookay,” I said, stepping around Liam to take Wyatt’s opposite arm, turning him toward the door with the motion. “That’s enough of that. Liam, go that way.” I nodded to the back of the bar. “And you—this way.”

Liam didn’t move, just stood there like a goddamn grizzly bear in a suit, arms folded across his wide chest. He didn’t take his eyes off Wyatt.

I wanted to yell at both of them, but somebody had to keep their cool. So I put on my softest voice and guided Wyatt to the elevator well.

“So ... you’re leaving?”

He huffed, dragging a hand through his hair. “Yeah. I ... I wanted to say goodbye—I’ll be gone at least another week.”

The door dinged, and we stepped inside. When I turned, I found Liam still standing sentinel, ready to take Wyatt to the mat if he so much as stepped a foot into the bar again.

“I’m sorry. For coming here,” he clarified. “I honestly didn’t know they’d be here, or I’d never.”

I could have sworn I’d told him exactly what tonight was and who would be here. “I’m surprised to see you.”

He chuckled. “So much for my big, grand gesture.”

“Why do you need a gesture? Do something wrong?” I teased to cover my suspicion.

“No. I just wanted to talk to you. I ... I want to see you. Officially. I’ve waited a long time to meet someone like you, Laney. When I get back, I want to take you on a date. A real date with a reservation and everything.”

I laughed, my cheeks flushed not from his proposal, but in a flustered, surprising discontent. “I don’t know. I’m partial to falafel.”

But he smiled, stepping into me, slipping his hand into my hair. “Say yes.”

My lips parted to speak, but before I could answer, he kissed me.

I experienced the kiss as if from some distance, noting things I should

have been too distracted to note. Like his limp hand on my hip. Or the fervency with which he kissed me, mismatching my enthusiasm by double. Or the way his lips felt. Because they felt *wrong*.

Everything was off, our chemistry suddenly as dynamic as a stretch of prairie. Was it him? Was his enthusiasm genuine? Was he just a more charming version of Collin? Or was it me? Had Darcy somehow scrambled up my brains? An unbidden comparison flashed in my mind—Darcy and Wyatt, opposites in every way. Darcy’s dark features to Wyatt’s light. Darcy’s intensity to Wyatt’s charm.

When placed side by side, there was no comparison. Wyatt paled next to Liam.

And perhaps that was the most telling sign of all in the matter of Wyatt Wickham—I was thinking about Darcy while Wyatt kissed me.

When the kiss broke, I considered it again with a scientific objectivity. Wyatt, on the other hand, looked thrilled.

“So what do you say? Go on a date with me,” he said, pulling me into his side to press a kiss to my hair.

Again, nothing. No flip-flopping stomach or squeeze in my heart when both had been present dancing with Darcy.

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped out and toward the exit. “Wyatt, I—”

“Wait,” he said quietly. “Wait to answer until I get back. Tonight was a mistake, and I don’t want you to refuse because my timing was terrible. You’re rattled. Darcy does that.”

God, if that wasn’t the truth.

“I’m sorry I showed up. I’m so sorry I caused problems with Liam too. The last thing I want is to see the Darcys, and I definitely don’t want to put you in the middle of it. You know that, right?”

“I do.” I didn’t.

We stopped on the sidewalk as a cab pulled up.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll text you when I get there, okay? And we’ll talk when I get back.”

With a kiss on my cheek and a shared goodbye, he climbed into the cab and rode away.

I didn’t want to talk to him when he got back. I’d much prefer to ghost him, to stop whatever this was without giving him a chance to argue. Because I’d realized his showing up tonight had been engineered by him. For what

purpose, I didn't know. But showing up at a cocktail party with his suitcase smelled like bullshit, and asking me to go steady like we were in middle school didn't make it smell any better.

But now wasn't the time to get into that.

Because I needed to face whatever waited for me inside.

CONTROL

LIAM

I stood in front of the elevators, staring at the doors for far too long.

I couldn't figure out what infuriated me more. Wickham's presence was usually enough. The likelihood that he was going to Atlantic City, not Chicago, maybe. The lie that he hadn't known what he was walking into. He knew. I'd bet every penny I had, I was so sure. He didn't come for Laney—he came for some purpose I didn't yet know.

But I'd find out.

None of those offenses struck me like the sight of her hand in his. Watching them walk to the elevators, her eyes locked on mine until we were cut off by closing doors.

Part of the reason I stood there so long was in an unconscious attempt to will her back to me. I wanted to talk to her, to warn her. To explain who he was and what he wanted. I wanted to protect her from his lies. Because though he'd told her something, I very seriously doubted it was the truth.

Truth wasn't in Wickham's nature.

Depending on what he'd told her, she probably wouldn't believe me anyway. But the words charged through my mind all the same, fighting to get out.

I had forgotten myself completely.

I forced myself to walk away, marching to the bar for a scotch in the hopes it would calm my nerves. A few minutes later, Laney walked back into the party, and the whole of me sighed its relief.

I was struck by the vision, just as I had been when I first saw her tonight.

She was blinding in her beauty, wearing a dress black as pitch, threaded with gold, just enough to catch the light every once in a while, gleaming over the curves of her body. I'd never seen her in a dress this short, and coupled with her gold heels, her legs seemed to go on forever. Her face, small and determined as ever, though tonight, her lips were crimson and her eyes lined with smoky kohl. The effect it had on the blue of her eyes was miraculous, an otherworldly shade I could only compare to sapphire. But I'd never seen a gem lit from within, with depthless layers of color that were certain to drown me, if I wasn't careful.

When she stopped in front of me, I couldn't read her expression.

"I'm sorry about that. I don't know why he was here."

"I do."

A pause. "Care to share with the class, Mr. Darcy?"

"He wants me to see him. To know he's with you. That he's this close to Georgie."

She folded her arms, her lips flattening in offense. "Nowhere in there did you mention that he might have come for me."

"I'm sure that was part of it too."

"Are you really so egomaniacal to think the only possible reason he could have come here was to fuck with you?"

"You don't know him like I do," I said.

She shook her head in disbelief. "Wow. You know, Liam, sometimes a spade is just a spade. But you can't even *fathom* taking someone at face value, can you?"

"Are you arguing with me because you believe that or because you can't help but argue?"

"You are unbelievable," she ground out, but her flush told me I'd pressed a bruise. "What if he *did* come here for me? What if you're *wrong* and he's telling the truth? Because you don't know for a fact what his intentions were."

My jaw was clamped so tight, my teeth ached. The bitter taste of my anger couldn't be washed away, not even when I kicked back the end of my scotch.

She'd believe what she wanted to believe. She'd hear what she wanted and say what she felt without thinking about anyone but herself. She would disregard me no matter what I said because somehow, against all reason, she trusted Wickham over me.

“If you believe him, you’re a fool.” I set the glass on the bar with a shaking hand, knowing I’d done it again, knowing I’d buried that little sliver of possibility again.

But as I walked away from her, the things I couldn’t say gnashed and snarled in my rib cage.

I scanned the crowd for Georgie but didn’t find her. The party had lost its luster, the grime and dinginess of the night no longer covered by the spell of hope. What I wanted was to leave, not to small-talk with Cooper or mingle with everyone. Not to avoid Laney, because there was nothing else to say, not tonight. I wanted quiet. Solitude. A space where I could think, and standing in a bar with Cardi B on blast was *not* that space.

I was so in my head, I didn’t notice Caroline sidle up next to me with a scotch of her own in her hand.

“God, these Bennets are terrible. Your aunt is right. We’ll be better off when we can be rid of them. Laney bringing Wyatt? I mean, how cruel could she be?”

“She didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?”

“She didn’t know he was coming.”

“And you believe her?”

“Yes,” was all I said, because forming sentences over ten words was impossible.

“They’re just so *tacky*,” she said, sneering a little. “Even this party. It’s like a misfit prom, not a cocktail party. You can tell who’s with whom just by looking.”

“Who cares, Caroline?”

“I care. Mingling with them is almost insulting. But those Bennets are the worst kind of interlopers.” She leaned in. “The kind you never see coming. Like that Jett boy kissing your sister behind the bar.”

Caroline kept talking, but I couldn’t hear her over the ringing in my ears.

“Where are they?” I ground out.

And she smiled like a cat with a mousetail dangling from its lips. “Just behind the bar, down the hallway.”

I was off before she finished, my thoughts like a hail of bullets in my head. Why Georgie had done it—and after she’d promised me she wouldn’t—was a mystery I was about to solve. And here, at a company function, where assholes like Caroline were watching her. Why now? Why tonight? Or

had it been going on under my nose?

I didn't even know if the answers mattered as I flew down the hallway behind the bar where the bathrooms were. Several hallways spurred off the main drag. I found them in the very last one.

They were caught in an embrace, their kiss oblivious to my presence, and the sight of her pinned to the wall by his hips broke some crucial tether in me, letting something loose that was better left chained.

I didn't realize I'd stormed toward them, not until my hand was on Jett's closest shoulder. With a shove, he stumbled backward almost too hard to catch himself. But when he did, he rose like a wave, and I drew myself up to my full height, barely hearing Georgie calling my name.

"*Stop!*" she shouted, putting herself between us.

The connection of her hands on my chest snapped me back.

"Liam! Jesus!" she said. "What are you doing?"

"What am *I* doing? What the fuck is this, George?" I motioned to Jett, who looked as ready to beat the shit out of me as I was him.

"It's exactly what the fuck you think it is," she shot, pushing me when she realized I was still locked on Jett. "Liam!"

I shifted my gaze onto her at an equal intensity. To her credit, she barely flinched.

I gestured to them. "This? This isn't happening."

"Listen, Liam—" Jett started, and I took a step toward him, only stopped by Georgie's full body weight.

"No *you* listen," I snapped. "I don't think you realize what kind of danger you're putting her in. Her job. Her standing. Our aunt—our last living relative and the owner of the fucking company—can't even stand your sister being in the building, never mind if she finds out a Bennet is fucking her niece."

"*Liam*. That is *enough*," Georgie yelled, pushing me with enough force that although it didn't budge me, it got my attention. The fury on her face was set off by the sparkling tears in her eyes. "You promised to trust me. You swore you'd try."

"And I never should have made a promise I knew I couldn't keep."

"I cannot believe you."

"That makes two of us."

The words hit their mark. Jett squared up again when he saw the rise of emotion in her. I would have respected him for it if I wasn't an inch away

from turning him inside out.

“This ends,” I commanded, addressing Jett. “Whatever it is, it stops before you both end up under Catherine’s thumb. Because if you think I’m bad, you have no idea what she’ll do to you.”

Georgie shook her head at me, her face shifting from rage to bald anguish. “Fuck you,” she said, the words trembling, soft. But they cut all the same.

I watched her take Jett’s hand, he and I leveling each other as they passed me. When they reached the mouth of the hallway, she turned and met my eyes.

“You’re not stopping me. Not this time, Liam. This time, it’s all me.”

A heartbeat, and she was gone.

I stared at that empty space for a long time, the distant thump of bass the only sound. I’d walked through the door tonight in control, but when I sank onto a stack of cases of beer and dropped my head into my hands, I had none. Not over my sister. Not over Laney or Wickham. Not over anything in my life that mattered or meant anything.

I’d lost it all.

And I didn’t know how I’d get it back.

HELLO, GOODBYE

LANEY

I'd never wished for a hangover more than I did that morning.

At least if I'd had a hangover, there would have been a chance I wouldn't remember last night. And if I'd happened to remember, at least my outsides would've matched my insides, which by all accounts were miserable.

When Liam had looked at me with such contempt in his eyes and told me what a fool I was, the pain and humiliation hit me like an open palm. Even though I believed he was wrong about what he'd said to me—and how he'd said it—the truth of what he thought of me hurt so much worse than I could have imagined. Maybe because something had shifted between us over the last week, and the tilt had slid me in his direction. Maybe because I'd caught a glimpse of something in him I wanted to unearth.

Maybe because I wanted him to see something more in *me*.

But I was a fool, and he was omnipotent—same as it ever was.

I left the second Liam gave me his back, too upset to pretend. Too proud to let anyone see my angry tears. Too wounded for anything but retreat.

I'd just washed my face for bed when the door opened, and Jett and Georgie tumbled in, wrapped up in each other like frantic flames. I'd stopped in the hallway, blinking at them to make sure of what I was seeing. They were well into the room before they noticed me and parted, panting. After a brief overview of what Liam had done, they excused themselves, taking off hand in hand for his bedroom.

And I went to mine with a fresh wave of fury at Darcy.

I'd wished I'd been drunk enough to pass out then too.

But I wasn't. Emotion had sharpened me to a razor's edge as I imagined the scene. Liam in a rage. Jett in defense. Georgie between them. I was surprised no one had thrown a punch—as angry as Liam had been about Wyatt, I suspected he had more steam behind him than Jett and Georgie had built on their own. I wanted to believe some of his blowup on Jett had been misplaced, and maybe a bit of it was. But Darcy had been openly defied, and by my encouragement.

Which meant at least some of this mess was my fault.

What little sleep I got was plagued with anxiety dreams. In one, I was trying to get to the airport, but I kept forgetting things. Like my passport. Then my tickets, because in my dream, there was apparently no such thing as the internet. In another, I couldn't get to the De Bourgh offices for a meeting with Liam. Something was always in my way—a train broke down on the tracks, a traffic jam stopped my cab indefinitely, lights wouldn't turn green so I could cross the street, my shoes broke. Not one—*both* heels snapped like chopsticks within five steps of each other.

Between bursts of sleep, I'd tossed and turned, my brain clicking on the instant I rolled over. My thoughts had cycled on a loop, starting with how happy Georgie and Jett had looked despite the fight with Liam. Wyatt showing up at the party, Liam confronting him. Liam dancing with me. Liam telling me I was an idiot. What Liam would do when he found out Georgie had spent the night here with my brother. They were literally the only good thing to come out of last night, and even that was tainted by Darcy.

Basically, all I thought about was Liam. He was the wind licking the waves, and I was in a boat with no oars, riding the swells made by his presence.

He made me feel helpless, not only to the vortex of his mercurial behavior, but to my heart. Because try as I might, I couldn't keep that part of me safe from the tumult. I had no defenses, not when it came to him.

And that made me very, very mad.

When the sun was high enough to change my room from a wash of purples to cheerful golds, I gave up the fight, peeling myself out of bed with coffee as my only motivation. Today's plan was dinner with our family, and I was glad I had a date with Mom in the greenhouse. Sitting around here thinking about Darcy wasn't going to help me sort things out. A distraction would give me some distance, which I desperately needed. Mostly because

Liam was impossible to escape. He'd infiltrated every corner of my life except my family, and I'm sure he had designs to ruin that for me too.

I heard Jett and Georgie talking for a while, nothing but muffled intonations floating into the living room as I finished my first cup of coffee. When my second was in hand, I sat in the breakfast nook and stared out the window at the fiery treetops of Central Park, the burning auburn of fall. The last bit of color before the gray of winter settled in. Soon, it would be a field of skeletons, a colorless wash of sleeping trees waiting for spring. And I wondered where I'd be when the last leaf fell. Because change was upon me too, though I didn't know what it was. I could feel the transition, feel myself pushing against the confines of it.

Jett's bedroom door opened, and out they came, him in sleep pants and Georgie in her dress from last night, heels hanging on her fingers. And my heart ached with happiness at the joy on their faces.

I recognized the rightness of them just as I'd seen it in my brothers and their partners and with my parents. It was rare—that unbreakable click of belonging. The indescribable sense that you'd just seen something monumental in two people's lives, and neither would be the same.

I smiled and stood, heading for the coffeepot. "Morning. Coffee?"

Georgie's smile fell, her face softening with longing. "I wish I could. But I have to face the music." She held up her phone, which I assumed was stacked with angry texts and missed calls from her brother.

Jett didn't look any happier at the reminder she was heading into the mouth of the beast. "I asked her to stay. Face him at work tomorrow. But she said—"

"He'll come find me, and this time, we're not going to get out of it without violence," Georgie said. "Best to just get it over with."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Listen. Let him yell. Yell back. And then do whatever I want," she said.

"You make it sound so easy," I joked.

"I'm under no illusions, trust me." She sighed, turning to face Jett, and I might as well have disappeared.

The way they looked at each other made me feel so much, a blossom of pain opened up in my chest. He took her small face in his hands and kissed her, and when the kiss broke, he pulled her into his chest. For a long moment, he held her there with his chin on her crown and his eyes closed. His brow was creased with worry, and I realized he didn't want to let her go. Not from

his arms, not from our apartment. Because even though she'd said she'd do what she wanted, we all knew enough of her brother to know it would never be that simple.

But eventually, Georgie stepped back. Gathered her things. Jett walked her to the door and kissed her goodbye, and this time when my heart ached, it was with sadness.

When the door was closed, he sighed through his nose, eyes to the ground and hand scrubbing his hair. I extended a fresh cup of coffee, which he took, and silently, we sat at the table and stared at the park without seeing much of anything.

"This is bad," he finally said.

Confused, I swiveled my face in his direction. "Nothing about that looked bad."

"Not me and her. Her and him."

I didn't disagree. I never could lie, especially not to Jett. "She's a grown woman. He can't stop her from seeing you."

He gave me a flat look.

"He can't. He's not a goddamn magician," I shot. "I'm sure he's pissed, but come on."

"The stakes go beyond Liam. This morning, she told me everything about her aunt, about her job. The life she's built will be threatened if she chooses me. How can I ask her to sacrifice so much for me? I want to make her happy, not hurt her. And what if choosing me does damage I can't fix?"

I didn't have a response to that. "I don't like how bleak you sound."

"The best thing to ever happen to me just walked out the door, and I'm not sure she's coming back. So yeah, things are looking pretty fucking bleak. And don't chuck me on the shoulder and tell me it's going to be fine, or I swear to God."

"I won't," I promised. After a beat, I confessed what I hadn't told him last night for Georgie's sake. "Wyatt showed up at the party last night."

His gaze snapped to mine. "What?"

It was one dark word that promised violence.

"He came to see me, to tell me goodbye before he left for work. You had Georgie in the clutch in the back, and thank God. I don't know what Liam would have done if Wyatt upset her, considering Liam's reaction to Wyatt when he didn't."

"What did Liam do?"

“Nothing, but I’m pretty sure that was only because I stopped them. Mostly, it was a lot of angry words and posturing, but I think it ruined him for the rest of the night, triggered him hard. God, he was such an asshole. And right after that, he found you with Georgie.”

Jett’s hand made a pass down his face, dragging his features with it. “The craziest part of all this is that I’d double the drama if it meant a real chance with her. That’s all I want. A chance.”

“I think that can be arranged,” I soothed. “You might need to climb through wreckage to get to her, but I don’t have a doubt that you *will* get to her. Who knows? Maybe Darcy will surprise us. Maybe he’s had time to think about what a complete dick he was and will apologize. Stranger things have happened.”

But as we shared a dubious glance, neither of us could think of a single one.

GUT CHECK

LIAM

The only sound was the ticking of the clock and the beat of my heart. I hadn't slept.

Last night when I'd come home, I gathered a bottle of scotch and a glass and sank into a chair off the entry where I could see the door. And then I waited. I waited, and I drank, and I thought.

I thought about Georgie, about what I wanted for her and what she wanted for herself. I thought about Wickham and the myriad wrongs he'd committed. But I thought about Laney most of all.

Had I always been so destructive, or did she bring out the worst in me? Or through her honesty, did she unearth what I didn't want to know, what I didn't want to see? Was I angry because she was wrong, or was I angry because she was right? She left me exposed, raw and prone, and I didn't like how that vulnerability felt. So I snapped and shoved her away until she was too far away to see. But she'd only creep closer again, slipping silently into my space like a thief or a savior, I didn't know which.

The hurt I'd caused her was so visceral, so visible, the imprint of her face was left on my heart. I'd done that. I'd hurt her because I was angry with Wickham, sure. But the truth was, there were things I wanted to say to Laney Bennet that I couldn't utter and that she likely didn't want to hear.

And then there was Georgie.

Facts were facts—it probably wouldn't have mattered who had their hands on her. I would have lost it regardless of who it was. But she knew Jett Bennet was forbidden to her, and she was with him anyway. She'd promised

me she wouldn't, but she did. Which meant it was more serious than I'd realized. She wouldn't have opposed me so openly without reason.

Another secret she kept—the depth of her feelings for him. Granted, I hadn't exactly given her a safe place to talk about it. I'd been haunted by the Ghosts of Boyfriends Past, a string of men who'd wanted her money and left her heartbroken. Wickham being the worst offender.

Ruined. He'd ruined her, and for the last year, she'd been trying to put herself back together. Not one man she'd ever chosen had been honorable in the end, only excellent liars. Given that statistic, I couldn't imagine Jett Bennet breaking the pattern. But that wasn't the biggest, most undeniable problem in front of her. Never mind his lack of ambition and empty bank account. Forget our class difference.

Because Catherine would inflict pain on us all if Georgie dated a Bennet.

Catherine told us she wanted to protect us, and her brand of protection was control. When it came to opposing her beliefs and passions, she was ruthless on a good day and vengeful on the rest. If she had a vendetta against the Bennets, I could all but guarantee she would make everyone's lives hell until she got what she wanted.

Everything about Georgie seeing Jett sounded an alarm. Everything about that choice spoke danger. And I couldn't stand by and watch her get hurt.

I wouldn't.

That ticking clock—my companion through the long night—marked just past nine when she finally walked through the door, scanning the entryway with wide eyes, stilling when she found me, ruffled and fuming with a scotch dangling from my fingers.

She straightened. Hardened to steel. Prepared herself for battle.

And said, "I'm not sorry."

The door slammed.

"If you were thinking, you would be."

"I see. If I saw things the way you did, I'd apologize and praise your rightness."

"Jesus, George. This isn't about my ego. These are plain, simple facts. You were with Jett at a company party. You know who told me? *Caroline*. And if you think for one second that she's not going to run straight into Catherine's lap with this, you're out of your mind."

The knowledge sank in. "Goddamn Caroline."

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

“I was thinking about what I want.” She leveled me with her gaze. “We’re not allowed to date clients? Fine, but he’s not even a client—he’s an employee—”

“It’s the same thing—”

“And what are they going to do, fire me?” She let out a humorless laugh. “We’re all Catherine has, but still you think she’d punish me for who I date?”

“I know she would,” I said as I stood, disliking being beneath her.

“Then I’ll get another job. If she doesn’t want to see me, that’s her choice. But this isn’t the only option. Running away isn’t the only option.”

“She’s convinced the Bennets put her best friend in jail and asked me to get Laney fired. And that was just because Laney was in the building. You want to quit? You want to walk away from everything Dad left us? Fine. But what about Jett? Do you really believe she’ll show Jett more mercy than she did Laney? You’re smarter than this, George.”

“Wouldn’t know you thought so. Are you sure I can make any decisions for myself? I’m going out later—do you want to pick out my clothes so I’m not too cold? Or make a menu for me so I don’t live on potato chips and ice cream? Should I bring my friends by so you can vet them like a fucking crazy person? Because that’s what this is, Liam. This is *crazy*. You sitting in that chair all night, waiting for me to come home so you could fight with me is capital C crazy.”

“I didn’t want to fight with you,” I argued. “I’m not trying to control you—I’m trying to *save* you.”

“What’s the difference?” she fired. “You call it protection, but your method is control. I love you, Liam. But when it comes to who I choose to give my heart to, you don’t get to do this. You don’t get to be the angry parent, busting their kid when they sneak out. You don’t get to punish me or choose for me. You don’t get to treat me like a child or make my rules, because *you aren’t Dad*.”

Her words hung in the air for a long, silent moment but for that fucking clock. My heart split open and spilled into my rib cage. Her face broke with regret. She reached for me. I stepped back.

“You’re right,” I said, my voice rough. “You’re right. I’m not Dad. But do you ... do you see that ...” The words jammed in my throat, and I swallowed, forcing them down so I could try again. “You’re all I have, George. You are the anchor, my tether to this world. I know ... I know I’m not easy. I know I do more harm than good. But protecting you is the only

way I can stop the one thing I love in this world from being broken.” The words cracked, the corners of my eyes stinging. I swallowed again, schooling myself. “Wickham shattered you,” I said, steadier. “If that happened again when I could have stopped it, I wouldn’t forgive myself.”

“But you aren’t responsible for me,” she said through tears, and I let her come closer. “You were for a little while, but you’re not anymore.”

“But I am.”

“No, you’re not.” She took my hand in both of hers. “You have to have faith in me. You have to trust that I won’t make the same mistake again. It was you who taught me, after all.”

I pulled her into my chest so she couldn’t see my face, my control slipping. “He’s important to you.”

“He is.”

“And you trust him?”

“I do.”

This was the crux of everything, the true fulcrum of the situation. It sank in with cold clarity and fear—I had no control over her heart, and if I wanted her to be happy, I couldn’t stop her. Not from this.

The things she’d accused me of were true.

I was wrong.

It was just as unreasonable as Catherine’s edicts, regardless of intentions. And if my father were here, I suspected he’d be ashamed.

There was one last thing to say before I committed to doing whatever it took to defend Georgie’s happiness.

Because my support didn’t mean any of this would be easy.

I sighed, but it did little to vent the pressure in my chest. “I have your back. Always. You know that.”

She nodded, her cheek rasping my shirt.

“If you want to do this, I will trust you. I will back you up. But I want you to listen to what I’m about to say, and I want you to be sure.” When she didn’t speak up, I took a breath and laid it all out. “I will go to battle for your happiness without provocation. But this time, I’m not fighting Wyatt. I’m fighting Catherine.”

She stilled in my arms.

“*Catherine*,” I said again. “The last living relative we have. The woman who, despite her exterior, took us in like no one else did. We’re the closest thing she has to children, and she’s the closest thing to a parent we have. And

you seeing him holds the power to break that irrevocably. It's easy to say you can walk away. It's another thing to do it. To leave everything Dad left for us, to abandon your place at the company, to walk away from Catherine ... to say you'll leave it all *sounds* easy enough. But they're only words. Can you imagine actually doing it?"

Her shoulders hitched with a sob.

My heart broke with hers.

"And there's whatever retribution Catherine might lay on you, on me. In her spite, in her pain, she will punish us. She might even punish the Bennets. I will shield you from that as best I can, but Georgie, your happiness doesn't depend on me like you think it does. It depends on her."

"W-what if we started over? Started a new company?"

"We could do that," I answered, still holding her close, "but is that what you want? If he is that important to you, then let's start over. But what happens when you break up? If it goes badly and you're alone again, will you regret the choice?"

Another hitch that dissolved into a shuddering breath. "M-maybe I could talk to her. Maybe she'll see reason."

"Maybe she will. Let me talk to her. Feel her out. But ... just remember who she is. She doesn't let anything go, not ever. If it were a matter of his status or class, it'd be easier to manage. But a family she perceives as an enemy? A threat?"

I didn't have to do any more convincing—her fresh wave of tears was enough of an answer.

My own wave of emotion rose again with understanding. I could never have Laney either.

"It's not fair," she whispered.

"I know." I smoothed her hair like I had so many times before. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"It's going to be all right," I promised.

But she didn't answer, didn't agree. And I didn't blame her.

I didn't believe it either.

POINT. SNIP.

LANEY

That afternoon, I headed to Mom's early to wander around the greenhouse with her before our family dinner, and the date couldn't have come at a better time.

Bleecker was bustling with weekend foot traffic, and when I reached our flower shop, I found it full. I was sure the window displays had something to do with it—Tess and Luke, the masterminds behind that facet of our shop. This week featured giant suspended butterflies made of tan pampas grass. Flowers of gold and amber dotted the wings in identical patterns, poised mid-flight. They managed to look both fresh and fallish, positioned over a hanging flower box built in the shape of a script font spelling the word *autumn* in one window and *harvest* in the other.

My first smile of the day brushed my lips at the sight, and when I pulled open the turquoise door of Longbourne to the sound of the ancient, tinkling bell, that smile bloomed in full.

A jazzy, '40s tune played over the speakers of the white-walled space, and patrons milled around the tables, weaving in and out of displays of market bouquets. One of the walls had been stocked with single stems in what felt like every color, organized in a gradient of the spectrum, the greenery stocked below.

This was home.

Pride rose in me like creeping ivy, threading through my ribs. Generations of Bennet women had run this store, our family name so vital, not one had taken her husband's name. In fact, Dad had taken Mom's when

they got married, which had pleased my grandmother to no end. But where the Bennet women had historically grown the shop and our standing in the community, my dear, darling mother didn't acquire the business gene. She was a genius with bouquets but a self-proclaimed ninny when it came to business, and after years of mismanagement and terrible business advice, Longbourne almost hadn't survived. But we were nothing if not tenacious—a trait that had both helped and hurt us in life and love.

Currently, we were in better shape than we had been in decades, thanks to my siblings.

I hadn't done much, just designed the new logo and materials, kick-started social media, gotten a few campaigns running. It was the rest of them who did the work. Luke and Tess handled the store aesthetic, imagining and building and constantly rearranging things to make use of things he'd built. Kash managed the greenhouse with Dad, as he always had, but he'd developed a few new strains of flowers that became a sought-after element in our bouquets. Plus, most of our event business came from Lila, his wife, who threw parties for the richest and most famous names in Manhattan. Marcus untangled the mess that was the store's finances and put us on a track to recover from the debt Mom had inadvertently racked up over the years. And Jett had run the day-to-day of the store itself, his experience in retail helping him in streamlining the whole operation.

We'd even all moved back home, and as annoying as it was to have my brothers teasing me and my mother with her nose firmly in my business—*that* business, she excelled at—I now longed for those days. Those months were the last time we had all been there together, just us, before significant others and the subsequent scattering of our locations. That fleeting time brought with it the safety that I'd felt as a child, the house and the noise and the mess the most comforting place I'd ever known.

I'd been so eager to leave, I didn't enjoy it when I had it.

I wished desperately that I had.

Ivy, who had worked here since she was in high school, waved at me from behind the register, and when I passed the counter, I saw her little girl, Olive, riding a plastic bug on wheels back and forth in the space behind the counter. Olive's face lit up when she saw me, and her chubby hand shot into the air. It opened and closed into a fist—her current method of waving.

I waved back.

“Want me to take her to the greenhouse?” I asked Ivy, hoping she'd say

yes.

“She’s all right for now, but ask me again in five minutes. I might even let you keep her,” she joked.

“Bring her to the back if you change your mind and we’ll pick some flowers, won’t we, Olive?”

She nodded emphatically. “Fow-ers!”

“She’ll just eat them all, you know,” Ivy said as I headed back.

“That’s the best part,” I called over my shoulder. I had at least ten photos of Olive with petals hanging out of her mouth like a cat who was just shy of swallowing a bird.

The workroom was quiet and empty, though trimmings and remnants of wire and floral foam lay scattered across the surface of a table in front of one of the empty stools—Tess’s, no doubt. So back I went, through the swinging double doors that led to our greenhouse.

A wall of humidity hit me, curling around me like loving fingers, drawing me into the cheerful space. Built in the 1800s, the greenhouse spanned the back of six buildings—the shop, our house, and the four properties we’d once owned. The basement of the shop was our storage, packed with generations of antiques that sat unassuming next to hay and mulch and fertilizer. And in the greenhouse itself, long rows ran the length, touting box after box of flowers. Seeds were cultivated in the back and moved into the main greenhouse when their season arrived, the old harvest making way for the new. Currently, a section had been tilled and replanted with spring flowers, the rest full of our year-round crop. Dahlias and gardenias, lilies and pink astilbe. Daisies and marigolds and, this time of year, ranunculus. And of course, bed after bed of roses.

In the big center aisle, I found Kash in front of a wheelbarrow mounded with soil, a shovel in his hands and his T-shirt hanging out of his back pocket.

I filed *shirtless brothers* under things I didn’t miss about living at home. All of them were towering beasts who were addicted to working out, though each for their own reasons. For instance, Kash’s rolling, brutish muscles came from hauling dirt and shoveling. For funsies, he moved thirty-pound bags of fertilizer from one side of storage to the other. Marcus worked out because he was a little bit of a control freak, so disciplined, I was certain he just enjoyed managing difficult things in his life just as much as he wasn’t happy unless he was living up to an unreasonable standard. Jett did it because it made him feel good to master himself and stay healthy. Luke was just vain.

Kash caught sight of me and dumped the load in his shovel, smiling brightly within the frame of his black beard. His big, dirty hand raked through his hair, which was forever just a little too long, even when he'd just had it cut. The dark locks curled gently around his ears and nape and seemed to always be on the verge of falling into his face.

He leaned on the handle. "Hey, Lane. What are you doing here?"

At the surprise in his voice, I was a tiny bit offended.

"Can't a girl just come home and pick a few flowers?"

One of his dark brows rose.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm meeting Mom here. We're going to put together a few bouquets."

"Look at you, hanging out with Mom."

"I hang out with Mom," I defended.

"By yourself."

"You're awfully close to convincing me to leave."

A deep chuckle. "It's good to see you around here. It's been a long time since you've been in the greenhouse."

"Too long. Every time I walk in, I can't remember why I stayed away."

He folded his arms on the handle and planted a boot on the flat of the spade. "How was your party last night?"

"Don't ask."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

Briefly, I told him what had gone down, from Wickham to Jett and Georgie. Except for the specifics between me and Darcy. I kept that to myself for fear I'd actually combust if I so much as mentioned him.

Luke had walked up—who was also shirtless, his skin peppered with sawdust to match the dusting of dirt on Kash. Unlike Kash and his unruly mane, Luke's hair was cropped and his jaw clean-shaven. His lips seemed to be in a constant state of smirk. Sometimes, I wondered if he'd end up wrinkled just on that one side, and I shamelessly hoped he would.

Both of them were wide-eyed as they heard about Georgie, and at such an intensity and with eyes that blue, it was almost unnerving.

"I can't believe that asshole squared up to Jett," Luke shot, his lips bent in a rare frown. "What is he, the sex police?"

I gave him a look and folded my arms, considering my teenage years. "Brandon Ellis."

“Listen, Brandon Ellis deserved a bloody nose for kissing you. I’ll die on that hill.”

“He’s not wrong,” Kash added. “You weren’t the only girl he was kissing.”

“What if it’d been me in that dark hallway last night?”

Both of them flinched, wearing matching expressions of disgust.

“Kissing Jett?” Luke asked.

I groaned. “No, not kissing Jett, dummy. Kissing somebody else, someone I wasn’t allowed to kiss.”

Luke paused in thought. “Fine, I would have hit him. Kash would have too.”

I cut a look in Kash’s direction.

He shrugged. “I want to say I wouldn’t, but I probably would have. Or at the very least, roughed him up a little.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I sort of, kind of get why he did it. But I hate him all the same. I’ll burn him down if he gets in Jett’s way.”

“But Georgie went home with Jett, right?” Kash asked. “Sounds like a win to me.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Except I’m almost positive Darcy’s going to throw the hammer, and it’s gonna hit Jett square in the chest. Darcy’s never going to let her see Jett, especially if it means he has to apologize or acknowledge he was wrong.”

“Man, he sounds like such a dick,” Luke said, scratching at his massive pectoral muscle.

My lip curled. “Could you please put shirts on? I’d rather not taste my lunch a second time.”

Laughing, Kash tugged his on—stretched across his chest were the words *Plant Lady*. Luke just bounced his pecs.

“My shirt’s in storage, sorry,” he said, flexing his muscles both discreetly and pointedly, that shit.

“At least *one* of you cares about your sister’s health. Or maybe you *do* want to see the contents of my stomach.”

Luke’s eyes flicked to the glass ceiling. “If you actually throw up, I’ll give you fifty bucks.”

“Anyway,” I started, “there’s a sliver of hope. We’ll know more tomorrow, I think. But if Darcy interferes, I might go ape.”

“I don’t know if I’d fling shit at him at work. That’d really put a ding on

your résumé,” Luke said.

“Oh my God, could you be serious for two seconds?”

He nodded. “Nope.”

Another groan, the kind only Luke could get out of me. “Just go easy on him tonight at dinner, would you?”

“Whenever are we not easy on him?” Kash asked.

“I don’t know, ask that kidney bruise of Luke’s.”

Luke twisted around to try to look. “What, that old thing?”

“You should know better than to mess with him for reading *Outlander* again. He’s still your big brother.”

“Yeah, and he doesn’t let us forget it either.”

“Who doesn’t let whom forget what?” Mom said from behind us, and we all turned.

She was adorable, a slight thing with curly silver hair that had once been as black as her children’s and eyes the same blue, hers wide and innocent. She wore the prettiest smile, and it was damn near impossible to get her down. The only times I’d seen her consistently upset was when my grandmother died and when she was in the middle of the lawsuit with Bower last year.

Of course, that’d almost ruined every Bennet. But Mom most of all.

She’d been part of society once upon a time and attended the same private school with Evelyn Bower, Catherine de Bourgh, and their toadies. My grandma had established a prestigious and exclusive garden club that all their mothers were a part of, and their places were passed down to their daughters. Though Evelyn and Mom had been enemies since high school and their mothers before them, the feud took root when Dad dumped Evelyn for my mom. After that, it was insult, injury, and impediment as a rule. She wanted to destroy Mom, Dad, and everything they held dear, if for no other reason than she could.

For years, poor Mom hadn’t even realized the lengths to which those women would go to humiliate her. But she’d learned that lesson the hard way, thanks to Evelyn.

Mom shuffled toward us, leaning heavily on her cane. I’d picked it out for her a few weeks ago after she came home with some ugly metal thing with a white rubber stopper on the bottom. This one was black with big peach and white flowers on it and a sensible, virtually invisible *black* stopper.

The three of us smiled and converged on her like hens, and she cooed at

our nearness.

“Look at you, all here together,” she said, beaming.

“Laney was just telling us the hot gos—”

I smacked his bare chest with the back of my hand and gave him a look.

“Goslings,” he finished. “The hot goslings in the park. Didn’t you hear about them?”

She frowned, eyeing us. “Shouldn’t they be flying south?”

“Oh, sure, sure,” Luke said. “But these are special geese. They only mate when snow is exactly three weeks off, which they know because they have these tiny little sensors in their beaks—”

“I’m sure it’s just the breeding pit stop on their way to Aruba,” Kash cut in.

Mom thought about it and shrugged, taking my arm. “Whatever you’re hiding, I’ll find out. I always do.” She turned her attention to me. “So where shall we start, Elaine?”

“I was thinking the ranunculus, maybe some hyacinths? Gardenias for sure, and—”

Mom was smiling, though her brows were pinched, and I realized that track would take us all the way around the greenhouse when she was likely exhausted just from coming down here to meet me.

I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed.

Luke put on a sparkling smile and said, “How about you give me a list, and I’ll bring you whatever you need?”

Something in her eased along with the crease in her brow. “Sweet boy. Elaine, why don’t we pick out our ranunculus and gardenias, and Luke can get the rest?”

“Sounds perfect.”

She rattled off a number of various fillers and smaller flowers, giving Luke very specific instructions that I knew he’d remember to the letter. And when he headed off in search of a bucket, Mom and I turned for the flower beds we were after. She patted Kash’s shoulder as we passed, and he gave her that look we all did, ripe with adoration and thick with an amused sort of reverence. Because despite her meddling and lack of boundaries—looking back, it was always fond and funny, even though it rankled at the time—she was the beating heart of this family, and we loved her endlessly.

I helped Mom over the gardenia bushes and was about to get a bucket for us to use, but Luke was a step ahead, handing me a second along with a pair

of clippers and a wink.

When the bucket was on the ground just behind us, I said, "All right. What do you think?"

"How about a now bouquet and a later bouquet? One to last through this week and another to last an extra."

"I'll take all the bouquets I can get."

"Then let's start here." She pointed, and I reached into the bush and clipped it. "I'm so glad you came down early. Maisie has something in the slow cookers that smells so good, my mouth has been watering all day."

"I'm glad too."

She pointed to another, and though I didn't meet her eyes, I knew she was frowning. "You sound tired."

"I feel tired."

"Is that job working you too hard?"

I sighed. "It's not that. It's just life, I think."

She hummed noncommittally, pointing to another.

"What's that mean?"

"I didn't say anything."

"I speak fluent Bennet."

A sigh as I snipped. She pointed to another. "I just worry about you, that's all. I know what's going on with all of my children, except for you."

"What do you want to know?" Snip.

"Well, I don't know. Everything, I suppose."

"I wouldn't know where to start, Mom."

Point. Snip. Silence.

When she spoke, it was quiet, reserved. "I know you were born into a difficult position, Elaine. All of these children, but you were the one I imagined would take my place. The moment I first held you in my arms, I pictured you here. Loving the things I love, dreaming the same dreams. It was a silly thing to do, though I don't know that I did it on purpose. But now I don't know how to dream anything else. And I don't think I'll ever stop hoping you change your mind."

"About what, exactly?" I asked in an equal tone to hers.

Point. Snip. Silence.

"Of all my children, you are the farthest from me. I haven't been able to reach you since you were a little girl, and I don't know how to bring you back."

My nose burned, the corners of my eyes pricking with the threat of tears.
“I don’t know either.”

Point. Snip. Silence.

“What do you want, Elaine?”

The question jolted me.

“In life,” she clarified. “What do you want?”

I thought for a moment. “What everyone wants, I guess. To be happy.”

“Of course, but what will make you happy?”

I didn’t have an answer. The realization stung like a sunburn.

“Would you think less of me if I said I didn’t know?”

“I could never think poorly of you,” she said, turning to me with those big, shining eyes. She took my free hand. “I’ll just ask you one thing.”

I nodded.

“Find out. Because until you do, you’ll keep running away. You are brave and fierce and everything I’m not. You can do *anything*, Elaine. So dig around and find what you want, what will make you happy, and then get it. Do that one thing for me, and I’ll be satisfied.”

Too moved to be serious, I quirked a smile. “Even if I don’t have babies?”

She made a dismissive sound and swatted my arm. “You don’t want to put me in an early grave, do you?” A little wink punctuated the question.

With a laugh, she changed the subject, bringing me up to speed on my siblings. I was so out of the loop, you’d think I’d moved to Tokyo, not the Upper West, and that knowledge made me impossibly sad.

Maybe she was right. Maybe I had been running away. I’d spent my young life forced into a box, and once I was freed, I swore I’d never get back in. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe it wasn’t the box itself, but the *size* of the box that I hated.

That thought was a grain of sand in my oyster.

And I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d turn it into a pearl.

PROFESSIONAL COURTESY

LIAM

Sunday was somehow forever long and nowhere near long enough. I spent most of the day in a foggy half-sleep with Georgie on the couch. We didn't talk about anything important, both of us too exhausted from the fight that morning to get into anything deeper than commentary on the string of movies she put on and what we'd order to eat. But even with the slow pace of the lazy Sunday, Monday morning came too soon.

Two things waited for me, and I didn't want to deal with either of them.

I'd promised Georgie I'd appeal to Catherine on Jett's behalf, which was a battle I was sure I'd lose. And I didn't fight battles I couldn't win. But for Georgie, I would try.

And then there was Laney Bennet to contend with.

Although I wasn't exactly sure what to expect, I had my suspicions. I was absolutely certain I'd have to answer for the fight I'd picked with her at the party. And I was sure her brother had told her about the words we'd exchanged. She would likely know that Georgie had spent the night with Jett, but from there, I wasn't sure what she'd heard.

The office was quiet that morning, as it usually was on Mondays, and I retreated to my desk to dig into work for a while. We were a few days from an internal review of our campaigns, and were busy putting the finishing touches on our proposal. Namely, I'd been tweaking everything the team had come up with to make sure it was as close to perfect as possible.

I'd been in deep focus for about an hour when the first of my problems

marched into my office without knocking.

Laney Bennet was a fire burning too hot to be colored in golds and reds—hers glowed a cool blue, a heat that needed no raging crackle to show its powers of destruction. The electric blue of her eyes, so blistering and angry, singed me from across the room.

Deliberately slow, I closed my laptop and sat back in my chair.

She came to a stop between the chairs in front of my desk, far enough away to throttle me with a lunge but close enough to feel the heat of her anger. I settled into a block of ice. And for a moment, neither of us spoke.

“I like to think I can take a lot of bullshit,” she started, her voice low. “You throwing a tantrum over Wyatt wasn’t surprising. Even you treating me like an idiot child was on-brand, as much as I hate you for it. And just when I think you can’t possibly get any worse, you find new ways to prove me wrong. I heard you nearly assaulted my brother, and it’s left me wondering why you can’t seem to stand letting anyone around you be happy. I get that you’re miserable—you don’t even try to pretend otherwise. But your determination to ensure everyone in your life is just as unhappy as you are is extraordinarily cruel.”

Any chance at being reasonable disappeared, eaten up by her fire.

“You seem to have me all figured out,” I said with cool indifference despite my roaring dissent. “Thank you for reducing me to such simple terms.”

“I wasn’t sure if you could swallow anything more complicated than that.”

For a beat, I stared at the siren across my desk, wondering how I could somehow both loathe and long for her. “Did you come here just to explain me to myself, or did you have some other objective?”

“You aren’t even sorry, are you?”

Another pause. “Does it matter what I say, Laney? Because as determined as you say I am to make everyone around me miserable, you seem doubly determined to find reasons to hate me.”

“Maybe because everything you do, every word that leaves your lips, is designed to intimidate. So if you’re asking me if I trust your answers, I suppose I don’t.”

What I wanted to do and what I chose to do were two very different things. What I wanted was to stand, round my desk, and take the stubborn, headstrong woman in my arms where I could tell her how wrong she was

about me. I wanted to tell her the why of it, especially in relation to Wickham. What I wanted was a release from the burden. Of *everything*, and somehow, I knew she could be that for me. The flutter of knowledge that she could be my savior was the last ditch of a dying butterfly, caged too long without sunshine.

But rather than expose the truth of my heart, I postured, just as she expected me to. “If you don’t care what I have to say, then you came here just to berate me.”

Her nostrils flared.

“Storming into my office to call me names and sling accusations is unprofessional by anyone’s standards. I don’t know if Cooper would keep a member of his team who so openly defied my authority.”

Her cheeks flushed crimson. “I’m unprofessional?” she breathed the question. “You and me? We are not just colleagues. You are not my boss, even if you are my superior. And not even you can pretend like whatever *this* is could be described as a professional relationship. So don’t threaten me, Liam. Don’t act like you have it all figured out either, because you don’t. And if you think I’m going to sit by and watch you ruin my brother’s chance at happiness, you’re mistaken. Leave them alone. Because if you don’t, you’re going to lose Georgie forever.”

A trembling rage flickered up my spine, down my limbs, to my fingertips. Slowly, I stood with my eyes narrowed and my voice deadly calm.

“Again, you presume too much. You don’t know me, and you don’t know my sister. You don’t know what’s at stake. I know you think you do. But you seem to think you know everything, don’t you? Statistically, how true could that possibly be?”

I didn’t quite realize I’d rounded my desk until I was close enough to catch the crisp, floral scent of her.

With a hard glare, she stepped closer. Heat radiated into me in the shape of her body. “I’m just as certain as you are.”

I pinned her with my gaze, and she stilled beneath the weight of it. “Then that’s where your fault lies. If you think that what you see of me is the sum of who I am, you’re more arrogant than I thought.”

A dry laugh escaped her. I watched her mouth, noting its shape and texture with enough detail to make the nerve endings in my lips spark electric.

“*Me*, arrogant? You are the most infuriating, relentless—”

Again, my door opened without a knock, and the second of today's problems blew into the room, shocking us apart with awareness.

Catherine was cold steel, her expression locking into disdain the second she laid eyes on Laney. Those cool eyes shifted from her to me, then back again as we all stood in silence.

"Liam," she said with the shining edge of a switchblade, "tell me you haven't stooped so low as your sister, or are the Bennets destined to sully our family from every possible direction?"

"Excuse me?" Laney challenged from behind me.

I didn't realize when I'd put myself between her and Catherine, but there I was, square-shouldered and braced for a fight as I faced my furious aunt.

"What do you need, Catherine?"

"You know very well why I'm here. Your sister has humiliated us once again, and I cannot seem to understand why you've been unable to keep her in check. It's indecent, her being pawed in a public place—and by a *Bennet* no less. And now you, nose to nose with another of their kind. Have you no shame?"

A fierce wave of defensive anger rose in me. Laney sucked in a breath at the insult, and I knew without question she was about to say something she couldn't take back.

"That's enough."

Catherine's mouth snapped shut at the authority in those two little words.

"Neither Laney nor Jett will be held to whatever standard you hold Rosemary Bennet to. You don't know them, so reserve your judgment. They are intelligent and resourceful and unafraid to speak their minds. Something you have in common, it seems."

Catherine made a noncommittal noise but didn't argue.

I took the moment to turn to Laney, who wore an expression of both fury and thanks, her confusion clear.

"Will you excuse us?" I asked. "We can continue our ... conversation later."

"Don't bother. I've said what I needed to say," she said smartly.

As she left the room, she and Catherine locked eyes, tracking each other until Laney was gone, the door slamming behind her.

"What have you done?" Catherine hissed. "What have you allowed your sister to do?"

"Georgiana is an adult. I don't allow or disallow her to do anything."

“Since when?”

I ignored her. “It’s true that I found them at the party, but when I intervened, she was so furious that she defied my wishes and left with him. If you think I have control over her, you’re wrong. And that’s as it should be, I’m coming to realize.”

She stared silently at me as she processed what I’d said.

“Nothing is going on with Laney and me, and nothing ever will be. She despises me. Particularly for inserting myself into her brother’s relationship.”

“Good. One Bennet rat is enough to deal with.”

Again, that defensive flare. “Georgie is determined. She cares for him enough to disregard my concerns.”

“And does she disregard mine too?” The question was a warning or a challenge. Maybe both.

“I suppose that depends. What happens if she continues to see him?”

Without hesitation, she answered, “Do you think I’d keep a traitor in my midst? In my *family*? She is either for me or she’s against me. And if she’s against me, I’ll strip her of everything in my power. Seeing that bottom-feeding trash violates our company policies. As such, I could relieve her of her shares. Her position. Me. Permitting *those people* into our family in any context is a mistake, and I won’t allow it.”

The sick twist in my stomach told me what I needed to know, but I asked anyway. “Under any circumstance?”

“None in this world or the next. Tell her to make her choice and accept the consequences.”

“You won’t speak with her?”

Wrath simmered behind her eyes. “She does not want me to speak to her, not about this. I cannot be reasonable. That family ruined my very best friend. Sent her to jail. Stole her business. She has nothing—do you understand that? When she leaves prison, she will have *nothing*. And it’s all because of them.”

I was silent, my chest still but for my sinking heart.

“Georgiana has a knack for finding degenerates. First a gambler, now the heir to nothing. And he’ll get more desperate for your money, more conniving, as will your little toy. The Bennets have hit some trouble, if you haven’t heard.” Her pleasure at the statement was plain, the shrewd smile it brought to her lips sparking suspicion in me. “It would be a shame if they lost what little they have. And if you don’t think they’ll slither their way into your

wallet to save them, you're mistaken. It's their way."

"And what's ours?"

"We *win*, Liam Darcy. And they do not. They *will* not." Somehow, she stiffened even more, lifting her chin. "Tell Georgiana to decide. And if she chooses that dog over me, she will not be forgiven. And I will not forget."

The battle of desire versus demand waged in me once more. I desired to shred her ultimatum and send her to hell. But it was demanded that I show deference whether I agreed or not.

I couldn't summon a single word of agreement, so I offered a solitary nod instead. With an answering nod, she stormed out of my office with all the force she'd stormed in with, leaving me with the task of breaking Georgie's heart.

And mine along with it.

THE BLAME GAME

LANEY

It had been a very bad day.

Kicking it off with a fight with Liam was bad enough on its own. Being spoken to like that by Catherine de Bourgh was a new level of rage and humiliation. But Georgie breaking up with Jett was the absolute lowest of the low points on a godawful day.

I'd left the office after the one-two punch of confrontations, assuming Catherine would be happier with me out of the building, which made two of us. I headed straight for Wasted Words where I could talk to Jett and try to work, which was a wash—it took me four hours to get through what I should have been able to do in one. But it was too difficult to concentrate under the weight of that many feelings.

I didn't know how I could feel so much at once. How I could want to rip Liam limb from limb and simultaneously wonder what it would feel like to fall into his arms. He'd gotten so close, so unbearably close when we were arguing that he could have kissed me with little more than a shift. And beyond reason, I would have let him. I'd left the office so angry and hurt and shaken, and based on Catherine's rant, it seemed safe to assume that Georgie and Jett would never be.

Once at Wasted Words, I didn't tell Jett what I suspected, keeping it strictly to what Catherine had said. But he made his own deductions, sinking into the booth across from me and dropping his head to his hands.

All of that was hard, but when Georgie came in, the heartache was unendurable. There wasn't anywhere they could truly be alone, but they

stepped into the back. I should have looked away, but it hurt so acutely, I couldn't. Not as she cried, not when he held her face and kissed her with longing so palpable, I felt it from across the room. They held each other for a long moment before letting go.

Georgie hurried out, her face bent with emotion.

Jett stood behind her, watching her walk away.

And I was struck by the unfairness of it all. Jett didn't come back out for a little while, keeping himself busy in back where he could be alone. I shed tears of my own at the utter unjustness, the complete dejection, the sheer indignation of the circumstance. I wanted to hate Darcy for it, knowing he'd played some part, but in the end, it wasn't him who'd thrown the hammer. It was Catherine.

And because of my family.

Jett told me the whole of it when we left work. The truth of their circumstance was what he'd suspected and feared—she wanted to be with him, but she would have to walk away from her job, her legacy, and her family. And she would do it, she'd insisted.

But Jett wouldn't let her. So they said goodbye instead.

That was the truth of love—he cared so much for her that he couldn't bear her sacrifice.

The gesture made the whole thing that much worse.

The last place Jett and I wanted to go was to Mom's tonight, but dinner had been planned, and there were whispers of an announcement from Kash and Lila. No one had said what—especially to Mom—and though the Bennets were shit at keeping secrets, none of us had to. Somebody was collecting prize money for the next one of the newfangled Bennet women to get pregnant. Maisie and Marcus were first, and Tess would plan her pregnancy down to the hour. So it had to be Lila. Mom was bound to have an emotional equivalent of an aneurysm. And everyone would be over the moon.

Everyone except Jett, and by proxy, me.

Jett barely spoke on the train, only marginally more on the walk from the station. And none at all when we walked into the bustling house full of happy voices. We greeted our family. Took our places at the table. Listened to them talk around us.

But I couldn't pack my resentment away. I couldn't listen to Mom go on about nothing, could barely even hear her voice without a fresh wave of irritation with every syllable she uttered. It wasn't her fault. None of it was

her fault. Mom couldn't manage to take down Christmas decorations, never mind the multimillion-dollar corporation Evelyn Bower had run before her arrest. Evelyn and her horrid friends had always been unnecessarily cruel to Mom—the spiteful, old crows—and when Bower Bouquets tried to sue Longbourne, none of us were surprised. But to know our family's involvement with Evelyn Bower's downfall had stopped Jett from having Georgie was just too much to bear.

“And how is your friend?” Mom said knowingly in Jett's direction, bringing me back to the moment. “The Darcy girl?”

Jett stiffened. “I won't be seeing much of her anymore. It's no big deal,” he lied.

“Why not?” Mom asked, pouting a little and blatantly disregarding his obvious hint that he didn't want to talk about it.

So I answered for him. “Because Catherine de Bourgh hates us and told Georgie to choose between us or her family.”

Jett cut me a look. The table went still.

Mom gaped like a trout, her brows together in confusion. “Whatever does Cat have to do with anything? She and Evelyn have always been friends, but —”

“She's of the mind that we ruined Evelyn. I mean, she dug her own grave, but we didn't really help matters, did we?”

“She did this to herself, and she deserves everything she got,” Maisie said quietly. And Maisie would know—Evelyn was her mother, after all.

“Good luck convincing Catherine,” I said, trying to tamp down my feelings without success.

Dad caught my gaze and tried to soothe me without speaking.

It almost worked.

“I just don't understand how once again, it only took our last name to lose something we wanted. Are we cursed? Did somebody break a mirror or six?”

“Elaine, I hardly think we're cursed,” Mom said on a laugh. “Look at all the abundance we've had.” The gesture to my sisters-in-law stung.

“All the abundance *they* have had.”

My siblings avoided my eyes but for Jett, who gave me an imploring shake of his head.

I sighed, but my frustration and guilt stayed put. “I'm sorry. You know I'm happy for you all, and I'll fight Mom in hand-to-hand combat to spoil all of your babies. But getting dressed down by Catherine de Bourgh today and

Jett losing Georgie has me twisted. You know how I get.”

A chuckle rolled through them. My default when someone I loved was hurting fell somewhere between snarling rottweiler and a bear with its foot in a trap.

Mom was cowed, her hands fiddling with her napkin in her lap. “Maybe there’s something I could do. Talk to Catherine, perhaps?”

“No,” I answered flatly. “You’ve done enough.”

The table shared a glance before Kash picked up the conversation and turned it in another direction. Jett and I had a silent conversation of our own across the table, the end result being an agreement at our misery and our vow to get out of here the second we could. When enough time had passed to pretend everyone had forgotten my outburst, Kash called everyone’s attention, and he and Lila stood to announce exactly what we’d already known—another Bennet baby would join the brood in somewhere around seven months.

I was happy for them—I really was. My heart was just so tired, left stretched out and sagging from being filled up and emptied too many times. Jett didn’t look much better than me, though he faked it well enough, bro-hugging our brothers and clapping them on the backs. When I got ahold of Lila, I hugged her for a long time and told her how much I loved her. I’d always wished for sisters instead of my dirty, smelly brothers, and the ones I’d finally gotten were everything I’d ever wanted—and without the fighting.

I loved them deeply, every last one of them and their little zygote babies. Kash crushed me in a hug and told me *he* was sorry—we spent a few minutes apologizing over each other until we were both laughing. Luke pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket and bestowed it on me for winning the pool—by two days, I might add—and by the time I curtsied to their applause with money in hand, all was well.

Mom was tucked under Jett’s arm at the back of the cluster of us, and whatever she was saying had a sad smile on his face.

Want me to save you? I asked with my face when I caught his eye.

But he shook his head just a little and rubbed Mom’s arm while she talked.

Dad sidled up to me silently, as he often did. And when he tucked me under *his* arm, he disarmed me. A lump lodged in my throat, my nose burning, warning me of tears.

I swallowed them back.

“I’m so tired, Daddy,” I said softly.

He squeezed me. “I know. There’s more to it than you said, isn’t there?”

I nodded against his chest.

“Want to talk about it?”

I shook my head.

“All right, Laneybug. But remember—everything changes. Good times, bad times, doesn’t matter. All things are temporary, even if they feel endless.”

He was right, but it felt like chasing a horizon. “I’m so mad. I’m mad at everyone, everything.”

“Of course you are. Someone you love had their choice taken away from them. And our family was the reason. We’re always in some sort of trouble or another, aren’t we?”

I chuckled, rubbing my nose. “Genetic predisposition.”

“From your mother’s side.”

I sighed. “I just wish there was something I could do.”

“Who knows? Maybe something will present itself. If your brother and the Darcy girl want to be together as badly as I suspect they might, they’ll find a way. Look at Marcus and Maisie. No one could have seen a Bennet with a Bower, but they defied everyone’s expectations—and at great cost to Maisie. Time will tell. Think you can be patient?”

I made a derisive noise.

“Didn’t think so. But at least try. For me.”

“Only for you.”

He kissed the top of my head and let me go. And with that, I was tapped. I turned for Jett with the intent to punch my time card and almost tripped over Mom.

She had that look on her face—the sad puppy face that was absolutely genuine, but still somehow felt like a minor manipulation.

“Can we talk? Just for a minute,” she added, her cheeks flushing prettily, damn her.

I offered a placating smile. “Sure.”

She took my arm and shuffled us toward the butler’s pantry. Sometimes I forgot just how hard it was for her to get around with her rheumatoid arthritis. In my mind, she was still the unstoppable force, dawdling around in the greenhouse and losing track of time. But we knew that soon, she’d need a wheelchair—the stairs had already become a massive challenge—and then

what? They couldn't leave the house—they just ... *couldn't*. They had to stay here forever, even if we had to spend a katrillion dollars on an elevator for her.

Once we were alone, she faced me, glancing over her shoulder again to make sure no one was listening.

I frowned. "What's going on?"

"We need you. Longbourne needs you."

"Mom, not this again—"

She shook her head, frustrated. "Elaine, listen for a minute and don't talk."

I waited but gave her a look.

"Thank you." Another glance over her shoulder. She lowered her voice. "I heard Maisie and Tess talking earlier about some trouble we're having. No one ever tells me anything anymore," she griped. "But if they think I don't know everything said under this roof, they'll learn that lesson the longer they're Bennets." With a chuckle at herself, she continued. "Maisie said we're losing staff—they're being headhunted, and no one knows where they're going, every one of them mentioning NDAs they were made to sign. And we're having some supply problems too. Losing clients. I don't know what's going on, but you have to help them."

I thought for a second, eyeing her. "Is this some kind of a trick to get me to come back to work for Longbourne?"

"I wish it were."

A pause. "I don't know. If they wanted my help, they'd ask for it."

Now it was her turn to give me a look. "Everyone knows you don't want to work for the family. They know you're busy and won't bother you."

A year ago, I would have known the second anything happened. But now that my brothers had paired off and Jett and I had moved, it was like somebody had cut the phone lines. I tried not to let that hurt my feelings. I tried really, really hard.

"All right," I said. "I'll check it out."

Her face melted in relief like a pat of butter. "Thank you. And if you fix it and love it, you could just stay, you know."

"Mom," I warned.

She held up her hands. "I'm just saying."

And I couldn't help but laugh. "Come here." I pulled her in for a hug. "I'm sorry," I said into her hair, the familiar honeysuckle scent easing

something in my chest.

“So am I,” she whispered.

And there was no denying that truth, no matter how badly it hurt.

LIAM

No amount of hot water could wash the day off of me.
Trust me, I tried.

I’d suffered through the rest of the workday preoccupied with Laney, Catherine, Georgie. When Catherine had left my office, I went in search of Laney, but she was long gone. But I found Georgie, brought her to my office. Told her what Catherine had said, watched her hopes dissolve into tears. She promised me she was fine before she left, but neither of us believed her. And there was nothing I could do to stop her from going to Wasted Words after work to talk to Jett. I didn’t know what she would tell him. Would she abandon her life for a life with him or would she say goodbye? I didn’t know, and she didn’t tell me.

She still wasn’t home.

Everyone around me was in misery, and it was my fault. Somewhere along the line, I had put the people I cared about in a position where no one could have what they wanted, and now there was no going back. Not without forsaking the people and careers Georgie and I had built our lives around.

The worst part of all was a level of certainty that I could somehow make things worse, if I wasn’t careful. It was about as easy as cartwheeling through a minefield—the margin of error was massive. And I was apparently so clueless, I didn’t even know what a mine looked like.

I stayed in the shower until the steam receded and the water ran cool, replaying the day, considering the circumstances. Laney was rightfully angry—even though her fury over my altercation with Jett was the arrow she’d nocked, the pull of her bowstring was powered by her hurt over what I’d said to her last. But we were alike in that—misplaced anger was our communication method of choice. It was why I’d snapped on Laney and the reason for my vicious reaction to Jett and my sister. All reasons were valid, but rather than practice restraint, we’d left our feelings untethered to do their damage like a pack of vengeful, wild dogs.

And mine had the sharpest teeth of all.

I dried off and stepped out of the shower, knotting the towel around my waist. The fog on the mirror had already begun to retreat, leaving me with a view of my reflection, framed by condensation. Sometimes I could see the man I'd been before my parents died, young and facing a life of hope and possibility. I remembered the softness of my face, the smoothness of skin unmarred by worry lines, my thin frame. I'd never been what anyone would call cheerful, but I'd been *lighter*. Now there was nothing light about me. I was a shadow, a shade. A man older than his years, no longer thin, but with corded muscle cultivated from a desire to master my body when I couldn't master my heart. Thick arms and broad chest, rolling muscles that gave me outward strength to offset my weaknesses. Physical strength I could use to save, to protect, just as I did with my mental fortitude. The man I'd become was worn and stubborn, fixated on a single mission.

Take care of my family.

It was easy, that directive. Following it simplified my life, my choices. Every decision passed through that gate like a cattle run into one of two chutes, a yes or no to the question that had come to define me. *Does this help me take care of my family or hinder it?*

It was that easy, that effective. But if I'd learned one thing over the last weeks, it was that nothing was so straightforward as to answer with a yes or no, not when it came to the inner workings of hearts. It wasn't black or white, but a thousand shades of gray, almost indiscernible from each other. Really, it all boiled down to perspective. And Laney and I stood on opposite sides of a chasm, looking at contradictory horizons.

The Bennets had managed to upend my family's life without lifting a finger and by no fault of their own. They existed and shared space with Georgie, Catherine. Me. And their presence alone was all it took to turn us inside out. To complicate things I'd thought were simple—or at least simpler than they were now. Because now Georgie had to live with her longing. My circumstance hadn't changed much in that regard—all I could ever do with Laney was long for her, even in the moment she mistook and insulted me. Maybe even more in those moments. But I was too cynical and clumsy for anything more than longing, even if having her was a possibility. Which it wasn't. Catherine had made that perfectly clear.

I hadn't realized until then that somewhere in the depths of my heart, beneath layers of denial and expectation, I'd held a sliver of hope that maybe

there was a way for Laney and me.

I pulled on sleep pants and an old Columbia T-shirt, scrubbing my hair with my towel before hanging it to dry. Still, I didn't hear Georgie. Frowning, I picked up my phone, hoping for a message but found none. The next few minutes were spent rummaging for a meal and heating it up in the microwave, thinking about worst-case scenarios. Like Georgie running away with Jett. Or trying to sneak around still, knowing the consequences. Or worse—that she wouldn't break it off with him, defying Catherine and putting me in the middle of it all, which I supposed was where I should be.

But before I could fully run away with that, the bolt on the door turned, and in she came.

She looked as tired as I felt, her shoulders sloped and her expression heavy. Eyes red and swollen from tears, makeup worn. Even her hair was flat and dull, without her shine and bounce. It was like someone had put out the lights in her, leaving a husk of shadows.

“Hey,” I said, abandoning my meal on the counter to meet her.

Georgie sighed, refusing to meet my eyes. “It's done. It's over.”

A pause as I considered what to say. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head and took off her bag.

Another pause. “I'm sorry,” I said quietly.

“Me too.”

I stepped closer, opening my arms to gather her up, but she edged away. A hot slice of pain cut my heart.

“I'm going to shower and get in bed for the night,” she said, backing toward the stairs with a sad smile on her face.

“George, I ...”

She shook her head. “It's okay. I just ... I just want to be alone. We're okay. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Night,” she said, turning to go.

I watched her until she was out of sight, then stood, staring at the stairwell for a long moment.

Would it always be this hard? Would she resent me for not fighting Catherine for her, for not forging a way for her to have what she wanted despite the consequences? Would she truly forgive me, or would this drive a wedge between us? Or were we all destined to lose what we wanted to the whims of fate and family?

I didn't know. But I hoped our misery was temporary. That although it seemed there was no way out of the darkness, we'd feel our way through it and into the light.

Which left me wondering if there had been a time since my parents died that I'd been happy, truly happy.

And I realized it'd been so long, I couldn't remember how it felt.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

LANEY

At noon on a Thursday, Longbourne's corporate offices were unnaturally empty.

The galley of abandoned desks sat in silence, and it seemed the employees left had moved into the smaller offices around the open center of the space. The eerie quiet was broken by the occasional ringing phone, which was answered by an unseen hand, proving there was actually life on what felt like Mars.

I headed to the back of the floor where Marcus and Maisie's office was, knocking on the door. When my brother answered to come in, I did.

My frown was mighty.

Maisie was on the phone, her eyes widening when she saw me, then flicking to Marcus. He stood, smoothing his tie.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" he asked without any inflection to indicate his thoughts.

"What are *you* doing? Where is everybody?"

Maisie hung up the phone and sighed before standing. "All over the place. We've been a victim of some aggressive headhunting. And it happened so fast—not only have we barely had time to replace anyone, but Marcus and I can't get through twenty employees' worth of work and ours too."

"Why didn't you tell us?" I sank into one of the chairs.

Maisie stepped into Marcus's side, her hand resting protectively on her belly and her eyebrows drawn.

"We didn't want to worry you," Marcus answered.

“I hate to break it to you, but *that* is not something you can just fix without having to tell us. I take it everyone knows but me and Jett?”

Marcus at least looked a little guilty. “You’re busy—”

“So are you. Don’t look so worried. I’m not mad.”

“You look mad,” he noted.

I gave him a look. “How about you don’t push it?”

“We’ve been doing interviews and hired a few people, but they were snagged from under us before they even started. I don’t know what’s going on, but if we can’t get bodies in those chairs, we’re going to be in big trouble.”

I nodded, gathering up my willpower. “I’ll take over marketing, social, ads. Jett can handle accounting. What about Luke and Kash?”

Marcus shook his head. “Luke’s too busy at the shop, and we can’t spare Kash in the greenhouse.”

“Then it’s just us.” I stood and started to pace. “I’ll work on interviews too, so you two can get back to the big stuff.”

“Well, that’s another problem,” Maisie started. “We’re losing events too, and some of our supply has been interrupted.”

“What?”

She nodded. “This is deliberate. It’s the only explanation.”

“We suspect it’s Evelyn,” Marcus said. Maisie leaned into him for support at the mention of her mother. “We haven’t found any proof yet, but I’m looking.”

But I had stopped walking, a realization reverberating like a gong in my head. “No, not Evelyn. Catherine de Bourgh.”

Marcus’s face pinched. “Do you think she wants to reacquire us for Evelyn?”

“No,” I said. “She wants to *punish* us for what happened with Evelyn. Evelyn lost everything, including her family and her freedom, and just yesterday, Catherine made sure I knew she believed it was our fault. Not just me or you or Mom—*all* of us. Catherine is just as bitter and petty as Evelyn, and if I had to peg this on one person in the world, it would be her.”

Now it was Maisie’s turn to sit. She sank into a chair, hand still on her belly. “What are we going to do?” she breathed.

“What we’re *not* going to do is give up,” I said. “We just have to work harder. Let’s make sure all the new hires know that if they’re approached with a better offer to tell us so we can outbid them. Send Luke up to the farm

in Long Island and talk to the manager.”

“He called, but Leo wouldn’t give,” Marcus said.

“Which is why Luke needs to go up there. No one can refuse Luke, and Leo has done business with us since Grandma was still running the shop. There’s a reason, and I don’t think Leo will lie to Luke’s face. Have him take Mom, if he really needs backup. Between the two of them, Leo doesn’t stand a chance.”

Marcus nodded, already on his phone.

“What did Lila say about the events?” I asked, seeing as how Kash’s wife, an event planner, was our biggest account.

Maisie tucked her chin-length blonde hair behind her ear. “Only that a few of her bigger clients broke their contracts and ended up with her old firm.”

“Think we can connect them with Catherine?” I paced.

“We can ask. If anyone can sniff it out, it’s Lila. But then what?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet.” Darcy’s face flashed in my mind, but I pushed it away. I couldn’t ask him for help, not even for this. “Family meeting tonight? In the greenhouse. I’ll text the chat.”

I stopped walking long enough to find my phone and fire off a message to our group sibling chat. A flash of sadness streaked through my chest at the realization that they’d probably started a chat without Jett and me. That they’d been keeping this from us for what, weeks? Months?

The thought soured my stomach. But there would be time to deal with that later.

As my phone buzzed with my brothers’ affirmatives, I turned my attention back to Marcus and Maisie. “All hands on deck. Jett and I will talk to Wasted Words and the firm to see when and how they can spare us.”

Maisie still looked so worried, I knelt at her side and took her hand, smiling with genuine mischief.

“You’ve never *really* seen the Bennets in action. But you’re about to. We won’t let Longbourne fail. Instead, we’re going to find out if I’m right and how we’re going to turn it around.”

“Maybe ... maybe I could talk to my mom,” she said uncertainly. “I don’t know if she’d listen to me after everything, but it’s worth a chance, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Marcus answered without hesitation. “It won’t do any good. If Catherine is anything like Evelyn, she won’t stop until she gets

arrested. The only thing that will happen is that Evelyn will hurt Maisie, and I think we can agree she's hurt Maisie enough for one lifetime."

He wasn't wrong. Evelyn Bower was even more of a monster than Catherine, and Maisie had taken the brunt of that since she exited the womb.

"What about the Darcys?" Marcus asked. "Could one of them help?"

With a long sigh, I shook my head. "I can't ask Liam for help. Who knows whose side he's on? We'd rather willingly put our hands into a wood chipper than help each other with anything. And Georgie ... I think she'd help, but I don't think she's any better off than Jett is. I can't ask her to put herself in the middle of this too."

Marcus nodded, but he didn't look pleased.

"We're on our own," I said, pulling my laptop out of my bag. "So let's get started. Where can I set up?"

"Let me see if I can find you a desk." Marcus gestured to the empty galley.

"I'm going to gather everyone up and see what's what. And then we're going to get this place back on its feet, whether Catherine de Bourgh likes it or not," I promised.

And it was a promise I'd sacrifice everything to keep.

MY MISTAKE

LIAM

The work week had been unbearably long.

It seemed the clock moved slower than usual, or maybe it was just that I noticed it while living in solitude. I felt my aloneness acutely. Georgie had folded in on herself, boarding up the shutters as she handled her heartache. Laney had been absent, something to do with her family. I never quite got a straight answer—Georgie barely said more than a sentence at a time, Caroline didn't give enough of a shit to remember, and Laney wouldn't speak to me. Wouldn't even make eye contact with me the one time we'd seen each other.

It had been on the day of the review, when our teams presented our concepts to Georgie in preparation of proposing them to Cooper and Rose. I gave our presentation first, and I couldn't help but watch Laney for a reaction. Was she impressed? Did she see the merit in what we'd done? Or did she hate it all, me first and foremost? But there was no way to know, not with her gaze stuck on her notebook and her hand in constant motion. It'd be filled of murderous images of me from cover to cover by the time the job was through.

Sadness struck me at the thought.

Her presentation was brilliant, well thought out, and innovative. As she smiled and went through their materials, she occasionally scanned the room, meeting everyone's eyes but mine.

I'd become a blank space in her world, and I didn't blame her for it, even if I was sorry. It wasn't as if I could explain it away again. We were well

beyond that.

But as I sat in my office late that Friday night, I considered it again. She was still here working on her final presentation, which we'd deliver Monday to Cooper and Rose. This was it—the last chance to put any finishing touches on our work before it was decided once and for all. Her or me.

My office door had been open for hours, and I could see the light on at her temporary desk, occasionally catching the top of her head over the cubicle wall. That little sliver of her crown shouldn't have been so distracting. But I found myself glancing at it incessantly, like a mosquito bite I couldn't stop scratching.

So I decided to quit fighting it. If ever there were a chance to bridge the gap between us, it was now. So I ordered pho from a place she liked, gleaned her favorite meal from the times I'd seen her slurping at it with a pair of chopsticks and the one time we'd ordered for the office. It should have been offensive to watch her eat like that, so sloppy and loud. Instead, I'd watched for the dart of her tongue as she gathered noodles into her mouth or appreciated the way her lips looked when they closed around her chopsticks.

It was sick, really. An affliction of longing. At some point, I knew I'd have to let it go. Move on. But with her here, I didn't know how I ever would.

When I left my office to meet the delivery guy downstairs, she didn't look up. She didn't even notice when I exited the elevator and headed to her cubicle, a little island of light in a sea of darkness. In fact, it wasn't until I said her name that she finally saw me, and that was only after jumping six inches in her seat and ripping her earbuds out.

"Jesus," she breathed, sitting back in her chair with her hand on her chest. "Somebody should put a bell on you."

"Georgie tried, but I bit her."

An easy laugh slipped out of her before she caught herself, locking down her face and clearing her throat. "I didn't realize you were still here."

"Can't have you winning on Monday, can I?"

"Yes, well. If you'll excuse me, I really should get back to it—"

"I ordered pho." I held up the bag stupidly, realizing the sad state of my plan. "It ... it's from the place you like."

"What the Pho?"

I frowned, not getting the joke. And then I remembered that was the name of the restaurant. I nodded. "Steak, extra spicy, with spring rolls."

She eyed me with no small amount of suspicion. “How did you know?”

“We ordered once after a meeting.”

“And you remembered what I ordered? I don’t know if that’s sweet or creepy. But I know you’re not sweet, so ...”

A smile tugged at my lips in thanks she hadn’t already told me to leave. “You haven’t eaten, have you?”

“I haven’t.” She still eyed me.

“Good. I mean, not good that you’re hungry, but that dinner won’t go to waste.”

Her brows came together in confusion. “Right.”

An awkward pause. “Well, if you want to eat here, I guess I could—”

“Give me my dinner and leave? That would be nice.”

Inwardly, I flinched. Outwardly, I was as stoic as ever.

I set the bag on her desktop and began unwrapping it. With my eyes on my busy hands, I figured it was now or never.

“I’m sorry, Laney.”

“How many times do you think you’ll have to say it until it’s true?”

“I don’t know, but that won’t stop me from trying.”

She was quiet for a beat. “And why is that, exactly?”

“Sometimes I feel like I know the answer to that, and others, I have no idea.” I unpacked the Styrofoam containers of noodles and toppings, stacking them on top of each other. “What I do know is that I can’t seem to stop hurting you. And contrary to what you might think, I don’t actually *want* to hurt you.”

Again, she was silent, giving me time to line up the meal, chopsticks and all. With that done, I turned to face her and found her expression unreadable, which must have been a feat. Her feelings were typically plain enough to see from space.

“That is very much contrary to what I think,” she said. “In fact, I imagined you notching a whip with a wicked smile on your face every time you successfully ruined someone’s day. Twice, if you ruined mine.”

Anger twisted in me, and I straightened up, agitated at her lack of awareness, her absolute wrongness. The grip on the leash of my self-restraint loosed.

“You have no idea, do you?” The words were hard, sharp, tugging at their tether.

“About what?” she asked cautiously.

A wave of jumbled emotions crashed into me, and for a moment, I looked off, shaking my head, rubbing my mouth.

“Nothing.” I turned to walk away, not trusting myself to speak.

Two steps, and she grabbed me by the elbow. “Stop running away every time things get hard. Tell me what I’m so wrong about.”

“I thought you wanted me to leave.”

“Not until you explain what you meant.” She took two steps back and folded her arms.

And I wasn’t strong enough to resist the challenge.

“You like to think you understand everyone, don’t you? That you can meet a person once and know them. Put them in a labeled box to keep or toss. You love to believe that what you see is who I am, which makes sense—you impose your feelings on everyone who crosses your path and expect them to thank you for it. But not everyone is so free with their feelings. Not everyone says everything that pops into their head the moment they think it. This isn’t *me*, Laney. This is me around *you*. *You do this to me.*”

She jerked back, affronted. “*Me?* What have I ever done to deserve this?”

The leash snapped. “You drive me *insane*. You’ve invaded me, invaded my work, my mind, my life, and I’m unable to be rational or patient where you’re concerned. Do you have any idea how little control I have when you’re near me? Against my will, against my reason, against my character, I am inexplicably desperate for you. And you can’t even see it past your pride.” My chest heaved like a bull, the admission hanging between us like a guillotine.

She stared, wide-eyed and blank-faced.

“You can’t be surprised.”

“I can’t?” she asked as she took a step in my direction. “You’ve been nothing but unkind since the moment I first met you, and now you tell me without pretense that you’ve been pining after me?”

“I didn’t say I was pining,” I argued, even though I had been.

“And what gave you the idea that I wanted you?”

I took a challenging step of my own. “Are you saying you don’t?”

Her cheeks flushed, her chin lifting to keep our eyes locked. “You’re maddening.”

“Yes, I know. So are you.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You haven’t answered me.” Another step, and the space between us

disappeared. Everything was electric—the beat of my heart, the skin of my fingertips, the webs of nerves on my lips.

“Because it’s ridiculous,” she said softly, as if trying to convince herself.

“Is it?”

“Ludicrous.”

“I don’t think it’s ridiculous at all,” I said, inching closer, stopping only when I was close enough to feel her breath. “Especially not when it comes to how I feel about you. You set me on fire. I’m tortured by thoughts of you. The shape of your lips. The sound of your laughter. The sight of you flaming in anger like a struck match. How many times have I almost told you? How many nights have I lain awake, thinking of how you would taste?” I searched her face. She said nothing. “If you can tell me you’ve never wished for me the way I’ve wished for you, I won’t kiss you.”

“And if I don’t?”

I slid my hand into her hair, not needing to otherwise move—she leaned into me, our bodies flush. “Then God help us both.”

It was only a moment, a long, stretched-out moment as our noses inched closer, her eyes on my lips before clicking to mine. A word flashed behind them before her lids closed in a fluttering of raven wings—yes.

And lightning struck.

Our lips met in a shock of heat and light, leaving licking flames everywhere it touched. My awareness shrank to the heat of her defiant mouth, her lips somehow both soft and hard with demand. It wasn’t a kiss—it was too consuming to be only a kiss. It was a breathing of souls, a meeting of bodies, a tangle of tongues and a seam of mouths. We were hands tasting hot skin, my palm on her long neck, my fingertips tracing that obstinate jaw, her galloping heartbeat so close to mine, it matched her wild pace. She tasted like open skies and seas that went on forever.

And I couldn’t find it in me to let her go.

I gathered her up, setting her on the desktop, learning the shape of her body without sight. Her hands fumbled with my tie, my buttons, a haphazard flurry of motions, none of which could be completed before being distracted by something else.

But it was where our lips were joined that I found salvation.

She was wholeness, rightness. The shape of her fit into the shape of me, filling a space I only recognized as an absence of light. A place once filled with dark matter—unable to be seen, unaffected by force, a void only

discovered because of how it affected everything around it. But for that moment, with Laney in my arms, her light blasted the darkness, chasing the shadows into every corner until they were vanquished.

This was the thing I'd feared, the redemption I'd craved. Because now that I knew her power, I would be a slave to her. And I'd be shackled willingly.

There was no future in this space. There was no past. There was no logic, no rules and no obstacles, only what we wanted now, without repercussion. I slipped into the stream of my desire for her, gave in to the feeling without considering consequence. The leash, my tether, was gone, the beast in me running free.

Running to her.

We were hands against feverish skin, frantic and seeking that which we longed for, that which we needed, outrunning the hunt of reality. We were racing hearts, racing lips, racing fingertips uncovering flesh by inches. The hitch of her skirt over her hip. The slide of her hands into the gaping V of my slacks. The primal feel of her bare hip in my palm, of the unyielding length of me in hers.

At the shock of her touch, reality awoke.

The past crept in. The future followed. And the truth of our circumstance made itself known.

There's no way to keep her without losing it all.

But I can't lose her either.

The thought sobered me, broke the kiss, bringing me upright so I could see her face. And we stared at each other breathlessly as my thoughts snapped into place.

"I ..." was all I could manage.

She smiled with swollen lips. "Me too."

I shook my head infinitesimally. "We should decide what to do."

Her smile twisted into something wicked. "I can think of a great many things to do."

I laughed before taking a moment to kiss her again, this time with enough restraint to keep from creating a vacuum of space and self. When I leaned back again, I smiled down at her, a plan unfurling. In fact, it was the only plan at our disposal, the only way to get what we wanted.

Each other.

"There are bigger things to decide. Like what we are going to do about

this. Because we are doing this. We're going to do a lot of this."

"But do we have to decide *now*?"

"I think we should. And then I think you should come home with me."

She sighed, relaxing her legs, which had been hooked around me. We parted, took a moment to right ourselves.

A sharp slice of amazement cut through me at the realization of what I'd done, at what I was about to do. I had let go so completely, so entirely to what I wanted, and the act had liberated me. A second followed when I realized that without question, I regretted nothing.

This was reinforced when she slid into me, her arms threading around my waist, rolling up on her tiptoes in silent request for a kiss.

I happily obliged.

When we parted, I swept her hair back from her smiling cheeks.

"All right, Mr. Darcy. So what do you suggest?"

Logic took charge, the words exiting me like a ticker tape of computations. "We only have one option. Your family is obviously a problem for mine—I can't openly defy my aunt without losing everything. But that doesn't mean we can't do *this* for as long as we want, if no one finds out."

Something in her shifted. Hardened. Pulled back and frosted over.

My brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she asked quietly. "Are you ... are you serious?"

My silence was enough.

She snapped like a switch. "Should I feel gratitude that you've propositioned me? Should I thank you for admitting you unwillingly want me? Should I take it as a compliment that you'd like to sleep with me, *so long as no one finds out*?"

Her hand on my chest was the final stop. I needed nothing more than the slightest pressure to put a yard between us.

"I can't believe I was so foolish. I can't believe I let myself get here, to this place. With you."

"That's not ... Laney, I *want* you."

"But only on your terms," she shot before laughing without humor. "It's so obvious. How I could have believed otherwise is just a testament to how able you are to control everyone around you. Even if I didn't have my own reasons for hating you right now, I could never be with the man who ruins and destroys everything he touches. I could never choose someone who thought my family so beneath them, such a problem. Thank you for

reminding me of what I momentarily forgot. Because nothing could pardon you, not even your *declaration*, if that's what you'd call it."

"What have I destroyed?" I asked, my jaw, my body, my mind tight as a garrote. "What have I ruined that you haven't had a hand in?"

"My brother, for instance, not that you care about him. Your sister, over and again."

"And what exactly have I done? I gave them my blessing. What more do you want?"

"What do I want?" she shouted. "I want you to *do* something about it! You could have saved Georgie and Jett, but you didn't. You could have fought for them, but instead, you left them to rot, just like you did Wyatt. Or maybe you're the impetus behind Catherine's unbending interference?"

I took a breath so sharp, it stung. My heart was a raging inferno.

"Do you deny it?" she asked.

"I don't deny that I did everything I could to stop Georgie from seeing Jett, but there was no joy in it. I want her happiness more than I want my own."

"And what about Wyatt? Did you want her happiness then?"

My eyes narrowed to slits, and I said through my teeth, "You're quick to defend him."

"How could I not be? You ruined his chance at happiness, just like you did your sister's and my brother's."

"*Wickham's* happiness," I scoffed. "Of course the state of his happiness is *my* fault."

"You're the one who stole that life from him, and yet here you are, mocking his pain. You lied to Georgie about Wyatt, filled her head with bullshit so she'd leave him. You tried to pay him off, for God's sake, and told her you'd cut her off if she didn't walk away."

Lies, lies, lies, I raged in my mind. But I was too furious to correct her.

"So this is what you think of me?" I shot instead. "Thank you for explaining so fully. My faults are unforgivable, as you said, since your word is law. But maybe," I said, leaning closer, "you wouldn't have been so quick to judge had your pride not been hurt by my honesty."

"Honesty?" she snapped. "Is that what you're calling it?"

"Maybe you'd be more forgiving if I'd pretended like your family hadn't been a nuisance since the moment I met you? Or if I'd lied to you to spare your feelings regarding my aunt and her edict to reject you at all costs?"

Maybe if I'd disguised how I felt about you, you'd be more willing. But I won't wear a mask, not for you, not for anyone. I'm not ashamed of how I feel about you, nor do I wish I hadn't told you. But could you really expect me to celebrate the inferiority of your family and the burden it puts on me?"

She stood before me, trembling softly with fury. "Thank you for making this so easy. For a moment, I forgot the simple truth of your *character*, as you call it. From the second I met you, you have shown nothing but arrogance, conceit, and disdain for the feelings of others. Within minutes of learning your name, I knew without question that you were the last man in the world I would ever lower myself for, Liam Darcy."

I was struck breathless, my lungs screaming for air and my heart throwing itself against my sternum, reaching for her. "Then there's nothing left to say. Forgive me for *inflicting* myself on you tonight. It won't happen again."

With an unfathomable pain in my chest, I turned and walked away.

And with every step I took, she seeped from that space in my heart where she'd fit so perfectly, leaving it empty once again.

EVASIVE MANEUVERS

LANEY

I barely recognized myself.

Exhaustion played some part—not only had I spent the last week working three jobs, but after last night with Liam, I hadn't slept but for the occasional drifting in and out of consciousness. This morning, I'd dragged myself out of bed and come to the Longbourne offices early to get a jump on the day.

My team's proposal for the ad campaign was finished before my coffee, and I sent it off, washing my hands of the project. I would be there for the final presentation, and then I was finished. I'd sent Cam an email somewhere around three in the morning to ask for a leave and let her know I didn't have time for the firm now that my family needed me, which was true. But not as true as the necessity of getting away from Darcy.

No one in this world made me so angry as Liam Darcy. Nothing confused and upset me like the presence of a man who could kiss me and insult me in the same breath. A man who made me feel so intensely, I could burst into flames with a word. A touch. His kiss was a smoldering brand on my heart, leaving a wound in the shape of his name.

I had been reduced to embers, eviscerated and consumed. Used up and flickering. I had nothing left for him, my will and patience exhausted, gone the second I'd given in to my desire. Because he'd destroyed me the moment I was vulnerable enough to forget who he was.

And this time, I wasn't going to let it go. There was no going back. And the only solution to putting it all behind me was to extract myself from the

situation. I could leave my position at their firm. Wasted Words would understand, and if they didn't? Well, I'd figure something out. Because one thing I would absolutely not do was willingly put myself in his path again.

There were masochists, and then there were fools. I liked to think I was neither.

So this morning, I sat in the empty offices of my family's business, picking up the mess left by whoever had set out to ruin us. Again.

Though I had no proof, I still suspected Catherine. It made the most sense, and though I'd occasionally been known to be wrong, it was rare. Speaking to Darcy about it would have gone nowhere, even before last night. And I'd thought to discuss it with Georgie, but she'd avoided me all week, and when we *did* speak, it was a tiptoeing, superficial thing, working hard to dodge the subject of my brother. I couldn't upset her worse by accusing her aunt of interfering with us, especially because I doubted any good would come from it. Georgie had just as much of a chance at stopping Catherine de Bourgh as I did of flipping a car over.

Of course, if Darcy was present and his mouth was moving, flipping a car might not be out of the question.

The best thing any of us could do was try to offset Catherine's interference while Marcus tried to dig up some evidence as to her involvement. She was sneaky, though—the headhunting always came from a different company and none affiliated with her. But if we could find some proof, we could potentially intervene with legal action, but so far, we'd turned up nothing. Through the course of the week, we'd hired ten new people, and so far, three had started without losing anyone yet. We'd had to outbid other companies several times, but we'd retained our new hires with the promise of money and perks. Worth every penny, as far as we were concerned.

Whatever this was, it wouldn't ruin us.

But we were still in the lurch left by our diminished staff and the new employees who weren't yet fully trained. So us Bennets had to pick up the slack. Wasted Words gave Jett and me freedom to work at Longbourne—my job could be handled remotely, and Jett's was easily covered. So he'd thrown himself into the masses of paperwork, bookkeeping, and account management that had piled up, and I'd jumped into our halted advertising and marketing. Now that I was through with De Bourgh, I could really make some headway.

Wyatt had texted me several times since I'd seen him last, but I'd been hesitant to respond. Today, I'd ignored him completely when he let me know he was on his way back, looking to secure a time to see each other. But my life was more complicated that Saturday morning than ever, and Wyatt was only good for more chaos.

I didn't have long until my solitude ended, but the last thing I wanted to talk about was what'd happened last night. How could I admit it aloud? How could I explain how I'd been so foolish as to give in to my desire, knowing he would only hurt me? And how would I ever forget the way it felt to be his for a moment, how the memory of his touch still kissed my flesh, the press of an aching bruise? How would I ever deny how absolutely right he felt before he erased me completely?

It was impossible. But Jett was about to walk through the door, and there would be no avoiding some level of admission. He'd been at Wasted Words for a hero-villain mixer when I got home, and when he came home, I made sure to appear asleep in my room. This morning, I'd gotten out of bed with the sun and left before he was awake. But I'd avoided telling him for as long as I could. It'd been hard enough keeping it from Jett this long. He was the human equivalent of my diary, but when it came to the matter of Darcy, I couldn't seem to tell him everything. Not the complete truth of it. Not the fact that part of me wanted Liam. Or that so much of my fury was because I wanted him to want me too, even though he found new and painful ways to cut me over and again. Worse—I'd kept going back for more.

But last night was the final straw.

I was through being hurt by him. Murderous rage was exhausting, and I was officially tapped.

And that was where half my mind was as I worked on scheduling social media posts and checking our social ads, updating my calendar to set meetings with our larger advertising contacts and to gather a team to create some fresh content. A new campaign brewed in the back of my mind, and I let it roll around there like churning ice cream, making itself into something delicious. Next week, once it solidified, I'd get a schedule together for it, see if I could plan out a few months of marketing with a fresh look. That way, when we had a team in place again, I could just pass it off to them and get back to my life.

With a gentle nudging of my heart, it occurred to me that being here, working for Longbourne, felt *good*. As much as I loved the bookstore, I knew

my family business better than anyone who had touched their marketing since I'd left. This was where I felt at home, where work felt easy. Where I could use all that I'd learned for the sake of my family. It was the joining of my two worlds, and I wondered why I'd never *truly* considered it before.

But at the beginnings of imagining, I shook the thought away. At the thought of flipping my life in the direction I'd avoided for so long had me slamming the shutters closed so I couldn't look out upon that possibility. Not now, at least.

Not yet.

I was so deep in my calendar that I didn't see Jett until he set a white paper bag and a cup of coffee stamped with the name *Blanche's* on my desk. My taste buds exploded in anticipation.

"Oh my God, you brought me Blanche's," I stated the obvious, tearing into the bag to find a beignet, a Cronut, and a lemon-cream filled donut.

"I didn't know which you'd want, so I got all three."

"I want all three, so you did good."

He chuckled, pulling up a chair to watch me tear into the beignet. His deep blue eyes were a little sad, a little worried.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Nope," I said around a full mouth. "How was the mixer?"

"Fine. The usual."

"Heart wasn't in it?"

"Not even a little."

I took another bite, chewed, swallowed. Asked, "Talk to Georgie?"

A small shake of his head, his eyes shifting so he didn't have to look at me. "I tortured myself long enough. Nothing left to do but move on, right?"

"And how's that going for you?"

"Fucking terrible, and I don't think I'll ever get over it."

My face fell when I saw the truth of the words in his eyes. "I hate this."

"You and me both. But what can I do about it?" He scrubbed his hand across his lips. "I think I love her, Lane."

My throat closed around a lump.

"But it doesn't matter. I won't be the reason she loses her family and legacy—I can't be. There's no choice to be made. But time heals all wounds, or something. Right?"

"I sure as hell hope so."

A pause. "So were you working late last night?"

“Yes.” I didn’t elaborate.

“Here or at the firm?”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I know. But I think you should.”

“Pushy.”

He shrugged. “Don’t act surprised. We share DNA.”

I stuffed the end of the beignet in my mouth and dusted off my hands, considering how to approach the topic through a swallow.

“I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Which makes me think you were at the firm, and that whatever’s upset you has to do with Liam.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “On both counts.”

His dark brows gathered. “What did he do?”

I watched him. “You don’t want to know.”

At that, all of him went dark. “Laney ...”

“He brought me dinner, insulted me, kissed me, and then ... I don’t know, Jett. Things got out of hand.” He was so still, I wondered if his heart might have stopped. “It would have been ...” I swallowed hard at the memory. “It would have been good. We could have been good, I think. But he’s who he is. He insulted me, and I won’t go back there. I’m through.”

“I’ll kill him.”

“Please, if you kill him, do it for yourself. I won’t have you going to jail on account of me.”

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Jett spat. “It’s like it’s his personal mission in life to fuck with us.”

“I’m sure it’s not just us. Georgie gets plenty of it, but for some reason, she hasn’t disowned him. I want to believe he’s somehow redeemable, but he’s hellbent on proving me wrong.”

“Like, seriously, Laney. How did he end up ... I mean ... *how?*”

“I don’t even know. One second he’s yelling at me that he acts this way because I drive him crazy, and the next he’s an inch from my nose, daring me to deny that I want him. And then he just ... kissed me.”

Jett swore in a long stream under his breath.

“It gets worse.”

“It’d better not get worse,” Jett warned.

I nibbled my bottom lip. “I wanted more.”

His face flattened.

“I know,” I groaned, dropping my face to my hands. “I’m feeling a lot of self-loathing about it.”

“Please tell me how it’s possible that you could actually want that son of a bitch.”

“Maybe it’s just because I hate him so much. They say your brain produces the same chemicals for both emotions. Plus, hate-fucking *is* a thing people do.”

He cringed.

“But don’t worry—I’m done. I’ll finish what I have to do with the firm, and then they’re on their own. I already have permission from Cam to not go to their offices anymore. I’ll work at the bookstore and at Longbourne and go to whatever meetings at the firm I’m obligated to be at, but I refuse to work with him. I’m exhausted, and it’s largely his fault. The pain’s not even necessary—I don’t *have* to deal with him, so why do I keep putting myself through it?”

“Because I think something is wrong with you and you really do *like* him.”

A laugh burst out of me like a flock of sparrows. “I assure you, as of right now, I have never hated anyone more in my life.”

“Except you let him kiss you.”

I gave him a look.

“*And* you liked it.”

The look intensified.

“I’m just saying, maybe you don’t hate him as much as you think.”

“Are you trying to convince me to sleep with Liam?”

“I mean, if you want to do it before I beat him to death, I guess I won’t hold it against you.”

I wadded up the powdered sugary paper and threw it at him. He caught it like an asshole.

“No, you’re right,” he said. “It’s good that we should just be done with them once and for all. Then maybe we can get back to normal.”

I tried to smile, but it was a weak, thin imitation. “Yeah, maybe we can.”

But I had a feeling we’d never have that normal again, no matter how badly we wished for it. And with the horizon hidden behind a thick layer of fog, there was no knowing how long it would be before we found it again.

ALWAYS A BUT ...

LIAM

I wasn't sure when I'd become a walking fuckup.

Maybe I'd always been this way.

Of late, I'd made a habit of testing the limits of my relationships, and all of them buckled under the strain. Some broke into shards and slivers so fine, repair was impossible. So sharp, they drew blood, the wounds as angry and red as the day I'd earned them nearly a week ago.

I'd spent the weekend in a self-imposed prison, not a word spoken to Georgie about the kiss. About the words of admission or the words of anger. About the woman who consumed my every thought, influenced my every action. And why? How? She'd reached into my chest and taken the reins of my heart. I was no longer in control, not even now that it was over with no small sense of finality.

The thing was, she wasn't wrong, not about everything. But neither was I. She assumed so much, never asking for the truth. Instead, she took comfort in her imaginings, never questioning whether she was right. It was easy to presume. To believe a charming snake like Wickham over an irritable bear like me. To think that I'd purposely try to ruin others' happiness just because I could.

She wasn't the only one to judge.

When it came to the matter of Laney, I couldn't seem to find a way to speak so she'd listen, not until we were both angry. And by that time, it was too late, the damage already done.

I shouldn't have led with her family. I should have been soft, told her the

truth in my heart—I wanted her, all of her. Her willful mind, her fiery heart. Her body, yes, but only as a way to reach the rest of her. That avenue didn't need words, which I was woefully empty of. It only needed her lips and mine in silent accord, reaching past our stubborn natures and into the truths of us. For a moment, we'd reached that place, that in-between where we could meet without obstacle, without the barrier of our pride—a trait which we had an abundance of. For that moment, we were perfect. We were equals.

And then I'd opened my mouth and acted like the monster she believed me to be.

It was the truth of our circumstance. Choosing a Bennet would be opening fire on Catherine, challenging her idea of safety and security. It would mean sacrificing my place at the company my father and grandfather had helped build. This place, this job, was my life, the sum of my goals, bred in me since infancy. It was my legacy, just as it was Georgie's—leaving was unthinkable. But I couldn't walk away from Laney either. I couldn't deny myself what I wanted, but I couldn't have it all. Seeing each other in secret was the only chance to be with her without upending my entire life, and I saw my mistake in saying so.

Because every good thing was followed by a *but*.

I want you, but ...

I've never felt this way, but ...

I barely know you, but ...

I think I might love you, but ...

Quicksand swallowed me up—the more I fought, the faster I sank.

When I'd been alone that night, after the kiss, I'd spent hours counting my regrets, picking out moments when I could have made different choices and aching with the loss of those choices. In my pride, I'd smashed the last bit of hope I had with her, written in stone when she kindly informed me that I was the last man she would ever choose for hers.

I didn't know how much clearer she could make it.

Although the time for Laney and me had passed, there were two important matters that needed to be addressed—Wickham and my involvement regarding Georgie and Jett. And since I couldn't find the right words with my lips, I laid them down with pen to paper where there would be no interruptions.

Now all I had to do was give it to her and leave.

Because I was leaving.

Not forever, though it was tempting. Georgie and I planned a last-minute trip to the cities Wasted Words would expand in under the excuse of getting a flavor for the cities and tweaking our final campaign to meet each location. Caroline would run the team while we were gone, and given that the competition was over today, I suspected we would go back to Laney coming in twice a week for meetings.

I wanted her here every day. I wanted her to leave—it was the only way I could escape her. Even now, as we sat in the conference room and she gave her presentation, I could barely stand to share space with her for the longing. A beast rolled and roiled in my skin, the desire to do *something*, anything, alive and hungry. I wanted to explain and to apologize. To yell and to argue. To kiss her and hold her. To tell her the truth.

I could do none of those things. So I sat in that chair, barely hearing what she said, my fist opening and closing under the table where it rested on my thigh.

Her final product was genius, just as I'd known it would be. The fill-in-the-blank slogan worked for everything, and her artwork, the palette, it was all not only on-brand for the bookstore, but firmly in the vein of current design trends. She'd taken my suggestions, and I was even more certain she'd win than I'd ever been.

Add that to the list of things I should have told her.

The meeting ended with a small speech from Georgie, then Cooper, thanking us for our work. We all stood, the team dispersing, but Georgie waved Laney and me over.

“Knew you could do it,” Cooper said with a sideways smile, extending his hand for a shake.

“I'm nothing if not consistent,” I joked.

“And how about Laney?” He pulled her into a side hug. “She's something else, isn't she?”

Laney's lips flattened, her eyes sharp with warning when they met mine. One tick of the clock, and everything about her shifted to defense.

“She is,” I answered, noting the many ways that was true.

“How'd you guys get along?”

Laney answered for us, “Well, we ended up competing with each other just to shut the other one up. So about that well.”

Cooper appraised her, then glanced at me. “She's not afraid of you at all, is she?”

“Not even a little.”

“Brave,” he noted.

“I have four brothers his size and with bigger mouths,” she said. “Very little scares me.”

He chuckled. My chest ached.

I said nothing.

“I’m really impressed,” Cooper said. “I’m not sure how we’re ever going to choose.”

“Then do me a favor and pick mine,” Laney suggested. “Destroying Darcy has become my new personal and professional mission.”

They all laughed like she was kidding. Maybe she was.

I supposed she didn’t realize she’d destroyed me already.

Georgie picked up the conversation, discussing subsequent steps and a meeting we’d have at the end of next week to determine our final direction, not mentioning she and I were leaving. No one knew, not even Caroline, and she’d be taking over. But I wanted to slip out quietly so I didn’t have to answer any questions. Because if they asked, I’d have to lie and say I was leaving for work. And I refused to lie.

Everyone said their goodbyes, and Laney led the charge out of the conference room as Cooper turned to me for idle conversation. I’d already taken a step to follow Laney.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but there’s something I need to take care of. Will you excuse me?”

“Of course,” he answered with that smile on his face and his eyes bright with whatever he saw in me. “Let’s have lunch, catch up.”

“I’ll text you.”

And I was off as quickly as I could go without looking urgent. Even if it felt like the last chance I’d ever have to speak to her.

Georgie stood in her office with Laney, the two of them chatting happily despite the sadness behind Georgie’s eyes. They quieted as I approached, Georgie’s face slipping from laughter to worry when she saw me.

I stopped just inside the threshold. My gaze stuck on Laney, drinking in the sight of her dark hair tumbling over her shoulders. Of the bloom of color on her cheeks. Of the sharpness of her eyes, their blue otherworldly. Electric. Her lips were pinched at the corners, but it didn’t change the bow, the swell. My own lips knew their shape, longed to taste them again, tingled with forever unfulfilled desire.

Georgie's eyes bounced from one of us to the other. "You know what? I forgot—I needed to check something out with accounting. Be right back." And then she walked out, offering an encouraging smile as I passed.

Laney didn't move. I thought maybe it was because she wanted to stay, but I quickly realized that might have been because I was directly between her and the door.

"Please tell me you're not going to apologize again," she warned. "Actually, please don't say anything. I'm leaving."

She'd already started walking, reaching me quickly in her hurry. But I couldn't let her go, not this final time. I caught her by the arm, squeezing gently, appreciating the last taste of her skin against my fingertips.

Heat flared behind her eyes, but not the angry kind, not at first. It was an open look into her heart, a streak of pain and longing I felt in my marrow. It mirrored mine.

"Please," I said softly. I was left without any other words as I waited for her answer.

When she turned to face me, I let her go.

"I'm leaving," she blurted, her face tight. "The firm. I'm leaving and going back to the bookstore."

I was struck still.

"I sent my design resources to Georgie, and Caroline can take over whatever duties I had."

"Is this because—"

"I've been working three jobs, and it's not sustainable," she lied. "Between the bookstore and my family's business, I don't have time to be here, where I'm not needed. Or wanted."

You're wanted. I want you. "What happened with your family?"

I didn't think her look could darken more, but it did. "Just busy on the front lines of a little corporate warfare. Someone's sabotaging Longbourne. I thought that was over with Evelyn in jail, but I guess your aunt picked up the torch."

My brows gathered. "Catherine?"

"No, your *other* aunt who hates us," she snapped.

"How do you know it's her? It could be anyone." Even as I said it, the possibility niggled at me.

"She practically threatened me when we first met. Would *you* put it past her?"

My frown deepened.

“Not that it matters. All I know is that I can’t stay here, not with her scheming and not with *you*. You’ve put me in a prison, and I need to be free of it. Of you.” She said it in such a way that I didn’t know if it was spite or sadness in her voice.

“I understand. I ... I won’t stop you. I just wanted to give you this.”

I slipped my hand into my coat, pulling the letter out. Her eyes followed it as I extended it.

She didn’t move to take it. “What’s this?”

“A letter.”

Her eyes took a turn. “What’s *in* the letter?”

“If I wanted to talk about it, I wouldn’t have written it down.”

“God, you are insufferable.” With a pop, she snatched it from my fingertips, glaring at me. “Goodbye, Mr. Darcy. May we both be so lucky as to never see each other again.”

With an angry rush of air, she was gone.

And so was I.

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

LANEY

The world was a blur around me as I left his office, stopping by my desk to blindly stuff my things in my bag, including the letter.

Thoughts fired like a machine gun, too fast to pick one out of the hail. They pinged in my skull, too loud to hear anything else, a cacophony so overwhelming, my body was on autopilot, carrying me out of the building and toward the subway. But I didn't head for Longbourne like I'd planned. I boarded the train to take me home with a name echoing in whispers in my mind.

Liam.

He invoked a feeling singular to him, a reactionary mixture of frustration and resentment and disdain, combined with longing and rejection and unwanted desire. And I hated myself for it. How could I want a man so uncommonly unworthy? Why did every insult sting deeper than skin—not for the words themselves, but for the disregard of the man who'd spoken them? Why, oh why, had I been haunted by that kiss, the one that made undelivered promises? Why couldn't I forget the way it felt to be held by him, why I felt safe in his arms when he was the most dangerous man I'd ever known?

I'd spent a long time chastising myself, but never so much as sitting on that train with his letter in my bag. I couldn't figure out what it was. An apology? A teardown? A list of puns? Blueprints for his summer home? There was no way to guess what he could possibly think. I suspected it mostly consisted of zeroes and ones, peppered with the occasional insult and swear word.

But it didn't matter. I wasn't going to read it. Historically, when I was through, I was through, and we were well past over it. Whatever was inside wouldn't deter me, but there was a very high likelihood that it would make me angry. So I'd throw it away. No, I'd burn it. Or tear it into fifty pieces and flush it down the toilet. Or just throw it in the subway trash and never think about it again.

But I didn't throw it away. I stormed off the train and all the way home, stomped up the stairs to our empty apartment, tossing my keys into the little dish next to the door with a clang. Bag off with a thump. Shoes off with twin clunks. Hands on my hips, I stared down at my bag, the letter all but glowing through the leather flap. I could light a candle, lavender maybe. Get all calm and Zen and watch that piece of paper get eaten up by a flame. I imagined it would be satisfying, but a niggling in my heart reminded me that not knowing would be much, much worse than knowing. It'd probably keep me up at night for the rest of my days.

So I knelt. Opened the flap. Reached in and retrieved the letter. It weighed a hundred pounds between my fingertips as I sank onto the couch, my name written in black ink by his hand in script with a calligraphic flourish on the *L* and the *Y*. It was almost too perfect to be someone's actual handwriting, and I wondered why he would school himself to write with such precision. Another of Darcy's many mysteries.

I slipped my thumb into the envelope flap, separating it from itself. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, my fight-or-flight kicking in with a rush of adrenaline.

I probably should have fled.

The paper was thick, folded in thirds, and when I opened it and saw my name again—this time in a strong, square, uppercase print—something in me snapped and flew away, released from an unseen tether.

Laney,
First, don't worry—I have no plans to repeat the admission you found so repulsive when we last spoke. I write this without the intention to hurt you or to humble myself by dwelling on things I can't have. I wouldn't have asked you to read this if my character didn't demand that I write it. And

I'm sure something I say will offend you—it's my way, isn't it?—so I can only tell you in advance that I'm sorry.

I was accused of two offenses—the first that I played some part in keeping Jett from Georgie, and the second that in defiance of honor and humanity, I ruined Wickham and Georgie along with him.

I have seen my sister in love many times, and each time destroyed her in some small way—in Wickham's case, ruined completely. And so I watched her with Jett, noticing instantly that I hadn't seen her so happy since Wyatt. I watched Jett too, and though he seemed charming and true, we'd all been fooled before. I didn't trust him, and I didn't trust Georgie, and in that, I was wrong. I was misled by that error, and I hurt them both. I wanted to find his faults, but not because I wished it. Only because I wanted proof of my suspicions—that he wanted her money and would break her heart.

I have always been protective of Georgie, but after Wickham, I am incapable of restraint.

There is, of course, the matter of your family. The situation with your mother and my aunt grew to a proportion I couldn't have anticipated. Catherine is my only living family besides Georgie, and this company is my legacy. But Catherine has the power to strip me of both my title and my family. In my frustration, I've said many things to you that I didn't mean, not the way I wielded the words—like weapons designed to cut to the bone—but the situation with your family couldn't be ignored. Your standing and status matter, though not to me. To Catherine.

As I said, I won't deny my wishes to separate my sister from your brother. But Georgie's happiness is my purpose, always. On learning the depth of her feelings, I told her I would support her, and I would have. But it's our aunt who stands in their way, not me.

On the matter of having damaged Wickham, I can only refute it by laying out the truth of what happened between us all. Wyatt was once my closest friend, and though he knew Georgie then, it wasn't until she started at the firm that he sought her out. It never felt right, the two of them. I know now that it was because lies clung to him, only visible in glimpses—a slip of his mask, a moment when he thought no one was looking—but Georgie loved him and was happy. Any attempt to talk to her about my suspicions resulted in a fight. When they got engaged and he refused to sign the prenup I had drafted, there was no more trusting Georgie's heart.

So I did some digging, hired an investigator. And I learned the truth for

myself.

Wickham had developed a gambling addiction, one that put him into six-figure debt. I believe he loved my sister, but addiction changed him. His “business trips” were spent in Atlantic City, his debt spread out over a dozen credit cards and a handful of bookies. His rush to get married came on the heels of threats to his person from the people he owed. He claims I paid him to leave, and I did pay him, in a sense—I gave him the money to clear his debts. Not that he cared—I’d cut off his access to the coffers, an offense he’d never forgive. But I never threatened him, and I certainly never threatened Georgie. When presented with the truth, Georgie made up her own mind.

This is why I believed he was using you—partly because he uses everyone and partly because I suspect he has designs on revenge. I don’t know if you’re aware, but he’s been in contact with Georgie, asking to see her. And I can’t imagine he has noble purposes.

This is the truth as I know it, and if you haven’t already rejected it, I hope you’ll absolve me of these two accusations—I won’t ask for anything more. I should have told you all of this the moment I learned what he’d accused me of, but I wasn’t master enough of myself to know what I could or should say. I don’t know what lies he’s told you, but my only hope is that you’re now aware of who you’re dealing with. If he hurt someone else I care for, I wouldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t try to stop it.

If your hatred of me makes this letter valueless, please talk to Georgie. She’ll tell you everything.

You won’t hear from me again. But know I wish you all the happiness in life, Laney.

—Liam Darcy

My hand covered my mouth as I read it again, too upset for comprehension, especially when it came to Wyatt.

I wanted to deny it, to believe it all a lie. For a moment, I did. I folded up the letter, put it in its envelope, and threw it in the trash. Within minutes, it was back in my hand, unfurled so I could read it again. I pored over the accusations while my mind worked the problem of deciding who was lying. I remembered the day Wyatt had told me about Darcy, the pain on his face and

the bald honesty in his words. Had any of it been true?

Again, I read it, hesitating as I weighed it out. Because if this were true, Darcy was no villain after all. Haughty in his explanation, sure. Controlling enough to hire a private investigator to spy on Wickham. But he was faultless in Georgie's broken heart beyond uncovering the truth. The lies Georgie had endured, the pain Wyatt had caused her ... it was almost too much to stomach, somehow so much filthier than the lie that Liam had interfered without reason.

If it were one of my brothers, I might have done the same.

Everything slid into focus. The new perspective shook me as I replayed conversations with Wyatt and Darcy both. It all made so much more sense. And where Darcy had nothing to gain and no reason to lie, Wyatt had quite the opposite. Wyatt's lie shielded him, gave him a way to hide his true self. Maybe he thought I could provide money for his addiction. Maybe he got off on lying to women. Or maybe I was just a doorway he could use to punish Darcy or get to Georgie again.

At the realization of my error, I was overcome with shame.

I was wrong. I was so deeply wrong, the foundation of what I held true crumbling and sinking into the mud of my disgrace.

I had been a fool, and I had behaved badly. I prided myself on discernment above all, but I shouldn't have. Because I was wrong. Wrong about Darcy, wrong about Wyatt. Blinded by vanity. Never had I seen my faults so clearly, so painfully.

Until this moment, I never knew myself.

I swiped tears from my face, changing quickly, needing to get out of the apartment, into the sunlight and open skies where I wouldn't suffocate. And then I was off, heading into Central Park with a full mind and an empty heart, looking for answers among rustling amber leaves.

(IM)POSSIBILITY

LANEY

Two days passed, and I was lost in myself.

The news about the competition didn't at all lift my spirits, not when I found out that we both won.

Wasted Words loved both proposals, deciding on Liam's tag line for the store and my fill-in-the-blank idea for the events and crossover marketing. The artistic approach would be somewhere between the two, using elements from both to create a new, comprehensive art set.

I'd been hoping he would win so I could extricate myself from the situation completely with no trace left behind. But now all the marketing would be an amalgamation of the two of us when all I wanted was to forget him.

But I couldn't. I didn't know that I ever would.

I hadn't told anyone about the letter, not even Jett, the weight of my wrongness humbling, silencing, too great to share until I found a way to swallow that shameful truth about myself.

I didn't know how to admit it aloud. I'd only just admitted it.

So I sat at a booth in Wasted Words that morning, making whatever idle chatter I could. Jett knew well enough that something was wrong, but he didn't press. I'd tell him soon, tonight maybe. But I just wanted a minute longer to keep my shame to myself before opening up to be judged by anyone the way I'd judged Darcy, whether they would judge me or not.

Fortunately, I had plenty of work to keep me busy.

I'd taken to the routine of working at Wasted Words in the mornings and

Longbourne in the afternoons. We'd lost a few of our new staff but nothing major, and Lila thought she was close to finding out who'd been poaching her clients. Georgie had understood completely when I told her I wouldn't be back unless they absolutely needed me, and the relief from having that particular job off my plate was palpable. I could stay away from Darcy and his vile aunt and work on my real job and my family. I didn't have time for anything else, especially not that family's drama, Georgie excluded.

And that was where I was when Wyatt walked into the bookstore.

He looked like a little slice of heaven, tall and blond and beautiful, his eyes bright and smile sincere. Or what I'd thought was sincere before I learned he was a rat.

Wyatt strode over like a king, slipping into the booth across from me. "So you *are* alive," he teased.

I didn't so much as smile. "What are you doing here?"

"You weren't answering my texts, so I thought I'd swing by, make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine." I closed my laptop with the intent to flee to the back where he couldn't follow without an invitation. And I wasn't offering. "I actually have a lot of work to do, so—"

Confusion flickered across his face. "What's going on? I thought ... well, I thought we were going on a date when I got back."

"I don't think that's a good idea." I slid my laptop into my bag and flipped the lid closed.

"What's changed?" he asked, and then it hit him. His eyes narrowed. "What did he tell you?"

"A very different story than you did."

"Whatever he said, it's a lie."

"And why would he lie to me? He has nothing to gain—we hate each other."

"Revenge. He hates me too."

A dry laugh shot out of me. "You're just as conceited as he is. Maybe he just told me because it was the right thing to do? By the way, how was Atlantic City? I hear it's nice this time of year."

The light Wyatt pretended slid into darkness like a thunderhead blotting out the sun. "I can't believe you'd trust him over me. After everything he's done to you."

"Darcy might be a lot of things, but he's not a liar. You, on the other

hand, I don't know at all. Please, don't deny it. I don't want to have to ask Georgie, not after all she's been through. I guess I just want to know why. Why did you choose me? Were you trying to get to Georgie again, or do you just get off on torturing people? Or maybe Liam was right. Maybe you just want to piss him off."

"It isn't very hard, is it?"

"No. But you seem to take a particular sort of pleasure in it."

"He ruined my life."

"He ruined your plans."

"I loved her," he insisted through his teeth.

"Just not enough to be honest with her. To convince her you were trustworthy so she'd leave her fortune open to the vacuum of your debt."

"You think you've got it all figured out, don't you?"

Another laugh, this one thick with shame. "If I have learned one thing, it's that I don't have *anything* figured out. Here I thought you were the good guy and Liam was the devil, but I had it backward. I punished him and defended you. Liam was right—I *am* a fool." I stared at Wyatt through a couple of heartbeats. "If you're not going to tell me why you went after me, I have work to do."

He watched me, his lips a thin line and his eyes ice. "It's all over anyway—Georgie is in love with your brother. There's no use separating her from Darcy anymore, no point in needling him to act out to show her what a controlling megalomaniac he is so I could get her back."

My lips pursed as I inhaled hard through my nose and exhaled loudly. "And I was your in."

A shrug. "Gotta work with what I'm given."

I stood, my hands shaky as I picked up my bag. "Can't say it's been fun. Do me a favor and never show your fucking face here again. Because when my brother finds out what you did to Georgie, he's not going to use words to express his feelings."

I'd been doing a lot of storming lately, and I did it again, heading for the door with my pulse racing. I didn't know where I was going, though I turned for Longbourne. I could walk the bazillion blocks or just walk until I calmed down enough to take the subway the rest of the way. Either way, I had energy to burn. So I took off down Broadway, chugging like a freight train.

The sea of red lasted half a dozen blocks before it even thought about dissipating. Slowly, the color leached out, and the dull sadness of rejection

and the confirmation of my mistake shaded everything blue.

Darcy was right. I'd known it enough to confront Wyatt, but the verification straight from the source was a bucket of ice water down my back. I hadn't known I'd been holding out hope that Darcy was wrong until then. And now there was nothing to do but figure out how to accept everything that had happened since I met Darcy and my life was flipped over and dumped out.

I was wrong, and I needed to tell him so. Not for him, but for me. Because until I did, I wouldn't be able to move on. Until I admitted my mistake, it would haunt me.

And then I could walk away from him forever.

The objective renewed me, and I trotted down the steps of the next station I came to, heading for him.

I had so many contradictory feelings, they tangled up in a knot, indiscernible as anything but one massive ache in my chest. I carried the feeling with me when I stood and exited the train. It was with me when I spanned the blocks to his offices. In the elevator, it constricted, shrinking until the ache was a slice of pain on my heart.

A few sets of eyes followed me through the office as I made my way to Darcy's door. A knock, my breath locked in my lungs. A stretch of silence.

"He's not here, and you shouldn't be either."

Catherine de Bourgh's imperious voice commanded on tone alone. And she glared at me with unbridled hatred I hadn't seen since my last encounter with Evelyn Bower.

"I suppose you won't tell me when he'll be back, will you?"

She seethed. "What have you done to him?"

"Me? What have *I* done to *him*?"

"Liam left in a hurry yesterday, taking Georgie with him under the lie that they needed to visit the cities the bookstores will launch in. But I heard a rumor from Caroline I didn't believe was true, not until I saw the two of you after the meeting Monday." She straightened up, puffed up her chest. "Are you seeing him?"

Hot rage caught fire in my ribs. "Excuse me?"

"I'm sure it was a spectacular rumor designed by Caroline to better her own chances with him, but I would never insult him as to assume it's true."

"If you're so sure of yourself, why bother to ask me?"

Her eyes glittered like diamonds in her skull. "Are you seeing my

nephew?”

“Sadly, I’m not as forthcoming as you are. Ask whatever you want—I probably won’t answer.”

A furious flush climbed up Catherine’s face. “Are you and Liam together?”

“You’ve claimed it’s impossible.”

“Graceless Bennets,” she spat. “You’re a thieving jezebel just like your mother, stealing men who don’t belong to you. You might have lured him in.”

“If I did, why would I tell you?”

“Do you know who I am?” she asked with quiet menace. “I am the closest thing to a mother he has in this world, and I am entitled to know *all* business where his safety is a concern.”

“But you aren’t entitled to mine, and this”—I motioned to her—“isn’t going to convince me otherwise.”

“Obstinate, headstrong girl!” she snapped. “I will ask you once more before things end badly—are you with my nephew?”

I realized she wasn’t going to let me go until I answered, and at the knowledge, exhaustion swept over me. There was no reason to fight, nothing to lose that wasn’t already gone.

So I answered with a weary voice, “I’m not.”

The sigh she released must have weighed twenty pounds. “And will you promise to never see him?”

Just like that, I caught fire again. She couldn’t take what I’d given her—she needed more. The vision of him rose in my mind like a giant. He wore the expression on his face when I’d walked away from him the last time, and I lost myself in the pain and longing in his eyes as he’d traced my face with his gaze as if to commit it to memory. And the answer was clear.

She would get no comfort from me. “I will not.”

Her nostrils flared. “He is not yours to have, and he never will be. Try all you’d like, but it will never happen, if for no other reason than *me*. Because if you think that I’m going to let this go, you’re mistaken.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m due to be anywhere but here.”

I turned on my heel, marching toward the elevators as I fought the squeeze in my throat with a swallow. She had insulted me in every conceivable way, even down to calling me—and my mother, for that matter

—a whore. Thoughts of coming clean with Liam crumbled away, not only for the distance between us, but for the matter of his aunt.

For the first time, I understood why Georgie couldn't choose Jett.

And I hated every single reason.

WRONG + WRONG = WRONG

LIAM

When our plane touched down in New York, I could say with certainty that distance did not help me forget Laney.

Chicago was cold. Seattle was rainy, Houston was crowded. San Diego was sunny, and Atlanta was hot.

And my heart ached relentlessly no matter where I went.

The pain had become a fact, as sure as cloudy skies in Seattle. I pretended I was fine, and so did Georgie—we'd talked it out, and there was nothing left to say. We wanted to leave our problems in Manhattan in search of escape, but there was no escaping ourselves. And so we came home as broken as we'd left, with nothing to do but get back to our well-worn routine in the hopes that time and repetition would make things easier.

Neither of us believed that was true.

I'd tried to convince Georgie to see Jett in secret—after Laney, I couldn't deny her that, not anymore. But she'd told me of his insistence to end things, not willing to be the reason her life was upended.

I'd never respected another man more.

Laney's accusation against Catherine followed me, niggling at my thoughts until I mentioned them to Georgie. Once we looked, it didn't take much to find traces and trails that didn't make sense, invoices and emails. It was enough to solidify the suspicion that she was, in fact, involved. I only had to take what I'd found to Catherine and hear what she had to say.

So we'd dropped our bags at home and headed to the firm.

The offices were busy as they ever were, and we made our way through

the galley, greeting people when greeted. Catherine was due back from lunch, so Georgie and I made for our offices where we could clear out desks while we waited.

But once the door closed and I was alone for the first time in a week, the silence deafened me.

The unfamiliar sense of hopelessness was perhaps the hardest emotion to grapple with, the most persistent, elbowing to make room for itself in my heart. I was the reason for so much unhappiness, for the misery of my sister, for the ways I'd hurt Laney. And then there was the matter of my own unhappiness, driven by the things I wanted and could never have. And all because I was everything Laney had accused me of.

I felt every word she'd said in anger and gladness both. They hurt equally, one for her rightness and one for her joy that I'd never see again. She was gone, and it was for the best. I couldn't go on having to see her every day. At least now it was over. I'd said what I needed to say, told her the truth and hoped she understood. But I meant what I'd written—I didn't expect anything from her. How could I after all I'd done?

Georgie said I didn't have closure, though I disagreed per the finality of Laney's words. The letter, she insisted, left a window open. That deep down, a candle still burned on the sill with the hope that she'd come back. But it was an impossibility that she'd absolve me. And that was okay.

Or that was what I was working toward. Acceptance. It seemed a thousand miles away, but with one foot in front of the other, I'd get there. Eventually.

I'd told Georgie about the letter too, as well as the lies Wyatt had spun. The knowledge made her even more miserable. Laney had tried to talk to Georgie about Wyatt, Georgie said, but they'd misunderstood each other. Georgie blamed herself for Wyatt tangling himself up in Laney—she'd had a chance to step in, but she hadn't. And it didn't matter how I tried to soothe her, it didn't work. Instead, she sent Laney a brief apology via text and they made coffee plans on our return to clear it all up.

And I hated that the thought gave me hope.

I spent an unknown amount of time staring through my laptop screen before Caroline came in wearing a shrewd smile.

"Oh, good. You're back," she said, moving to sit without being asked. "How was your trip?"

"Fine. Everything is running smoothly here, I presume?"

“It is. We’re still waiting on the final word, so we’ve been in a holding pattern.”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

“I think they’ll pick yours. How could they not? It was inspired.”

By Laney.

“You’ve missed all the fun,” she said with a wicked smile. “Catherine has been on a rampage since you left. It’s a good thing Laney went back to the bookstore. Catherine torched her on the spot when she got Laney alone, and I’d hate to think what would happen if she dared come back.”

I stilled. “She did what?”

“Which part?”

“Both.”

“Well, Laney came here the day after you left, looking for you, I assume. But she found Catherine instead, and it devolved into a battle royale of insults. Catherine’s convinced you’re seeing Laney in secret and wanted details from the source. Threats were made—by Catherine, of course. What could Laney do about anything?”

“And I wonder who gave Catherine the idea that I was seeing Laney?”

“Oh, come on. Everyone can see it, Liam,” she fired. “Anyway, I almost feel sorry for the Bennets. Between Catherine’s vendetta over Evelyn, the fact that Jett Bennet slept with your sister, and Laney Bennet having a thing for you, Catherine’s well on her way to some Old Testament, scorched-earth destruction.”

Laney? Feelings for me beyond her hate? But the thought was set aside for later at Laney’s voice in my mind.

Corporate warfare.

My eyes narrowed. “What did she do?”

Caroline chuckled, her face touched with admiration. “It’s genius, really. She’s been using her network to poach the Bennets’ business, their employees. Word is, she managed to clean out their offices in little more than a week.”

My blood stilled. Cooled to ice. “I take it you were a part of this?”

Even her shrug was elegant. “Who am I to refuse Catherine de Bourgh’s request for help? She trusts me. Like minds and all, I suppose. Why do you look angry? I thought you hated the Bennets?”

“Have I ever said as much?”

She frowned. “Well, no, but Georgie—”

“Then you shouldn’t have assumed. And that’s beyond the very simple possession of honor and integrity you lack.”

“Not fair. Catherine started it.”

“But you sit here, sneering and applauding yourself for ruining that family’s livelihood. And for what?”

“You like her!” Caroline blurted, her cheeks pink with anger and embarrassment. “How could you like that insubordinate, mannerless Bennet? You can’t pretend you don’t know how I feel about you, Liam—I always have. And Catherine agrees—we’re a good match. Much better than that tacky Bennet.”

“Does Catherine agree?” The edge to my voice was sharp enough to draw blood. I stood, furious and disgusted. “It seems the two of you have it all worked out. Should I go ahead and buy you a ring? Have you already decided when we’ll get married? Want me to help you destroy the Bennets? It doesn’t look like I’ve been left much choice in the matter.”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic, Liam.”

“This, coming from you. I think it’s time you’re moved to Brandt’s team where you’d be more useful.”

Her jaw popped open. “You can’t be serious.”

“As serious as I am when I say that if you meddle with the Bennets in any way, I’ll make sure you have to leave the state to get another job.”

She blinked. “You don’t mean that.”

“Think what you want,” I said as I rounded my desk on a path to the door. “But don’t test me, Caroline.”

I left her sputtering in my office in favor of stalking toward my aunt’s office with hell on my heels and my mind on fire.

Laney had known it was Catherine all along, and I didn’t do anything about it.

The truth of my life, of my circumstance, came to focus—I’d been looking through the wrong end of the telescope, entrenched so deeply in the dogma of our family and business that I’d misappropriated my values. My heart.

The things I’d once believed as gospel were inconsequential when weighed next to my integrity. Catherine had flung what was right out the door in favor of petty destruction, abusing her power to raze a family and business. Her reasoning didn’t matter—it was base and undeniably wrong.

And I refused to be connected to anything so vile.

Catherine lied to me. She put Laney and the Bennets in danger for no reason beyond spite. Georgie's heart, the things she wanted, what *I* wanted, had been banned by the woman who should have supported us whether she wished it or not. But what Catherine didn't realize—what I hadn't realized until right then—was that *she* needed *us*.

We didn't need her. Not if this was how she loved.

Catherine looked up from her desk, smiling at me when I entered. "Liam, darling, you're home. What ... what's the matter?"

"For weeks, I've defended you," I said with barely tethered fury, stopping in front of her desk. "I've used your name, your wishes, to put a stop to the happiness of others out of loyalty, deference, respect. But that ends now."

"What's the meaning of this?"

"You've been sabotaging the Bennets."

I shouldn't have expected her to be ashamed, but I did.

She was not.

Her chin rose, eyes narrowing, the lines of her face hard. "Because they deserve to suffer the way Evelyn has. Evelyn was punished, and the Bennets got away with everything."

"That's not for you to decide. What did you say to Laney Bennet when she came here last week?"

Her chin lifted another tick. "I wanted her to admit she'd set her designs on you and to promise me she wouldn't follow through."

My heart jerked in my chest. "And what did she say?"

"She was insolent and impertinent. When I asked if you were seeing each other, she didn't deny it, not until I pressed. And when I asked her to promise me she never would, she refused."

A glittering streak of emotion shot through me—I instantly recognized it as hope.

Laney had refused to promise Catherine she'd stay away. Surely if there were no chance, Laney would have conveyed her disdain and cheerfully agreed to walk away from me forever.

"You've overstepped your authority," I answered. "Contrary to what you might think, it's never been your place to dictate who Georgie and I see. You've used your power to damage the Bennets and to break Georgie's heart. I'm no longer sure you care about anyone but yourself."

"How dare you," she breathed, rising. "It is *because* I care so much that I've done all of this. I love Evelyn with the fierceness you feel for your sister.

I love you and Georgiana with a fire that would raze the city to the ground. It's my job to know what's best—you've both been blinded."

"But you *don't* know what's best, not any more than I do," I registered with more clarity than I'd ever had on the subject—what had once been knowledge slipped into understanding. "You're protective because you're afraid—it's a trait we both possess. I am terrified for Georgie to be hurt, so consumed by the thought that I've done my share of meddling, almost to my destruction. But I've realized my fault. Now it's your turn."

"You're going to teach *me* a lesson, are you, Liam? All of my years mean nothing, do they?"

"I'm not going to teach you anything. But I *will* express to you, in no uncertain terms, what will happen from here."

"Or what?"

"Or Georgie and I will leave, and you will never see us again. Who will you leave the company to when we're gone? Caroline?"

Her chest rose and fell. She said nothing.

"Regarding the Bennets—you will call off your dogs. Effective now, they are officially off-limits."

"You can't ask me to do that."

"I'm not asking. If you don't, I'll drum up enough evidence to deliver to the Bennets. They should at least be able to sue, if not press charges."

"You wouldn't," she breathed.

"Wouldn't I? I've suspected you'd done *something*, but this is beyond the pale. I didn't want to believe Laney when she told me. I didn't want to look. But I knew exactly where to find what I needed. If Caroline hadn't ratted you out, you might have been able to explain it all away. But know that I won't hesitate to take proof to the Bennets to do what they will. The threat of Georgie and I leaving might not be enough, but what about the threat of your sharing a cell with Evelyn Bower? I'm sure she wouldn't mind after all you've *done* for her."

"You would betray me?" It was a furious, disbelieving whisper.

"You would betray me. And I won't make another decision on your wishes. I'll make them for mine."

A noisy breath. A hard swallow.

"You will remove yourself from Georgie's relationships, and you will never, ever threaten and intimidate a woman connected to me by even the loosest terms. Our choices are just that—*ours*. Not yours, not any more than

Georgie's choices are mine.”

She sank into her seat, her back straight and her nose in the air. “And you insist?”

“I demand.”

The color rose brighter in her cheeks. “You've left me no choice. Everything you see here, everything we have built, is yours and Georgiana's. We have no one else, the three of us, and giving our company away would be blasphemy. I am displeased. I am *greatly* displeased.” Her voice quivered with anger. “I will ask one thing of you, a point I will not bend on. Don't *ever* bring a Bennet into this office again. Do not bring them to dinner or holidays. I will ... refrain from interfering on the condition that we never speak of them and that I never have to lay eyes on their kind again.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

“Then leave me now. Your Bennets will be safe, from me, at least. But make no mistake—you've vandalized our relationship, and washing that away will take effort and time. And until we've cooled off, we should avoid each other.”

“I couldn't agree more.”

With a shared nod, I turned and walked out of her office, counting all the ways I was wrong, the truth struck clear by Catherine. Was I so horrible, so manipulative as her? I had wrecked and ruined so much in my quest for control, in my desire to protect. And that desire had turned me into a monster equal to Catherine.

I had wrongs to make right.

And it was about time.

EVERYTHING

LANEY

Georgie and I walked in silence through the Mall in Central Park, coffees in hand and leaves crunching under our boots as I processed what she'd just said.

Which was exactly what Liam had said about Wickham.

The gambling. The debt Liam paid. The prenup and his exit from their lives. Even confirmation that he'd been texting her while courting me.

I'd been fooled, just as she had.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she said softly. "But I thought you knew enough of the truth when we talked about it. I should have known he'd lied to you."

"It's not your fault, Georgie. He's just so ..."

"Charming? Handsome? He has this way of making you feel like the only girl on the planet, like every word he says is biblical in importance. Don't feel bad about being tricked by him. You weren't the first, and I doubt you'll be the last."

The question I'd been considering since I read the letter was finally asked. "Why did Liam pay Wickham's debt?"

"Because he still loved Wyatt despite it all. His anger isn't just over me—he lost someone he loved too."

The knowledge shook me.

She shrugged, her shoulders weighted with sadness. "Wyatt needed the money so badly, he was willing to go to these lengths, to cause so much damage. He was desperate. But his brand of love consumes without giving.

I'm better without him—he would have ruined me. And Liam was the only one who saw it, the only one brave enough to stop him.”

Humbled, I was quiet for a few steps.

“He’s not what you think he is,” she said. “When we got back yesterday, Caroline told him Catherine’s been sabotaging your family’s business. He confronted Catherine, threatened to expose her if she didn’t leave Longbourne and your family alone.”

I stopped dead, nearly dropping my coffee. “Wh-what?”

She turned to me, her eyes as soft as her smile. “She won’t be bothering you again—Liam made sure of it. He uses his powers for good far more often than evil. Really, all he wants is to keep the people he loves safe. I’ve always thought it was because we lost our parents so young, so unexpectedly. He was always protective, but after they died ...” Her gaze shifted to the ground. “He doesn’t want to lose anything else. It’s easy to believe him unfeeling, but the truth is that he feels *too much*. So desperately, so intensely, that he clings to what he loves with all he has. I think he believes if he loses us, he’ll lose himself.”

I dashed a tear from my cheek and started walking again. Georgie fell in step beside me. “I’m afraid I was very wrong about him.”

“It’s easy to do. He makes it hard to see beyond what he chooses to show. He’s designed himself to keep people away, because less people to love means less opportunities for heartache when they’re gone.”

It was all too much, too fast. As plagued as I’d been by my misjudgment of him, Georgie’s testimony overwhelmed me completely—I was swept under the surface and carried away by the current. Everything I’d believed about him was wrong. *Everything*. The truth once again sent me tumbling in its wake.

The only true moments were the moments I’d been in his arms, blessed by his smile.

He’d done this for my family without asking for anything in return. Selflessly, he’d put himself between Catherine and my family, stopping the sabotage with a single conversation.

Everything that had passed between us flipped through my mind like slides. I hadn’t realized the bulb had burned out, and now that it was on, everything was illuminated.

Liam was so much more than I’d thought him to be.

“I need to see him,” I said, swallowing back tears. “I owe him an

apology. Do you think he'll speak to me? After everything ... I can't be sure. I can't be sure of anything."

Georgie smiled. "I think he'll see you. He's at the house now—unless you'd like to set something up instead?"

"Now is good. The sooner, the better. I don't think I can walk around with my guilt much longer before I crumble."

She took my arm. "Well, we can't have that. And the timing couldn't be better. He texted, asking me to come home for a minute, and if I know him, he's already worrying over how long it's taken to get to him."

I frowned. "Did he know we were together?"

"He knew I was planning to see you, but no—I didn't tell him where I was going today. I didn't think it would bring him any peace of mind to know I was with you."

"Does anything about me bring him peace of mind?" I asked on a laugh.

But her smile widened. "Oh, you'd be surprised."

The walk was only ten minutes, but it felt like a lifetime.

Georgie talked about their trip, and I listened—or tried to. My mind was busy with the anxiety of seeing him. What could I possibly say to express my regret? Would he hate me? Would he reject the apology and show me spite? I'd deserve it if he did.

But I really hoped he wouldn't.

Ten minutes—just enough time to worry, not enough time to consider what would happen *after*. When we stepped into the lobby and walked to the elevators, we fell silent. But she never let go of my arm, and I was grateful for that. It made me feel so much less miserable.

My heart rate doubled when we stepped off the elevator and walked through the door.

For a moment, there was no space to be nervous—I was struck with awe at the sight of their home. It wasn't just beautiful. It was astonishing. The space somehow managed to feel both modern and timeless. Mid-century furniture with clean, tidy lines was Liam. Touches of softness in sheepskin and lux textures were Georgie. Just like them, it was dark and light, from the floors to the upholstery to the sunlight bathing the room and the shadows that

light made. I found it both familiar and foreign, a manifestation of something I'd only known in my heart.

"Hello?" Georgie called from the entryway as I wandered into the living room.

But when I saw the dark figure by the window, I stopped mid-stride.

My head cocked. "Jett?"

He smiled in brilliant exaltation, his eyes quirked in curiosity. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

But before he could answer, his gaze shifted behind me, and I ceased to exist.

Jett floated to where Georgie stood, stunned and flushed and hopeful.

"What ... how ..." she breathed.

"Liam," he said, cradling her face in his hands. "He brought me here."

"I was wrong," came a rumbling voice from behind me, the timbre sending a shock of electricity down my spine.

I turned to find Liam, his eyes touched with both sorrow and joy. His eyes met mine—how had everything about him changed?—and he smiled before turning his attention back to them.

"I was wrong about many things, most of which lie in my lack of defense in the matter of you two. I should have fought for you sooner, but until yesterday, I'd convinced myself that I was doing what was right. Catherine won't stand in your way, and neither will I."

Georgie's face broke open like the sun from the clouds, her eyes glittering with tears and her cheeks flushed with emotion as she looked up at Jett. He pressed his forehead to hers, and when her eyes closed, Jett kissed her with such tenderness, the room was filled to the brim with it.

Liam's fingertips on the back of my arm stole my attention. With a small smile, he jerked his head toward the other end of the house. And with a nod, I followed.

We made our way through the kitchen, then down a hallway before he turned into a library.

Again, I found myself in a state of wonder as I took in the room. The only wall not covered in brimming bookshelves was the one made of windows that overlooked Central Park, which was on fire with shades of fall. Overstuffed chairs, a couch, and a few end tables were the only furniture, the space designed for comfort and a singular purpose—to read. I approached one of

the bookcases to trace my finger along the spines, reading the titles. This shelf seemed to be all science fiction, with old copies of everything from Jules Verne to Kurt Vonnegut. The next was comics and graphic novels. There was a fantasy shelf and two filled with classic fiction, as well as nonfiction and trade reference books. I even caught half a shelf packed with bodice-rippers and shot him a smile.

“These are yours, aren’t they?”

A little shrug. “You caught me.”

“Which one’s your favorite?”

“Georgie made me read one once about a pirate and the girl he kidnapped. It was a little rapey, if I’m honest.”

“The old ones often were,” I said on a chuckle, but my smile faded when he moved for the shelf.

“They were my mom’s. Sometimes I wonder how many times she read them.” He took one from its place and turned it over in his hand. “The creases in the spine, the curl of the pages. She dog-eared pages too—Georgie comes in here sometimes and just reads the ones Mom marked.” He slid it back where it belonged but said nothing more.

“I owe you an apology.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Laney.”

“But I do. Because I have been selfish and vain and *wrong*—not just about Wickham, but about you. I was so convinced that you were a monster, I twisted everything you’d said and done to fit the mold I made. But you’re not a monster at all. A monster wouldn’t have saved my family from Catherine. A monster wouldn’t have made a way for Jett and Georgie to be together.”

He stared at me, stunned. “Georgie told you? About Catherine?”

I nodded. “We were together this afternoon. It’s why I’m here—to thank you for what you’ve done on behalf of my family.”

“Your family doesn’t owe me anything,” he said softly. “I thought only of you.”

All words left me, slipped out of me and to the floor. He couldn’t have said what I thought he’d said. Confusion and shock locked me where I stood, clamped my lungs shut.

“I only *ever* think of you. I tried to leave, to forget you. To forget what I’ve done and how I’ve treated you. That night, when we kissed ...” He paused, his gaze snagging mine as he rifled through memories. “I pushed you away when you were all I wanted. I hurt you when I wanted your happiness.

Rather than own my feelings and stand up for them, I insulted you by suggesting you weren't worthy of more than an affair. But that wasn't what I wanted. If nothing else, I hope you know that. I wanted *you*, and I believed it was the only way to have you. It's *me* who's unworthy, Laney. What I should have said that night was that wishes for your affection have kept my hope burning. Every time hatred burns in you over me, it carves another line on my heart. I won't ask for your forgiveness when I can't forgive myself. But I ... I need you to know that my feelings haven't changed—I don't know that they ever will. I've held out hope that yours would. But one word from you will silence me forever."

I reeled, searching his eyes, searching my heart. All this time, I believed he thought me inferior. That he loathed me to the point of obsession. That I was some sort of game to him or an itch he wanted to scratch.

A handful of sentences changed everything. His words washed away the last of what I'd thought I knew, leaving things clear for the first time since I'd met him.

"Your feelings haven't changed, but mine have," I admitted with my heart in a twist. "I thought I hated you."

"I know." Regret hung on the words.

"I thought you were cruel. But you weren't. You let me think what I would without ever correcting my mistake. Why?"

At that, a smile tugged at one corner of his lips. "Would I have been able to change your mind?"

"I like to think you would've, but I can't blame you for not trying. I can be pretty scary when I'm mad."

He laughed broadly enough that I caught a rare glimpse of his teeth. He was even more beautiful when he truly smiled.

"I wish you'd tried," I said. "I wish we could go back to that first night and start again."

"So do I."

"Just like I wished we'd never danced or touched or kissed so I didn't have to remember how it felt. I wished not to care for you or think about you, convinced it was only anger I felt for you. But it wasn't. Beneath it all, I was angry because I wanted you too. Only you didn't make it easy."

"I rarely do." His voice was tight, his brows bent, as if he were struggling to keep something in him tethered.

"So I suppose my feelings have changed. My misjudgment blinded me to

the truth of who you are. Can ... can we start again with that truth between us? Do you still want me after all that's passed?"

"I do. I think I always will, whether you refuse me again or not."

"I don't think I could refuse you again. Assuming you're not still suggesting I be your side piece," I teased.

His eyes were bright with hope as he stepped closer, slipping his fingertips into my hair, my jaw resting in his palm. "No. You'll be my everything."

Starlings fluttered from my belly up in a whirl. "And what will your aunt say?"

"Nothing—she's said all I'll hear."

"I'm sorry, Liam."

"Catherine offended you, and me by proxy. It's me who's sorry—I should have listened to Georgie, to myself first. But one good thing came out of it."

"Oh?"

"It taught me to hope. The truth as I knew it was that you despised me. That we would never be because you couldn't stand to be near me. You told me plainly I was the last man on earth you'd ever choose, but if you hated me as much as I believed, you would have answered Catherine with the truth without hesitating."

When he thumbed my cheek, I leaned into his hand, smiling. "That's fair—I'd abused you so badly to your face, I probably wouldn't have spared you for Catherine's sake."

"What did you say that I didn't deserve? You might have been misinformed, but I earned every word on my own merit. When I think about what I said to you, I hate myself. I've spent the last weeks regretting every word I spoke in anger. How could I ever win you after that? I haven't said anything to convince you to accept me."

"Until now."

"Until now." The adoration on his face struck a match in me—I could have basked in its glow forever. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

"I'll forgive you on one condition."

"Anything."

"Kiss me."

Smiling, he leaned in and said against my lips, "Always."

One word, and I was his. One kiss, and I was gone.

He'd marked me the first time our lips met, but this time, I was claimed. I

had no choice as I melted in his arms, our lips a seam and our hearts thundering.

But if I did, I'd choose him.

The surprise of the last few minutes dissipated with every sweep of our tongues, every shared breath. He breathed me in, and I let him. I was through fighting, past resisting, and the comfort I found in his arms shocked and soothed me. Because with that kiss came a certainty, an unnamed feeling of rightness.

And I couldn't for the life of me understand how we hadn't been doing *this* from the start.

My hands wanted to learn the shape of him, my lips wished to know his taste. And for that reason, it was a long time before we finally parted, breathless and soul-sated.

Our bodies were another matter altogether. But we'd have time to sate them when we were alone.

I smiled up at him. He smiled down at me.

"What will everyone think?" I mused, my arms hanging around his neck.

"That we're crazy."

"They wouldn't be wrong."

"Are you embarrassed?" he asked quietly.

"Only of how I behaved."

He relaxed. "It's going to be awkward."

"Luckily, I'm great at awkward. I mean, not as awkward as you are, but —"

He was laughing when he kissed me, our teeth briefly meeting as if to prove the point. But again I sighed into him, the kiss deepening until our bodies searched for more. His hands roamed, cupping my ass, toying with the waistband of my jeans, tracking the curve of my waist. I could have climbed him like a gym rope—in fact, I was just about to when we heard a snicker from the hallway.

Our lips popped when they disconnected, but our bodies didn't budge. Liam held me in place with his hand on my back like he didn't want to let me go. And I didn't want him to either, not even with my brother and Georgie amused and shocked in our eyeline.

Georgie leaned into Jett. "See? I told you," she said to him.

"Told him what?" Liam asked with a brow arched.

"Just that you were a gentle breeze away from finally admitting you're

obsessed with each other,” Jett answered.

“It’s been painful to watch,” Georgie noted. “Do you ever do anything the easy way?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I asked.

When Liam laughed, I looked up at him with wonder at the sound. Our eyes locked again, smiles fading as our lips came closer, wishing for something else to occupy them.

“Jeez, get a room,” Georgie said.

Liam finally let me go with the exception of my hand, which he wrapped up in his.

“I think champagne is in order.” Georgie tugged Jett in the direction of the kitchen. “Please don’t make me come back in here to get you,” she called over her shoulder. “It’s been too good a day to ruin it by seeing something I shouldn’t.”

When they were gone, he pulled me into his chest again. “Can I take you to dinner tonight?”

“Only if I can stay here after.”

“Always.” He brushed my cheek with his knuckles, his eyes following the motion. “Did we just ...”

“I think we did.”

“It feels wrong to be so happy. I don’t ... I don’t believe I deserve it.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of everything. There hasn’t been much room for joy in my life, not for a long time. So long, I forgot the feeling. Until you.”

“Then I say you’ve earned every minute.”

“I think,” he started, pausing again. “I think I’ve been given a gift.”

“Don’t waste it.”

“Oh, I don’t intend to,” he said hotly.

And the kiss he laid on me all but guaranteed it.

THE SEA AND THE SHORE

LANEY

Two Months Later

Liam turned me around the dance floor at Wasted Words to Lionel Richie, and neither of us could seem to stop smiling.

Of course, where my smile was broad and frequently accompanied by laughter, Liam's was a quiet thing that somehow still managed to change him into a creature of joy. A mischievous glint in his eyes, his brow smooth and cheeks a little higher than I was accustomed to. Those were the notable features, but the levity that clung gently to him was otherwise indefinable. It was as if he had lived in a land of unending rain and had seen the sun for the very first time. Now he carried it with him wherever he went.

The night had been long and lovely, another regency mixer. Liam had surprised me this afternoon with a new dress—a sky-blue empire-waisted shot-silk affair—as well as a chemise, stays, a petticoat, silk stockings, and matching shoes.

When posed with the why of it, his answer was, *Something to complement your eyes, of course, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit I wanted something to unwrap when we get home.*

Georgie and I spent too long getting ready, curling the front section of our hair in barrels to frame our faces and twisting up the back into a virtual

bouquet of ringlets. It took us a minute to figure out our stays—which were shockingly comfortable—but once we were set, the effect was some sort of magic.

Jett and Liam waited in the living room in their beautiful suits, cravats tied and scotches in hand as they chatted through their idle time. And when we'd set off, I'd been sad it was in a taxi and not a coach and four.

Two months had flown by, propelled by hope and happiness. The business with Catherine was behind us—Longbourne was back in action, and she had decided to live in a state of denial about the relationships of her niece and nephew, though Liam believed she'd eventually come around, the sentimental man that he was. But for the time, she wasn't speaking to any of us, and she had no recourse for her grievances.

In the end, we'd gotten around the company clause quite simply.

Because Jett and I had gone back to Longbourne.

What do you want, Elaine?

My mother's question had haunted me from the moment it left her lips. But it wasn't until Liam that the answer became clear.

First, I wanted him—once I'd realized, there was only that directive. In the beginning, I worried we'd bicker like children, always at odds, always fighting for power. But we hadn't gotten in a single fight. Not a minor tiff. Not a snap, not a jab, not a one. The closest we came was on the day I moved in, the dispute in regards to which side of the bed we claimed. Spoiler alert—I won.

The truth was, there was only an abundance of love between us, forged in that fire that had kept us apart for too long. We'd gotten all the wiggles out early, we supposed.

It was Liam who brought me around to the second thing I wanted. It was on a night when we lay in bed, our limbs tangled and our breath slow, my head resting on his chest, listening to his rumbling words as he spoke. He'd known what I wanted before I did, seeing it the first time he was prisoner to a Bennet dinner, when all twelve chairs were full. My mother beamed at the sight of Liam and Georgie on our arms. My father quietly assessed and approved—the two of them were so much alike, I wondered if Dad had once brooded the way Liam did. My siblings were welcoming, the whole night a long and lovely exhaustion. Liam hadn't said much, just sat with that inescapable smile on his face, occasionally laughing and always watching.

When he told me I wanted to work at Longbourne that night in bed, I was

sure my mother had gotten to him—which she had, but not about that. Liam held my face when I balked, and with knowledge of me no one else possessed, he told me the truth of my heart.

That what I wanted was my family, but I'd been too stubborn to admit it.

It was the hairline crack in a hatching egg, a realization that pecked and stretched until the shell broke and fell away. Had I always wanted to be a part of Longbourne? The answer was yes, but it'd been buried under so much willful refusal that I didn't even realize I was carrying a cross I'd foisted on myself. Not my mother. Not my siblings. I'd manifested the entire thing, simply because I didn't want anyone to dictate my life, even if my dreams were in alignment with what they wanted.

When I told Jett I wanted to go back, you'd have thought he'd been let out of prison, he was so relieved. He practically shoved me out the door and into a cab to go tell our family. A week later, he and Georgie found a place in the Village where he'd be close to Longbourne, and I moved in with Liam.

It'd been fast and probably reckless, but there was no denying who we were and what we wanted. I was certain of so few things in my life, but being with him was the one thing I didn't question. He was a lazy stream after a life of rapids, a luxuriant joy. We joked that if we could survive our explosive courtship, we could survive nearly anything. All we had to do was trust each other with our truths and share those truths with each other, without fear, a promise we'd both made and kept.

He smiled down at me, his bottomless eyes twinkling. "I requested this song, you know."

"What?" I asked on a laugh. "Why?"

"I had a wrong to right. I told you once I'd never dance with you, in a bar, to a Lionel Richie song. But the truth is, I'd dance with you anywhere, any time, to any song. *Especially* Lionel Richie."

"Who knew 'Say You, Say Me' had such profound meaning to you."

"Only now that I've danced to it with you," he said against my lips before he took them for his.

The dance slowed to a sway so we could concentrate on what was important, the kiss carrying on until someone bumped into us.

"Get a room!" Georgie called before Jett spun them away, smiling.

And the air was ripe with joy.

"Can we go home now?" he asked, his lips against the shell of my ear.

"Why, Mr. Darcy—anxious to unwrap something or another?"

“Since I saw you walk down the stairs tonight. You’re all I’ve been able to think about. You’re all I’m ever able to think about.” He pressed a kiss to the place where my cheek met my hairline.

“I know the feeling. Should we say goodbye or opt for a French exit?”

“French. Always French.”

He took my hand, and with those immovable smiles, we threaded through the crowd and out the door, unnoticed by Collin and Ruby, who were busy canoodling at their post.

Liam stepped to the curb, lifting a hand with a whistle splitting his lips, and within seconds, a taxi pulled up, its exhaust huffing in the cold, December air. Feather-light snow danced in the headlight beams, melting the moment it touched the pavement.

The cab was warm, but I slid into Liam all the same, grateful for his arm around me and the velvet of his bespoke coat against my bare skin. Once he gave directions, we settled in, silently watching the city beyond the windows with that bone deep contentment that only comes in those moments of perfect happiness.

It was nearly Christmas, and the trees lining the traverse across Central Park were strung with lights. It was that magical time of year when dreams came true and new beginnings were around the corner. And I felt that change, felt the shift slowing as we neared our destination.

Because I had him, and suddenly, the world was easy.

I wondered if it would always be this way. Would we always be so happy? It didn’t seem fair, to have so much. But after so long with so little, I knew what I had without question.

It was a gift I wouldn’t waste.

We made it home just as I’d dozed off. When he exited, he reached in for my hand and helped me out, my limbs heavy and tired. Still we were quiet—me in the warm dust of sleep and Liam turned inward. But I didn’t mind, used to his thoughtful silence. Rather than fill the air, I languidly nestled into his side.

Once we were through the elevator and the front door, I sighed happily, glad to be home.

As I turned to face him, I said, “What a perfect night—” before he interrupted me with a kiss.

It was a languid thing, a simmering heat. A slow tasting, a sweet savoring. I felt his hands on my waist, on my back, felt his solid body against

mine. Every breath was filled with the earthy, elemental scent of him, my fingertips occupied with the feel of his velvet coat. But what arrested me most were his lips and the sweep of his tongue, the gentle way he told me without words how he loved me and how he hoped I loved him.

I do, I do, I do, I said with my silent mouth.

When he broke the kiss, his eyes never met mine, hung on my lips. He thumbed the swell of my bottom lip.

“Come with me.” His voice, low and raspy, woke something in me like a yawning cat, stretching and purring and content.

He took my hand and led me upstairs. I took the moment to admire him—his body was a marvel of broad shoulders and wide chest, tapered waist and strong legs. His stature sang of a timeless man, a man who could just as easily wield an ax for chopping wood or on an ancient battlefield. In these clothes, in this house, he was a tamed beast. And best of all, he was mine.

The lights were low in our bedroom, and when I moved to raise the dimmer, he stopped me. Once he had my gaze, he looked toward our bed, and I followed him, stilling when I saw what he’d intended.

On the smooth stretch of white comforter sat a small velvet box.

When I glanced back at him, flushed and unsure of what this meant, I caught him without armor, without walls, just a man who loved a woman enough for forever.

“Liam,” I breathed.

A flicker of a smile. His hand on the small of my back, nudging me forward.

In a trance, I floated toward the little box, my mind so full, it was empty of thought, filled with a thousand murmurs. The box was in my hand. A creak, and it was open.

In the dark cushion sat a diamond ring with a sizable, glittering stone. Somehow, it managed to look simple despite its ostentatious size, ringed with smaller diamonds that twinkled with the trembling of my hand.

When I turned to him, I found him on one knee.

“I wonder if you’ve always known that I love you,” he said, taking my hand. “Have you realized that I was empty until you? That my life wasn’t a life at all—it was four blank walls with no windows. I didn’t know until the day you forgave me. I didn’t know. Not until you. I know that I should wait. I know the responsible thing to do would be to wait the recommended year, have a long engagement, plan and prepare for the future. But I’ve done the

responsible thing my entire life. I've planned and prepared. I've done what's expected of me. But when it comes to the unexpected rightness of you, I don't want to wait for our future. I don't need time to know that I love you. For all of my certainty, I know this certainty above all—there is only you. There will only ever be you. Marry me, so we can start our future now. Marry me, because I will never be more sure than I am right now that I belong to you, and you belong to me. Marry me, so we can begin forever now.”

His eyes were touched with hope and fear—I saw them through a well of tears, driven to spill down my cheeks by my teeming heart.

Marry him, marry him, marry him, it whispered.

I had no words but one, the most important one, and it slipped out of me in a breath.

“Yes.”

His smile broke loose, and then he was standing. His arms around me, his lips pressed to mine. When he broke the kiss, it was to laughter, to faces held by loving hands, to eyes shining and hearts on fire, burning for each other.

He took the box from me, held the ring between his thumb and forefinger, held my left wrist so he could slide it down the length of my finger, where it would stay until the end of time. For a moment, we stared at it, his thumb stroking the fine bones of my hand.

Our eyes met. Held. Spoke a thousand words in silence.

And he kissed me.

Our hearts were threaded together with that kiss, a kiss touched with the shaky disbelief that came with a dream coming true. It was an infinite kiss, stretching to the horizon of time, a river that wound on forever.

My throat closed with a sob that parted us, and my fingertips brushed my smiling lips.

He pressed his forehead to mine. Our eyes closed.

When I mastered myself, I leaned back so I could see his beautiful face. I traced the lines of the love I found there with my gaze, sweeping over the planes, noting every angle, committing every rise, every fall to my memory.

And when I was through, one side of my smile ticked up a little higher as I reached for his cravat.

The muslin whispered as I pulled the knot free and unwound the crisp fabric, exposing his neck to me. The strong column, the knot at his throat, the hollow at the base. Hungry hands slipped into the warm space between his vest and jacket, and he let go of my waist to shrug it off, tossing it behind him

blindly. His eyes were on my lips, but he didn't move for them. He wouldn't, not until I was through, simply because he knew this was my wish, and he held my wishes above his.

One, two, three vest buttons and all the way down to the bottom, and then it was gone. But his hands cupped my arms, his eyes on fire, holding me still so he could kiss me. And all time for stillness was through.

The kiss never ended, only breathed and stretched and paused to taste skin or give space to watch wandering hands. Breathlessly, he turned me, unfastening my buttons with deft, steady hands until it slipped down my arms and to the floor. The tug of a string, and my stays were loose. A turn, and he untied the straps, first one, then the other. His eyes drank in the sight of me as he brushed the swells of my breasts, pinned and welling from my stays, with the back of his hand, his index finger extended, as if to prolong the sensation of my skin against his.

And I stayed still simply because I knew this was *his* wish, and I held his wishes above mine.

A firm pull, and the stays were loose enough to slide over my hips and to the floor with the rest of it. The pull of another tie, and my petticoat joined them.

I stood in the dim room in my thin chemise, set aflame by his appraisal, lit by the strike of a match when his gaze met my skin.

"A man shouldn't be this lucky," he said quietly, earnestly. "It leaves so much to lose."

"Well, know one thing ..." I stepped into him, feeling the heat of his skin through muslin. "If you always love me this fiercely, you will never lose me."

His eyes closed as if he'd been pardoned from an unknown crime. When they opened again, they were devout in their promise.

"Until my last breath. There's no other way to love you."

Before I could speak, he descended, sweeping me into his arms, our lips a hot, yawning seam. I sank into the bed, held in place by his hips until my blind hands fumbled for the front buttons of his pants. He kicked off his boots—mine I'd left with my forgotten clothes on the floor—rising to his knees as he reached over his shoulders to rid himself of his billowing shirt. My hands were still blind for my eyes' occupation with the stretch of his torso, the curve of his shoulders, then up to his face, his lids heavy with desire, his lips plumped from the work of mine.

He didn't wait for me to free him, moving instead down the bed and to my legs. Broad hands followed the line of my legs, dragging my chemise up with them, tugging to signal me to shuck it. And when I tossed it away and lay back, I found him once again still and silent and reverent as he took in the sight of me, naked but for my stockings, vulnerable and at his mercy.

I could think of no other place I'd rather be.

With slow deliberation, he untied one blue satin ribbon of my stockings and rid me of it. Then the other—a faint hiss of satin, a gathering of silk. Another pause. A heartbeat. A breath before I was breathless.

He was made of velvet and stone, of strength and desire. His hands knew every curve, every soft place, every line of my body, and he tasted every one with skin, with lips, with tongue. He held my breast in his palm like a precious thing and a wanted thing, with demand and tender care. Traced the fluttering flesh between my thighs with a knowing tongue and a desperate love. He bared himself to me through the portal of his dark eyes as he flexed his hips and slipped into the heat of me until we were as close as we could be, as close as we would ever get, which never felt like enough.

We were a hissing wave licking the sand, a meeting of two forces in an endless, sliding kiss. The shore and the sea, the sun-kissed earth and the tempestuous ocean. The meeting of two elements who would forever be joined, swelling with every tide, kissing with every cresting wave.

A blind flash. A gasp of pleasure. A throaty moan, and we were pulled into the deep, caught by the undertow and carried away.

It seemed a long time until we drifted back to ourselves, a knot of limbs, skin to skin. His heart thundered against my ear where he held me, cheek to chest, by way of his hand in my hair and his arm around my back. I listened to his breath as it slowed, the steady rise and fall lulling me into a gentle, flickering sleep, my limbs weighted and heart unburdened.

"*I love you,*" he whispered so quietly, it was barely audible.

But I heard him. I heard him when he said nothing.

"Never as much as I love you," I murmured.

A single chuckling *harrumph* escaped him. "Will you always insist on winning?"

I glanced up at him as best I could, and he relaxed his grip to let me. "Yes," I answered with a sleepy smile.

Peering down at me, he cupped my jaw, leaning in for a kiss, and said the perfect thing—a newfound trick of his.

“Good. Because I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Thank you so much for reading *Pride and Papercuts*! Hope you decided to watch your favorite adaptation of our beloved story, regardless of your likely controversial Darcy preferences.

Interested in the Bennets and their feud with Evelyn Bower? Follow the link to read [Coming Up Roses](#), book one of The Bennet Brothers. And if you’d like to read my free bonus content, just click [here!](#)

If you’re itching for more Austen retellings, I have a treat for you. There’s [Wasted Words \(Inspired by Emma\)](#), [A Thousand Letters \(Inspired by Persuasion\)](#), [Love Notes](#) (Inspired by Sense and Sensibility), and [Pride and Papercuts](#), coming fall 2020.

If the idea of crossing Gatsby and Gossip Girl makes you tingly, you should definitely check out [Fool Me Once](#). It’s the perfect escape in a time we need it the most.

If you love a good small town, enemies to lovers romantic comedy, turn the page for a sneak peek of [Bet The Farm](#) and find out what happens when a lactose intolerant woman inherits a dairy farm.

I’d love to keep in touch, so come join us in my Facebook group, [Read Your Hart Out](#), and get exclusive giveaways and sneak peeks of future books. And to be sure you don’t miss any releases, you can <http://stacihartnovels.com/get-the-newsletter>

Thank you for all your help in spreading the word and telling a friend. I appreciate each and every one of you, and I hope you’ll consider leaving a review on your favorite book site.

Turn the page to read a sneak peek of [Bet The Farm](#)!

SNEAK PEEK: BET THE FARM

OLIVIA

A very unladylike grunt grated out of me. Every muscle engaged as I hauled a ridiculous pink suitcase off the baggage belt of the tiny airport. The curl of my toes kept me braced. My glutes were hard enough to bounce a quarter off of. Shoulders bunched, abs engaged, fingers burning.

It was more than I'd worked out in a year.

In that moment, I second guessed everything I'd packed to come home to California, even though I'd been absolutely certain every article of clothing was necessary when I'd packed. But when I stumbled backward from the force of finally loosing my luggage, I questioned the rain boots. And the overalls. And all that plaid. But I was back at the farm after two long years, and I had to look the part.

The worst part of growing up on a dairy farm was being lactose intolerant.

Butter and cream, ice cream and cheese, and tanks brimming with milk. Growing up, it was inescapable, and as a sweet, innocent child with no clue of the tragic fate my digestive system had in store, I didn't have to escape it. I remember sneaking hunks of cheese from the creamery and eating until I was sick in the hay loft. Or sitting across from my grandfather, warm brownie and teeming glass of fresh milk before us and the sounds of crickets floating in on the breeze through the open windows of the farmhouse.

These days, it was almond milk and soy cheese, margarine and sorbet. I'd abandoned cream, opting to drink my coffee black, which made me feel like a

true badass—no easy feat at five feet and change, with hair the color of a penny and enough freckles to find constellations in the array. I was about as badass as a paper towel or a guinea pig or a carrot. Or a guinea pig on a paper towel eating a carrot.

When the suitcase wheels were on the slick tile floor of tiny baggage claim in the tiny airport, I brushed my hair back from my clammy forehead, scanning the belt for my other suitcase.

It was equally as ridiculous a shade of pink as the one I propped myself on to catch my breath, a bright bubblegum hue, fit better for a little girl than a grown woman. A New Yorker, no less. But I couldn't bring myself to curb the inclination to the color. It was a color that instantly brought cheer—you couldn't tow a suitcase that vivid and hopeful without getting the distinct impression that everything would be all right, regardless of where you were going.

Even a funeral.

The hulking pink plastic suitcase rounded the corner of the belt like a shiny-shelled gumball. At the sight of it, I stood and stepped up to the whirring metal track. Remembering my bag behind me, I cast a suspicious glance to the people nearby, noting their distance and attentiveness. But no one paid me or my bag any mind. They probably figured the suitcase was filled with glitter glue and stuffed unicorns.

Not that pink rain boots were much better.

I braced myself as the bag came closer, developing a strategy to master the physics of it all, hoping I had enough berth to drag the brick factory off the belt. With a fortifying breath and my lips screwed in determination, I reached for the handles and yanked with all my strength, which got me as far as upending the thing.

A pair of very large, square hands slid into my periphery.

“Here, let me help you with—”

“I've got it,” I huffed, shifting to put my back to him.

With another heave, I pulled, leaning back in the hopes that my weight would help me, but gravity had other plans. It thumped back onto the belt loudly enough to draw everyone's attention in the vicinity. People shifted out of the way as I walked along side it, a prisoner shackled by way of my hands fisting the handles.

Mr. Square Hands chuckled and stepped around me, reaching for the bag again. “Seriously, you're gonna hurt yourself. Let me—”

“I said, I’ve *got* it,” I shot, ready to stomp his foot or kick him in the shin if he didn’t back off.

But then, I lifted my gaze.

When Kit, the cook, told me someone would be there, I’d expected her, not the hulking expanse of Jake Milovic.

His hands weren’t the only square—or large—thing about him. My thirsty eyes drank in the sight, cataloging every detail, noting what had and what hadn’t changed in the years since I’d seen Jake, my grandfather’s right hand. He was a beast of a man, so tall I only came to the divot in his broad chest. Square pecks, wide and solid as granite under his heather-gray T-shirt, which was almost too small. Small enough that it bordered pornographic.

It was indecent, really.

His shoulders were square too, strong and straight and proud, and between them stood the column of his neck, corded with more muscles. Muscles on top of muscles, with more brawn than any human should be equipped with, but not enough to feel unnatural or gratuitous. My gaze hung on his jaw, which I instantly decided was my most favorite square—sculpted and strong, masculine and shadowed with dark stubble. That jaw framed a ghost of a smile on wide lips.

I’d kissed those lips, once upon a time. But the boy who’d owned those lips was gone, replaced by a man who looked like he belonged on an ancient battlefield, wielding a mace and dressed in furs. Even the word *man* seemed too bland, too thin to describe him. He was a bear, grizzly and wild, loping through a forest alone.

That was the Jake I remembered. I wondered what he remembered of me.

His eyes sparked with amusement, crisp and flecked with greens and golds and honey browns, like the first turn of the leaves in autumn.

“Jake?” I said stupidly, not realizing I’d stopped moving until my suitcase dragged me off balance.

He moved more gracefully than a man of his size should have been capable of, somehow catching me with one arm and lifting my suitcase with the other. I found myself tucked into his chest and inhaled greedily, my lids fluttering and senses full. He smelled of pine and hay, of old wood and loamy earth. He smelled like he was made of the woods and the soil and the salty sea air.

He smelled like home.

His hand was so big, it spanned the small of my back, which held me to

him while he turned us like we were dancing. For a moment when he released me, I stood mutely, blinking at him.

One of his brows rose with the corner of his lips, just a flicker, just a glimpse. “You okay?”

“Of course I’m okay,” I blustered, smiling. “Are *you* okay? You didn’t pull anything, did you?”

“I think I’m all right,” he said, hefting my suitcase with one hand. His bicep turned into a mountain range, with veins snaking like rivers down his forearms and hands. “That one yours too?” He nodded to the suitcase’s twin.

“How’d you guess?”

Jake gave me a sidelong glance, that corner of his mouth still just a little higher than the other. “I thought the pink thing was just a phase.”

I shrugged to cover my wounded ego. “It’s my signature color.”

“I can see that,” he said, snagging the other suitcase by the handle without breaking stride.

“That has wheels, you know.”

He held one out for inspection. “Sure does,” he noted and kept walking toward the exit.

We walked through the sliding doors toward the parking garage of the Humbolt airport, which was smack dab in the middle of Nowhere, California. The crisp, spring air drifted over us, carrying his scent in the draft.

God, he’d grown. He’d been big for his age at sixteen, but by my measure, he’d grown nearly a foot taller—two in shoulder width. When he’d shown up at the farmhouse looking for work at sixteen, Pop didn’t think twice. It’d been clear to all of us that Jake had nowhere to go, so Pop took him in, cared for him just like he’d cared for me when my parents died. In turn, Jake worked his ass off for Pop, earned every bit of his room and board and then some.

Of course, we’d only really known each other that first summer, at the end of which I left for New York to live with my aunt. Jake stayed on the farm indefinitely, and I was glad for his presence there. It excused my guilt for leaving Pop.

A sharp pinch in my chest brought my palm to the spot, followed by the familiar sting at the corners of my eyes. Tears were never far these days, the endless well forever surging without warning. Because I left the farm, and now, Pop was gone.

Jake stopped, and I slammed into his back, bouncing off him like a rubber

ball. Unfazed, he glanced over his shoulder at me.

“You sure you’re okay?”

I waved a hand and made a noise of dissent. “Please. I run into brick walls all the time.”

The quietest chuckle left him. He picked up one of the suitcases like it was empty and deposited it in the bed of his old Chevy.

A low whistle slipped out of me as I inspected his truck. “A ’67 K20? Boy, she sure is pretty, Jake.” I ran a hand across the shiny cream stripe, crisp against the fire-engine red. “Did you lift it?”

“Just a couple inches,” he said, depositing the other bag with a thump. “Didn’t figure you for a gearhead.”

“I *did* grow up on a farm, you know,” I teased, nonplussed. “Pop loved his old Chevy. When I was little, I helped him tune it up, fix it up, replace parts. He thought it important that I know the difference between a ratchet and a socket at a very young age.”

“It’s useful knowledge. Not that you have a chance to use it in the city.”

I frowned, but followed when he got in his truck, sliding in next to him. The leather bench was bouncy, and with a smile, I tested it out. He cut me a look when the squeaking of springs reached his tolerance threshold.

Warmth bloomed across my cheeks. I reached for the seatbelt as he turned the key, and the truck rumbled to life around us.

Jake didn’t say a word as he backed out and drove us out of the lot. It wasn’t that comfortable, companionable sort of silence. It was awkward, weighted with half-conceived thoughts and yawning distance.

I wasn’t accustomed to this kind of quiet. I started a dozen conversations in my mind but couldn’t find the wherewithal to actually speak. Instead, I played every conversation into a dead end, because I got the feeling that was where it would go. Nowhere.

It wasn’t as if he’d ever been any other way. Really, I didn’t know why I’d always been cowed by his quiet judgments or lack of conversational skills. He was and forever had been the brooding farmhand, the silent workhorse. Lone wolf, and all that. To him, I was the same silly girl with the pink suitcases that abandoned the farm all those years ago.

But he most definitely was *not* the same, not by appearance at least. Maybe I’d expected him to be different *because* of how utterly affected I was by him. Maybe I wanted him to want to talk to me. Maybe I wanted to connect.

Jake and I were all that Pop had in the end, and I'd been firmly on the other coast finishing my masters with the best intentions to come back to the farm. And I'd graduated. I wouldn't walk next week, but it didn't seem to matter now.

The one person who I wanted to see me graduate was gone.

And Jake was the final connection I had to the man who raised me. But I got the impression he didn't want to talk to me, and that knowledge made me feel desperately alone.

The tears came again, almost too fierce to stop, halted only by a solid pinch of my thigh and a long, hard look at nothing outside the passenger window. Almost immediately, we were in the countryside, the sky cloudless and sun relentlessly beating on the truck, heating the cab like a greenhouse. Sweat blossomed at my nape, across my forehead, down the valley of my spine. A fat droplet rolled between my breasts and into my bra, and as it absorbed, I reached for the window crank in the same moment he reached for the air conditioning.

I beat him to it though, rolling down the window with gusto, reveling in the feel of the cool coastal air against my overheated skin. The current whipped my hair into a copper tornado, curly and wild, and I gathered it up, reaching into my bag for a hair tie.

A lock of hair broke free, twisting toward the window, and the sight of the brilliant red against the cornflower blue sky and the rolling grasses that stretched to meet it left me thinking of Pop. Of summer days in his truck with the windows down and Merle Haggard on the tinny old radio. I was home, and this place would forever be occupied by my grandfather. He was here, everywhere—whispering on the wind, living in the warmth of the sunshine.

The weight of my loneliness drifted out the window, the burden on my heart easing. I sighed, leaning back in the seat with my eyes on the horizon where blue met green.

It took a moment to realize Jake was watching me, and when I turned to meet his gaze, I was struck.

It was only a second, a fleeting, fluttering second, but I saw the honesty of his own pain, of his loss, etched in the lines of his face, the depth of his eyes. Because it wasn't just me who had lost the most important person in their life.

He had too.

And so, I decided right then that it didn't matter if he didn't want to talk

to me or that we were virtual strangers. It didn't matter if he didn't want to connect. Because he needed me just as badly as I needed him. We'd never survive the next few days without each other.

We were in this together whether he liked it or not.

"How's Kit holding up?" I asked, deciding dead-end small talk was better than the silence.

He didn't answer right away, his eyes on the road and face tightening almost imperceptibly. "As good as you'd figure."

I waited for him to elaborate. Unsurprisingly, he didn't.

"How many trays of biscuits has she stress baked?"

That earned me a smile, small though it was. "About fifty. You'd think she was feeding an army. But they've just piled up. None of us feel much like eating."

"No," I said quietly. "I wouldn't think so."

His eyes flicked to me, then back to the road. "I think she's planning to take a basket down to the VA later, if you want to go with her."

"I think I might." I paused, considering what the next few days would bring. "I don't know if I'm ready for this. Any of it. All of it."

"None of us are. You won't be alone in that."

That thought was an ember of hope in my chest.

But before I could respond, he doused it. "You sure did bring a lot of suitcases for a weekend."

"That's because I'm staying for a few weeks."

At that, he cut me a look. An accusatory, possessive look. "What for?"

"Because this is my home," I answered with a frown. "Because I want to spend some time with my memories." *Because I'm about to inherit the farm, and I'm not quite sure what that will mean*, I thought, keeping it to myself so as not to upset him. Suddenly, I got the feeling that he wasn't going to be too happy to work with me, and that was alarming. There was no way I could run the farm without Jake.

He simmered, but didn't press. Of course, he didn't acknowledge what I'd said, either. "Kit's got everything ready for you, and Pop's lawyer is meeting us at the house. He's anxious to talk to you about the will."

I swallowed hard. "Now? So soon? Can't it wait until...after?"

Jake's jaw flexed until the muscle at the joint bulged like a marble. "Probably, but he insisted on seeing you the second you got here."

With a long exhale, I sat back, not realizing I'd straightened up. My gaze

landed on the scratched up lock on the glovebox as I processed that I was about to deal with business I wasn't ready for. The farm hadn't been doing well, and I had a lot of ideas on how to turn things around, ideas I hoped Jake would help me implement.

But I wasn't ready. I didn't want the farm right now, not yet. Not until I had a chance to say goodbye.

A surge of tears threatened me once again, and this time, I couldn't stop them. I couldn't ease the twist in my chest or the vise of my throat. I couldn't temper the sting of my nose or the unfurling pain as it filled up my ribs.

Because my grandfather was gone. He was gone, and I was alone again.

The loss of my parents had always haunted me, but I only remembered them in wisps and snapshots. In memories I couldn't be sure were real or pieced together from stories and photos. But Pop I remembered. I remembered every night he tucked me in, every book he read me. Every scrap of homework he struggled through on my account and every night counting fireflies on the porch. I remembered it all in a fierce rush, as if my pain dug up all that would hurt me just to use it as fuel for my tears.

I couldn't see for the shimmering curtain, so I closed my eyes. Held my breath, stifling the hitch of my lungs as best I could. Which wasn't very well.

"It's going to be okay, Liv," he said, his voice rough as gravel. "If Frank taught me one thing, it was that there is always hope. In the darkest night, at the lowest low, there is *always* hope."

A sob broke loose, my hand moving to my lips to stop the rest. And without thought, I slid across the bench and into his side, hanging on to his arm like an anchor.

He stiffened in surprise, leaving his hands on the wheel while he sorted out what to do with me. When I didn't let go, when my tears soaked his sleeve, he softened, shifting to pull me to his chest, holding me to him with his massive arm and that square hand on my shoulder. And I cried. I shuddered, face buried in his chest, his shirt fisted in my hand. For that one moment, I was stripped down to the studs, exposed and frayed after two days of trying to keep it all contained.

Because no one in this world understood like Jake. That fact was as comforting as it was painful.

When I finally caught my breath, I shifted away, swiping at my cheeks and nose.

"I-I'm sorry," I blubbered, moving back to my side of the bench.

“Don’t ever apologize to me for missing him,” he said.
And when our gazes met, I decided I wouldn’t.

Click here to preorder ***Bet The Farm!***

THANK YOU

This retelling was probably one of the most challenging novels of my career. How do you retell a story that means so much to so many? How much of the original do you keep, and how much do you invent? What the hell *does* go on in Mr. Darcy's enigmatic brain? And what do you do with him in a modern retelling when he's absent for more than half of the original work?

There was a *lot* of planning. Much discussion. Many notecards to connect the multitude of subplots and characters. Hemming and hawing—how much is too much, and how much is not enough? But in the end, writing a love letter to these characters I love so well was an absolute pleasure and honor, and I hope you enjoyed my take on the most beloved and renowned romance novel of all time, *Pride and Prejudice*.

First, I'll thank the usual suspects—my husband, Jeff for handling remote learning for our three children so I could write this book. Kerrigan Byrne, my KerBer, for hemming, hawing, and fangirling alongside me. Kandi Steiner for being ever-ready to read, to listen to me argue with myself until I'm sure I'm right, to write through every day with. K.A Linde for always knowing the answer. You four are the right angles that constitute my cornerstone, and I couldn't do it without you.

My betas cannot be beat, folks. Sasha Erramouspe is always willing to read, anytime, any place. Amy Vox Libris is forever ready to listen to my long voicemails wherein I pick apart the minutia of a character. Dani Sanchez is always here to make sure no one is boring and that Darcy wasn't **too** much of an insufferable dick. Nadine Kilian for the daily affirmations and nitpicking scenes until they're clean. Sara Sentz, Sarah Green, Julia Heudorf, Sam Schumpf, Melissa Brooks, and Jenny Ellis—thank you so much for your

time and your feedback! You helped me see the big grand scheme of things, and I appreciate you each so very much.

To my production crew—Tina Lynne, the PA to rule all PAs, Dani Sanchez at Wildfire Marketing, Jovana Shirley at Unforeseen Editing, Stacey Blake at Champagne Designs. Every single one of you is vital to me, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate you. Thank you, so much.

To all of my bloggers—you make the book world go 'round. Thank you so much for all your hard work, dedication, and the joy of books that you bring to the world.

And readers—Thank you. Thank you for reading, for spending your time in my brain and heart, for loving books. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

ALSO BY STACI HART

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staci has been a lot of things up to this point in her life: a graphic designer, an entrepreneur, a seamstress, a clothing and handbag designer, a waitress. Can't forget that. She's also been a mom to three little girls who are sure to grow up to break a number of hearts. She's been a wife, even though she's certainly not the cleanest, or the best cook. She's also super, duper fun at a party, especially if she's been drinking whiskey, and her favorite word starts with f, ends with k.

From roots in Houston, to a seven year stint in Southern California, Staci and her family ended up settling somewhere in between and equally north in Denver. When she's not writing, she's reading, gaming, or designing graphics.

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