



THE

grumpy

ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LESLIE NORTH

BOSSY GLENHAVEN BILLIONAIRES

The Bossy One

The Grumpy One

The Grouchy One

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BLURB

Cleaning floors in Branson Couture was never part of my career plans. Neither was almost decapitating the CEO with a mop. Of course, I didn't know he was the CEO—my mind only registered “intruder” and “hot”. Maybe not in that order.

Meet James Branson: infuriatingly hot, obscenely wealthy, and as charming as a door slammed in your face. He's the king of high fashion. And, apparently, of ruining my day.

The thing is, he wants to do more than just ruin my day. In my hasty retreat from the mop-attack I left my design journal behind. James discovers my designs and offers me truly *insane* money to work beside him.

Every cell in my body is screaming: “Run, girl!” James is a master of the boardroom with a heart encased in steel.

This Snarlmaster General has a scowl that could out-thunder a hurricane.
But he also holds the key to my dreams in his giant mitts.

But I can't think about his giant... anything.
In the fashion world, it's not just designs that get ripped apart at the seams.
Hearts do as well.
But if James thinks I'll let him unravel mine, he's in for the fight of his
billionaire life.

So I have a plan:
Show up.
Do my job.
Don't think about my boss naked.
Piece of cake, right?

MAILING LIST

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(Bossy Glenhaven Billionaires Book 2)

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JAMES

I considered myself a patient man. Truly.

But even patient men had limits—especially when that patience was tested by an after-hours banshee.

“Excuse me? *Hello?*”

Arms folded over my chest, I looked at the screeching creature who had taken over *my* store. She twirled around the floor, the mop in her hands doubling as a microphone stand, and completely ignored me. But then again, how could she hear me given how damn loud she had the music? I wasn’t exactly up to date on pop trends, but there was no doubt that this *American Idol* reject was doing her best Beyonce impersonation. Which was, in fact, *really* bad.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to suppress the growing headache that had settled between my eyes.

“Hey, listen up! I need you to turn —”

She threw her head back dramatically. “WHO RUNS THE WORLD?”

Well, *me*. I do, but she clearly didn’t know that yet.

As annoyed as I was with the stranger, I couldn’t stop staring at her, waiting

to get a full view of her face. Her shoulder-length brown hair actually gleamed as she whipped it around, like she was a model in a shampoo ad. And her body? Let's just say that my mind wandered as she shimmied up and down the mop pole. She couldn't sing, but the girl had some impressive moves. Stripper-adjacent, body rolling, ass-displaying raunch that I actually found myself enjoying, despite the accompanying vocals—and the mountain of work that *should* have my focus instead of...whatever this was.

I finally glanced at my watch.

It was after ten, which meant she was one of the cleaning ladies, a tardy store assistant, or the worst robber in history. Whatever way, I didn't really care. The only thing that mattered to me was getting back to my fucking spreadsheets, and this stranger was making it impossible.

When I was able to tear my eyes off of her, everything else in the retail showroom was a reminder of how much was at stake and why I was still working late into the evening. This business, this *legacy*, was mine to sink or swim. Every employee's fate was in my hands, including the shockingly bad singer shaking her ass when she should've been working.

"For fuck's sake," I muttered, crossing the length of the store with wide strides. I closed up on the woman—a store assistant, judging by the charcoal button-up shirt—and tapped her on the shoulder. Or tried to, anyway.

I caught up to her mid-chorus, and the lunatic was halfway through a twirl when I reached out. The handle of her mop caught my arm, whacking it down. Not how I had planned to draw her attention, but it did the trick. She jumped backwards and screamed in shock.

"I want that music off," I said simply, trying to hide my shock at how fucking *intense* her eyes were. Deep blue and ringed in dark lashes, she had a fairy-tale princess vibe despite the look of horror on her face.

"Back away," she snapped, blue eyes widening with fear. She pointed the wet end of her make-believe microphone at my chest. "I don't know who you are or what you want, but I'll let you know that I can handle myself."

"Oh?" I pushed the mop away from my chest, but she flicked it right back, the water puddling between us on the floor. "Better than you can sing, I

hope.”

“I... Well, you...” She finally lowered the mop and fished her phone out from her jeans. One tap of her finger and the sweetest of silences—at last—filled the store. She pursed her lips and looked back at me. “I thought I was alone.”

“Clearly.”

“But that’s not the real issue here!” she shot back, trying to take command of the conversation again. “Who are you and what are you doing here? The store is closed, and everyone’s gone home.” She shifted her grip on the mop handle, and I had to stifle a laugh. Even though I had no intention of attacking her, did she seriously think that she could take me on?

“Maybe I should be the one asking you that,” I threw back.

“Not that I owe you an explanation, but I have loads to do here, all right?” she snapped, now using the mophead to point an imaginary arrow across the store. “The samples for the new line got here after-hours and we had to get everything prepped before morning, and Lucy needed to get home, so I said, ‘no problem’ because I need the hours, and then—” She cleared her throat as if to stop her mouth from outpacing her brain. “Well, never mind that. I’m here because I have to be here. What are you doing here?”

“I was going through the books,” I explained, hoping that would be the end of it. “And, if you don’t mind, now that I’ve gotten you to stop howling, I’m done here.”

I turned, ready to get back to those damned spreadsheets, hoping my headache would magically disappear on the walk back to my office. Looking over diminishing profits was never fun, but it was certainly better than —

SPLAT.

A mophead—a *drenched* mophead—landed on my shoulder. Tendrils of freezing, dirty water spread across my back and chest. I’d paid six hundred dollars for my shirt, and this banshee was treating it like a rag. I’d been patient, I’d been polite, and *this* was what I got for it? My headache spiked, and I could barely keep from growling in frustration.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I muttered, doing everything to keep my fury in check.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the woman ordered from behind me. “Don’t you move!”

I looked back and there she was, fingers tight around the handle of her mop. She stood her ground, mophead still on my shoulder, and threw me a defiant stare. She looked like a challenge—and by that, I mean the kind of challenge you can’t help but want to tackle. A *fun*, wicked challenge. You know, the worst kind. The kind I *absolutely did not need* right now.

“You’re making a mistake,” I said slowly. “A big one.”

“No, *you* are,” she countered. “I don’t trust you. You look like trouble.” She narrowed those arresting eyes at me. In any other scenario I’d be a goner for them, but in this moment, I was starting to get seriously annoyed.

I was trouble? I was the one holding this business together—practically with my bare hands. I was the one logging eighteen-hour days, pouring everything I had into keeping Branson Designs from slipping totally off the map. Which meant that I was, incidentally, the one responsible for this shrew having a job in the first place. And *this* was the attitude I got in return? I didn’t care how gorgeous she was—I wasn’t going to let this stand.

Plus, where the hell did she get off glaring at me like I was some kind of thug who’d tried to snatch her purse? Did she really have no idea who she was dealing with?

“When you profile potential attackers, do you always include men in custom-made suits?” I snapped back at her, gesturing down my body, and watched her eyes follow. “Because you’re probably terrified when you’re out on Fifth Avenue. And the Financial District must have you *cowering*.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she sputtered angrily. “Doesn’t matter how expensive your outfit is or how good looking you are. Ted Bundy was handsome and look what he did.”

In spite of my aggravation, I admittedly felt a little pleased at her inadvertent compliment. “So you’re saying I’m handsome, huh? Thanks, I think.” I pretended to adjust invisible cuff links.

She let out a frustrated yelp. “No, that’s not the point!” She took one hand off the mop and tapped the badge hanging around her neck. “I don’t see a badge, which means you’re not an employee. And Bryan’s the accountant, not you. You’re just the guy who was creeping around here *spying* on me like some kind of weird stalker.”

Stalker? “Are you for real?” She clearly didn’t know that I, of all people, didn’t need to wear a badge. Was this woman clinically insane? “I’m done with you. Now get the hell out of my way.”

“I don’t take orders from you. No.”

“No?”

“No.” She tapped her badge again. “No one’s allowed here off hours without a badge, and that badge has to be on your person at all times. Company —”

“—policy,” I finished for her. “Trust me, I know all about company policy.”

“You might know it, but you clearly don’t follow it,” she grumbled. “Which means you don’t belong here.”

I’d had enough of the vexing stranger. My patience was way past exhausted—and so was I, for that matter. It was time to shut this down once and for all.

“If there’s anyone who doesn’t belong here, it’s you,” I said, shoving the mop off my shoulder and making her jump away in shock. “I was trying to work, and your screeching was making it impossible. I’ve had about enough of your bullshit. Music *off* and get back to doing your actual job, got it? Or is that too much to ask of you? Are you really not capable of doing anything more than wasting my time? You may have gotten stuck on this shift because you lack the brains or talent for anything more rigorous than mopping a floor—when you’re not using the mop to pole dance on, that is—but *I* have serious work to do.”

Her eyes went round before they narrowed in fury. I turned away to leave and started for the door, only to have the mop handle smack me across my midsection.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“You’re really doing this?” I asked, struggling to keep my voice even. “Because I think you’re going to regret —”

“Oh, I’m not going to be the one with regrets.” She gave me a Cheshire Cat grin, two barely noticeable dimples dancing on the corners of her lips. Cute—if cute can be used to describe the most annoying person I’ve ever had. “I just called security.” She lifted the hem of her shirt triumphantly to reveal a company walkie-talkie; the red switch on the corner, the one connecting directly to the security desk, had been toggled.

“Fantastic,” I shot back at her. “Maybe Dave can educate you since you don’t seem to want to listen to me.”

The fury on her face slipped away for a moment when I mentioned our head of security by name. For just a beat, she looked uncertain...but she quickly found her scowl again. Not that frowning made her any less alluring.

“So you profiled the company’s About Us page and you can name drop. Congrats.” She sneered at me.

“Yes, and maybe you should do the same,” I demanded, taking a few steps closer to her, in the hopes that the sole overhead light might illuminate my face enough to make me more recognizable. At some point the woman would *have* to get a clue and realize who she was messing with. Did she not read any gossip sites? “Might help in a situation like this, because I’m not an accountant. I’m the goddamn —”

Her expression was blank, as if she’d tuned me out completely. I watched as she shifted her arm backwards like she was about to throw a javelin—and then she launched the mop straight for my face. I was too shocked to move until the last second, leaning to the side so that it missed my nose by an inch.

I straightened up and glared at her. The nerve of this woman! I was about to roar that I *ran* the damn company she worked for—I was Branson number one, grandson of the founder and current CEO—but I was actually too furious to say anything.

“We’ll let security sort out who you are, got it?” she said, glancing down at the mop like she was ready to grab it and re-arm herself.

I crossed my arms and watched her, expecting her to be jittery without her

weapon, but she stared right back with fury in her eyes. I'd never encountered anyone like this annoying, ridiculous, and yes, absolutely gorgeous woman.

At least I was going to have the last laugh once she figured out who she was messing with.

NATALIE

Was this the way I was going to die?

At the hands of a power tripping burglar in Burberry, who was sizing me up through narrowed eyes? Because the absolute last thing I needed at the end of a long day at the shop was a death match with a criminal who seemed to be *judging* me.

I mean, what the hell gave him the right to say all of that about me? He'd known me for less than five minutes while he was *robbing me*—or whatever crime it was he was trying to commit here—and yet he thought he could judge me just from that? What could *he* know about my brains and talent—or my work ethic or my commitment to my job or anything else about me? What could a silver-spoon-up-his-ass snob like that know about working three jobs while getting your degree? Or putting a life together out of nothing?

And the way he *looked* at me. Like I was a...a *dust bunny* he'd just kicked out from under the couch. Or a carton of expired milk that he'd just made the mistake of sniffing. The way his nose was sort of scrunched up and his dark brows were knitted together...you'd think *I* was the one trespassing!

Well, security was on the way; they'd escort this jackass out, and I'd have the last laugh. I could already picture Dave hauling him away by the scruff of his

shirt.

His expensive shirt. *Very* expensive. I knew clothes, and I knew how much he must have spent on it. I felt a little petty satisfaction at the thought that it was ruined now...even though I had to admit, it kinda looked better ruined, given the way the mop water made it cling to him, showing off strong shoulders and that V-shape that made it clear the guy knew his way around a gym. Not that I was checking him out or anything, despite the fact that he had the kind of body that would make me do a double take in any other scenario. No, I was merely scanning him for safety's sake, because who knew what this stranger was capable of.

I mean, he was tall, and he definitely looked strong. His sleeves were working overtime to keep his biceps covered. And when he turned around, of *course* my eyes dipped to check out his ass. (Round? Yup. Firm? Sure seemed that way but I'd need to do some hands-on inspection to confirm.) Despite all of the muscles, I felt confident I could take him. I knew how to be scrappy and fight dirty when I had to. Growing up the way I did, it wasn't like I had a choice. Yup, I could do this. In fact, I *wanted* to.

"You're overconfident, and from what I can see, you don't have a reason to be." His gaze traveled down my body for the billionth time, sending a shiver up the back of my neck.

"Stop *looking* at me!" I shouted at him. "Stalker!"

He closed his eyes and let his head drop back. "Oh my fucking god, I am *not* a stalker. Quit saying that."

"Quit giving me reasons to! You've been staring at me this whole time."

"Can you blame me? I was trying to fend off your damn mop. I happen to like my nose intact."

Dave finally jogged into the room, his hand resting on the walkie at his waist. I breathed a sigh of relief. Even though I was positive I could save myself, it felt good to have backup in the form of our massive head of security.

"You okay, Natalie? I got the distress signal—" He froze and his mouth dropped open when he noticed the stranger in the room with me.

Yes! Things were about to get interesting. I couldn't wait to see the look on his stupid-handsome face as Dave escorted him to the door—or maybe even turned him over to the cops.

“Oh...Mr. Br-Branson, hello,” Dave stuttered. “Did you need... Uh, how can I be of assistance?”

Hold on. Wait a sec. *Branson?* As in, my *employer*, Branson Designs? No way.

But...now that I took a minute to think about it instead of just reacting, it sort of made sense. The guy had an almost regal air, like he knew he was the shit, and he was pissed that I had the nerve to question him. Maybe I should have realized his oh-so-superior attitude was because he was part of this business's ruling family. But overprivileged guys like that rubbed me the wrong way so completely that I just couldn't help lashing out. It was like he had a force field around him that made even the air I breathed a little more aggravating. And it didn't help that in addition to looking like he could bench press me, there was also the way I felt his when his gaze lingered on me. I had a hard time staring back at him, because my stomach did embarrassing flip-flops every time our eyes met. It had to be my adrenaline kicking in, but the truth was, it felt like something else entirely. I licked my lips and forced myself to focus on what an asshole he was.

“I'm a little frustrated at the moment, Dave. And wet.” He glared at me as he gestured to the front of his button-down.

“I see that, boss.” Dave chuckled nervously. “What happened in here?”

Hearing Dave call him “boss” set off warning bells in my head. Bad enough that he was a Branson, but Branson Designs employed a shit ton of Bransons, some of them in pretty minor roles. I'd been hoping that maybe he was an operator in the call center. Or the intern wrangler. Or a tech dude at the help desk. Something that gave him no actual authority over me. But “boss” sounded ominous. *Very* ominous.

“It seems that Miss...” The guy trailed off and looked at me expectantly as if I'd willingly offer up my name to him. Yeah, right!

“Reynolds,” Dave said. “Her name is Natalie Reynolds.”

Damnit, Dave!

“Miss *Reynolds*,” the guy gloated, “has been abusing our sound system after hours. And when I came in to get her to turn down the music, she accosted me with a mop.”

“Hey, just hold on! You scared the shit out of me,” I shouted, stomping closer to him. I turned to Dave for support. “He was hiding in the shadows, spying on me. And then he wouldn’t give me a straight answer about who he was, so I defended myself—while protecting the store!”

“Yes, and it was very effective. The filthy mop water stopped me in my tracks,” he said sarcastically, locking onto me in a way that sent a shiver down my spine. I felt like I was in his crosshairs, and I didn’t like it one bit. Everything about his expression said that this was a guy who wasn’t used to losing.

Well, he clearly didn’t know who he was dealing with. Branson or not, I wasn’t going to just roll over and play dead. That wasn’t my way.

“No one’s ever complained about me playing music after hours before,” I snarked back at him. “Which means you’re either new here, or you just got your hearing aids tuned up.”

He cocked an eyebrow again. “Are you implying that I’m old, Miss Reynolds?”

I smirked as I slowly dragged my eyes down his body, like I was trying to appraise an antique. I expected him to fidget a little, but the guy seemed to *enjoy* the way I was taking him in, which made me even angrier. “I’m saying that the only people who complain about Beyonce are grumpy old men, so draw your own conclusion.”

“I have absolutely no issue with Beyonce. I like Beyonce. *Your* singing, on the other hand...”

“Oh, come on!” I glared at him. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Says you. I never want to hear that screeching again.”

“And why should I give a shit about what you want?” I exclaimed, throwing

my hands up in frustration. “You still haven’t told me who you are.”

Dave took a tentative step forward, reminding us that he was still in the room with us. “Oh, uh, Natalie, you should probably know that the man you, uh, *mopped* is—” he began.

“We’re good here, Dave,” the guy interrupted quickly. “I’ll handle it.”

Dave bobbed his head and laughed nervously. “Okay, got it. Just holler if you need me, okay?” He backed out of the room, and I could *swear* he did a little bow towards the guy. Ugh, gross. Just because he was part of the founding family didn’t mean he was the king or anything.

We glared at each other, and I realized that my chest was rising and falling like I’d just jogged a few laps. My skin felt flushed and prickly too. I chalked it up to that unblinking stare of his. I slipped my hand up the back of my neck to untangle my hair from my collar, then realized that I was smoothing it. What? No! Why the hell did I care how my hair looked? Was it because the guy was watching every move I made?

“So who are you really?” I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest.

“The man in charge of the sound system,” he answered deadpan, his face an expressionless mask...except for the little hint of a smirk. Was this asshole enjoying this?

“If you think this is funny —”

“I think a lot of things are funny,” he said, “but I don’t count being soaked with a mop and accused of being a stalker among them.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t act like one, then,” I said. Probably not the best of ideas to be this nasty, especially given how deferential Dave had been, but what the hell—if he could dish it out, then he’d have to take it. Besides, it wasn’t like I could get away with pretending to be demure at this point. He already knew better.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“So,” I insisted, “are you going to tell me who you are? Or should I start bringing my crystal ball into work?”

“Just as long as it doesn’t have built-in speakers.” And, with that, that annoying little smirk of his grew in size.

I opened my mouth to hit back at him, but he was faster. He raised his hand in a halting gesture.

“Since it seems like you’ve been living under a rock, my name is James Branson and I —”

I didn’t even hear the rest of his words. The alarm sounds ringing inside my head were just too loud. This was worse than I thought. I hadn’t misheard it. He was the actual boss. My boss, my boss’s boss, Dave’s boss—everybody’s boss.

Oh, no way.

I tried to clear my throat to hide my shock and wound up launching into a mortifying choke-coughing fit. He watched me struggle like I was a fish flopping around on dry land, until I finally managed to catch my breath.

Shit! The scenario was *way* worse than I thought. The smug, grinning asshole watching me nearly choke to death on my own spit was the actual, real deal owner of the company. James Alexander Branson the Second. Like, his signature was on the paychecks and everything.

And I’d nearly mopped his face off.

Shit. Shit-shit-shit.

I needed this job. I needed all *three* of my jobs if I expected to be able to afford my final semester at design school. But I wasn’t about to bow down to him, especially with the way he kept pushing my buttons, like it was nothing more than a game to him.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” James asked, the condescension dripping in his voice.

“Do you?” I snapped before I could stop myself. My damn mouth was always getting me in trouble but at this point, I felt like I had nothing to lose. The chance to make a good impression had long since come and gone. So there wouldn’t be any point in bowing and scraping now, if I could even swallow

my pride enough to try. “You shouldn’t have lied about being an accountant.”

“And you shouldn’t have assaulted my ears with that godawful screeching,” he fired back.

“You do realize that I was working, right?” I snapped at him. “I’m a dedicated employee but I’m not here this late for fun. The singing helps to pass the time when I’ve got more work than I can handle, which happens to be the case, oh, ninety percent of the time.”

He frowned, and for the first time I felt like it wasn’t at me. “Why isn’t Lucy here helping?”

I swallowed hard because I didn’t want to get my manager in trouble. I liked her. “She was, but I told her I could handle the rest of it on my own.” I shrugged. “She’s got kids and a husband at home...”

“And I take it you don’t?” James asked pointedly.

I straightened my back and gave him a withering look. “Do *you*?”

“Have a husband at home? No, and I don’t think my personal life matters in this moment —”

“Thank you for proving my point,” I said, cutting him off triumphantly. “Now if you’ll leave, I can finish up for the night.” He had to approve of that, right? He could go do his job, and I could go back to mine, and we could pretend that we never met. It wasn’t likely our paths would cross again—not when they hadn’t up to this point.

He let out a long, frustrated sigh. “You’re done here, Reynolds. Just pack up and go.”

I froze. Hold on. That sounded sort of...final. And there was no way I could afford to lose this job. “But I need to finish...” I trailed off and gestured around the room.

“Did you not hear what I just said?” There was a scowl in his voice. “Go *home*.”

I stared at him in shock for a second. I...I’d thought that maybe I’d get reprimanded—that I’d get sent to HR for Claire to drone a lecture at me, or

that I'd have to go to an anger management class, or even that I'd have to—perish the thought—buy the boss a hideously expensive replacement shirt that I absolutely couldn't afford. But this sounded like I might actually be fired. My stomach dropped. I *couldn't* be fired. I wanted to argue—hell, I wanted to beg—but one look at the stony expression on his face, and I knew that I'd be wasting my words. I swallowed hard and then straightened my shoulders. *Never let them see they've gotten to you*, I reminded myself. It had been my mantra for too many years.

“Fine,” I managed as I turned on my heel. The suddenness of the move whipped my phone out of my shallow pocket, sending it skittering across the floor.

“*Get your hand out from under my skirts this minute, you beast,*” a female voice boomed over the speakers.

No. Oh my fucking god, *no!* My audiobook, *In Bed with the Rogue*, must've been cued up, and now it was being broadcast for Mr. Bossman to hear. I dove to my knees to grab my phone, but it danced just out of reach again.

“*And why would I do that?*” a deep voice countered. “*Because if you truly wanted me to remove my hand, you'd have slapped it away by now. Instead, my lovely Penelope, you seem to be waiting for me to move my fingertips higher. Hoping that I might travel from your supple calf to your silky inner thigh. Am I correct? Does that blush upon your cheeks mean I may continue my journey?*”

“*You...you may.*”

A trembling sigh filled the room, and I wished I could disappear.

I didn't dare glance at Branson as I finally managed to turn the damn thing off. I grabbed my purse and headed for the door, head bowed.

I stopped with my hand on the knob, then turned back to face him. “There's still a ton to finish. Are you sure I can go home?”

Even at a distance I could see the twitch of a grin as his eyes settled on me. “You may.”

His voice was deeper, smooth as scotch.

My mouth dropped open as it dawned on me. He was mocking my book, calling me out for reading romance! I bumped back against the door and left in a hurry, not bothering to respond to him.

Because all I wanted to do was get as far away from James Branson and his overbearing, judgey, miserably handsome face as quickly as possible.

NATALIE

I slammed the door to my apartment way louder than I meant to, but it felt really fucking good to take out my anger on *something*. I felt tight as a bowstring after the interaction with Mr. Bossman, ready to send a flaming arrow in the general direction of Branson Designs.

“Yikes,” my roommate Stephanie’s voice echoed down the hallway. “I’m in the family room. With wine.”

I’d called her with a quick rundown on my way home and warned her that I was a hot mess, and she’d promised to calm me down with bottomless Merlot.

I kicked off my shoes and groaned in relief. They were comfortable enough, but after twelve hours on my feet, I wanted to toss them in a bonfire. I padded down the narrow hall, trying to ignore the way James Branson kept invading my brain.

Because I didn’t like the way my stomach fluttered every time it happened.

“Here,” Stephanie said, holding out an overfilled glass. “Tell me everything about how you sang your way out of a job.”

The lights were dim in our small family room, which made my tension headache ratchet down a few notches. Our combined decorating aesthetic was

yard sale chic, with mismatched furniture and walls filled with cast-off art from thrift shops, but we made it work. Stephanie patted the couch and gave me an encouraging smile. My roommate was in full cozy mode, wearing leggings and a tank top, with her dark pixie cut sticking out in different directions. She still looked gorgeous without a smidge of makeup, but naturally beautiful personal trainers tended to have that annoying ability. No doubt my SOS text had dragged her out of bed, but she looked totally willing to sit beside me, drinking wine and commiserating for as long as I needed. That's the type of friendship we had. We'd always looked out for each other. After a childhood like mine, I treasured my found family.

I let out a strangled groan of frustration as I threw myself on the couch next to her. "He's the *worst!* Beyond pompous. A first-class asshole!"

Stephanie's mouth went into an exaggerated frown. "Seriously? Like, abusive?"

I took a gulp of wine as I considered the question. "No. Not like that. He didn't touch me, and he didn't really raise his voice. He was just so *condescending*. Ugh, it was disgusting. And he's very 'my way of the highway.'"

"Well, he is the big boss," Stephanie offered in a quiet voice, like she knew she was on thin ice by even suggesting that James had a right to be a jackass. "And you can be a little, uh, *direct* when you don't like someone. Maybe he's not used to an employee calling him out like that."

"It was his fault, though!" I scowled, staring at my glass. "He could've avoided all the drama if he'd told me who he was right off the bat and politely asked me to turn down my music. Instead, he lied and insulted me."

"Okay, okay, fair point," Stephanie said with a nod. "What does he look like? I'm guessing old money country club vibes, right?"

I thought about the man I'd just met and realized that there was no way to describe him without coming out and admitting that James Branson was sex on a stick.

I rolled my eyes. "Tall, light brown hair, and handsome. Like, the kind of good-looking that's an insult to any other guys in the general vicinity. Perfect

body, a mix of linebacker and swimmer, so he's got those shoulders." I gestured to help her envision how absolutely distracting the man's physique was. "Bone structure of the gods. Picture one of those marble statues and that's him. And he's got this way of staring that is so distracting. It felt like he was scrutinizing me the whole time!"

Stephanie gave me a naughty grin over the lip of her wineglass. "Uh-oh."

"What?" I demanded, frowning at her.

She paused, still smiling like she knew a secret. "Sounds like someone's down for a hate-fuck."

I wondered if my neighbors could hear her laughing and begging for mercy as I battered her with a throw pillow for even thinking it.



Back at the scene of the crime at the crack of dawn. I clutched my thin vintage army jacket across my chest, cursing the fact that March was feeling much more "lion" than "lamb" this morning.

I dodged the early morning crowds on the Manhattan sidewalk on the way to the front door of Branson Designs with my head held high, because Stephanie and I had come to the conclusion that since he hadn't said the words, I hadn't actually been fired. If I could just keep my head down and keep doing my job, maybe the whole thing would blow over. It wasn't like I did anything *that* bad, anyway.

Okay, maybe I was a *tiny* bit sassy with the boss man. And then there was the mop-to-the-face stuff. But still. He was the one who started the whole thing by not coming clean about his true identity and being an absolute jackass to me. If anyone had an HR issue, it was probably me. Wasn't faking an identity a crime?

I fished my key card out of my purse under the light of a streetlamp. I was used to being the first one there. I liked the time alone to collect myself, so I could work on my designs for school when I could catch a spare minute. I'd always struggled to try to scrape together the money for classes, and now that

I was deep in the middle of my BFA, I wasn't about to give up. No one would ever call me a quitter.

For now, my life was all daydreams and hustle, and the hope that one day they'd both come together and I'd get a lucky break.

Because I sure as hell needed one.

I stifled a yawn as I touched the key card to the pad by the door. The little yellow dot went off, signaling that I hadn't held it in place for long enough. Typical. I was always in a rush to get inside. I held the plastic card against the pad for a few seconds longer.

Yellow light *again*?

I rubbed the key card off on the front of my blouse, assuming that something in my purse had spilled and was obscuring the sensor, then touched it to the pad for a third time.

Whoa. Hold on. A red light?!

Then it hit me. Branson had actually gone and done it. The asshole had fired me! That was the only explanation for why my card wasn't working. He probably called HR right after I'd left the night before! Maybe the threat of bodily harm with a stinky mop really had been a bit too much?

I threw the card on the ground and paced in a circle, feeling my face go hot with anger. How dare he? What right did he have to fire me for something so insignificant? Maybe I could sue him? Yeah, I could hit him in the wallet for wrongful termination!

I paused. It wasn't as if a puny lawsuit like mine would have any impact on him. The guy was a freaking billionaire, after all. A snap of his fingers and he'd set his hellhound lawyers after me. I'd be left with nothing—less than nothing, because I'd have to pay a lawyer. As much as I hated the thought of letting him get away with being such an irredeemable asshole, I was going to have to just let this go no matter how unfair and wrong it was.

I was busy gnawing on the inside of my cheek when I heard footsteps behind me. Was it Dave again, this time coming to throw me off the premises? I spun around, an explanation on my lips, then froze.

“Good morning, Miss Reynolds.”

It was *him*. The bosshole. And he had the actual nerve to be smiling at me!

Damn it, why did he have to look like that? I dug my nails into my palms as he scanned me from head to toe, because the man actually made me feel a little woozy, and I needed a tiny jolt of pain to restabilize myself. It wasn't fair that he was stinking rich *and* stupid hot. But then again, he was both of those things, plus a gigantic dickwad, which totally canceled out the hotness.

Okay, not *totally*, because I wasn't blind. But the little quiver-y feeling in my chest was merely because of my white-hot anger, not because he was close enough to me that I could detect his surprising soapy clean scent. It was so fresh that I wanted to go up on my tiptoes and inhale at the base of his neck.

Then I remembered what he'd done.

“Are you fucking kidding right now?” I stomped even closer to him. “You fired me? For singing?”

It came out as a screech but I didn't care. I could feel my hands curling into fists. If he didn't wipe that cocky grin off his face I'd do it for him.

“Sure, that's it exactly, Miss Reynolds. We just instituted a strict no singing policy here at Branson Designs, and your off-key howling last night was a direct violation of it. And let's not forget the assault with a deadly mop.”

There was that smile again. In another life I'd be mesmerized by it, because it was sexy as hell. A little crooked on one side, like he had a secret. And his bright blue eyes...they were taking me in like he was one of those carnival guys who could guess your age and weight just by looking at you.

But of course he probably already had that information on me. Billionaires could get whatever they wanted, right? I shuddered, imagining him gaining access to my phone and scrolling through my audiobook collection, because more than half of them were books with cover models that looked a little like him. Okay, a lot like him.

I had a thing for chiseled heroes, who didn't?

But right now that didn't matter, because James Branson was about to get an

earful of Natalie Reynolds. Now that I was terminated, the gloves were really coming off.

“Do you have any idea how much I despise you?” I fumed at him. “First, you lie to me and make me feel unsafe at work, and then you go and fire me for sticking up for myself?”

“No, it was the singing, remember?” he replied with a smirk. “And if I want to get technical, you weren’t exactly working efficiently. Trust me, I checked the security footage. You’re incredibly slow.”

“See? That’s *stalker* behavior!” I let out a rage-y noise, not caring that the people passing by turned to look at me. “Oh my god, you are the literal worst! I’m glad you fired me, because there is no way I’d ever want to work for someone as annoying as you! You don’t *deserve* me.”

“You might be right,” he admitted, looking like it pained him to say it.

I snapped my mouth shut. “Excuse me?”

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a tattered blue spiral sketchbook.

My sketchbook. My heart dropped to my feet. Not only did it contain my pie-in-the-sky design concepts, I also used it for my to-do lists (oh my god, did he see that I needed to restock my tampon supply?), snippets of songs that inspired me, random doodles (yes, there were a few nudes), and most embarrassing, occasional journal entries. Like last night. *That* mess would eventually get a page or two dedicated to it, but after killing the better part of a bottle of wine with Stephanie, I hadn’t felt up to writing anything last night, so I hadn’t even noticed it was gone. Stupid, *stupid*. I’d been in such a rush to get out the door of the shop last night, I’d left it behind without even noticing.

“What are you doing with that?” I asked, moving closer to snatch it away from him.

James pulled it just out of reach, like he was playing with a puppy. “So it is yours.”

“Yeah, that’s everything I’ve been working on for the past year.” I held my hand out to him. “Longer, even. And it’s *private*. Not to mention, it’s none of your business, No-Longer-My-Bossman. Give it.”

“Careless, to leave something so precious just lying about,” he replied, flipping the cover back. “But that seems to be your M.O., yes? Careless, impulsive, reactionary, and to top it off, a mouth that doesn’t know when to remain shut.”

His eyes dropped to my lips and lingered for a second longer than necessary. I couldn’t catch my breath, because what was essentially my diary was cracked open in his massive hands. I wanted to jump out of my skin as he skimmed the first few pages. *No one* got to look at my sketches until I felt like they were ready, and even though these were getting close, I still felt like I needed time to perfect them. But if I was honest with myself, I never felt like they were truly ready. That not-so-little voice of doubt was always *right* there, telling me that I’d never be good enough. And James Branson looking at my work was the equivalent of him looking through my dirty laundry basket. I felt exposed, like his hands were sifting through my lacy thongs.

I braced myself for the insults he was about to hurl my way.

“*But*,” he added, his tone shifting, “I was wrong to say last night that you don’t have talent. These are good.” He paused on a sketch of a gown that happened to be my favorite, then met my gaze. “Really good. I would like to buy these designs from you.”

I cleared my throat, unable to find words for a second. How was it possible that the man who’d done nothing but insult me since I’d met him was actually saying something nice?

“Hello?” James frowned and waved his hand in front of my face. “Do you need an etiquette lesson? I just told you that I’d like to buy your work. One typically replies with something like ‘Yes, thank you.’”

He sounded so condescending, like he was talking to a child, and it set me off, compliment or not.

“Why should I thank you for a statement of fact? I know I’m talented,” I snarked back at him.

He shook his head and chuckled. “And no shortage of confidence, clearly.”

“Whatever,” I said. “I’m not interested in selling my designs. I want a job where I can create and grow, not just hand over my work.”

I took a step closer to James and held my hand out.

“I’m thinking...*no*.” He brought my notebook to his chest and folded his arms over it.

“But you can’t...that’s my property! I’m going to report...” I sputtered in shock, panic rising in my chest. Maybe it actually *did* belong to him since I’d occasionally stolen a few minutes at work to adjust a sketch or two?

“Miss Reynolds, would you please pipe down and listen to me for a moment?” He waited for me to stop freaking out and face him. “I’m trying to move Branson Designs in a new direction, and based on your sketches I think you might be the way to make it happen.”

All I cared about was getting my precious sketchbook back *now*, so whatever he was saying to me wasn’t registering. Could I grab the thing from his hands and take off running? The sidewalk was slowly filling with people who just finished up their graveyard shifts, or were clocking in for a long day ahead, which meant I could blend in within a block or two. Maybe his gigantic-ness would slow him down? My brain spun out in dirt bike circles as I imagined trying to recreate my work if the asshole decided to keep it. No, that would be impossible. Catastrophic. I felt a little lightheaded and couldn’t focus, because damn he seemed to be taking forever to get to his point.

“Miss Reynolds, I’d like to offer you a promotion—out of the shop and into the design studio.”

My jaw fell open. *That* I heard.

“You mean you’re un-firing me?”

He tilted his head and squinted at me. “I don’t recall ever saying that you were fired. That was all you. In fact, you seemed quite eager to see yourself let go.”

“But...” I pointed to my key card on the ground a few feet behind me. “It doesn’t work.”

He pulled his out of his jacket pocket. “Mine doesn’t either. Company-wide systems glitch. It’ll be fixed in an hour. If you’d given me a minute to explain, we could’ve avoided much of the confusion, as well as you telling

me how much you despise me.”

I felt my cheeks go hot.

“So let’s try this again,” James said, still clutching my notebook to his chest.

I blinked a few times, trying hard to follow him because nothing was making sense right now. I mean, Bossman was right, I *had* just told him that I despised him. Maybe this was another way for him to fuck with me? Say he wanted to promote me, then laugh at me when I actually believed the offer?

“Miss Reynolds,” James continued, still staring at me in that unblinkingly intense way. I forced myself to stare back with an unreadable poker face. “Can you put your hatred aside and consider discussing a new position working alongside me?”

He drummed his fingers on my precious notebook while he waited for me to respond.

Something toggled in my chest, and it felt a lot like hope. Maybe he wasn’t playing with me, and he was about to give me the break I was so desperate for?

I was about to work up the courage to say yes when he continued.

“One condition, though.”

“And that is...?” I replied slowly, not even hiding my suspicion.

He pulled a key ring out of his pocket and headed for the front doors. “Don’t you ever, *ever* sing in my presence again. Got it?”

He unlocked the door and slipped inside in one smooth motion, leaving me stewing on the sidewalk with the knowledge that while I would happily take the position, I would *never* not despise this man.

JAMES

“What the hell, man? Were you still in bed?”

My brother leaned against the door to his apartment and squinted at me like the hallway light was hurting his eyes. “Maybe.”

He swiped his hand over the stubble along his cheeks.

“For fuck’s sake, Christopher.” I sighed, knocking into him as I pushed my way past him into the dark room. “It’s nearly nine!”

Lately, it felt like we’d swapped roles, with me as the caretaker and my older brother as the one who needed guidance.

“It’s eight fifteen,” he corrected in a sleepy voice, shuffling behind me. “Early.”

“It might be early for the rest of the world, but not a Branson,” I shot back. “Whatever happened to your 6 a.m. runs through Central Park?”

He plopped down on the couch and shrugged. “I’m taking a little break. Speaking of unhealthy life choices, is there a blueberry muffin for me in that La Pâtisserie bag?” Christopher grinned and patted his stomach.

“Yeah. It’s Lorraine’s birthday, so you know the drill. Figured I’d pick up a muffin for you as an excuse to come annoy the shit out of you.”

I threw the bag at him, and he snatched it from the air without missing a beat.

“Mission accomplished, I’m annoyed,” he lied with a wide grin. He dug out the muffin and took a giant bite. “Is the Bern-meister still enforcing that old tradition? ‘The Bransons need to show that we value our employees,’” he said, mimicking her voice. “She wouldn’t know if you skipped it.”

I narrowed my eyes at my brother. “Oh, she’d find out somehow. And you know how superstitious she is. If word got out that a Branson assistant didn’t get the special birthday treatment, there’d be hell to pay. Did I want to waste a chunk of my morning fighting uptown traffic to pick up a cake for Lorraine before work? Absolutely not. Did I do it to avoid The Wrath of Bernadette Branson: our founder, matriarch, and busybody grandmother? Ab-so-fucking-lutely.”

Christopher laughed, and my heart lifted a little to see it. The dimness in his apartment was usually a good indicator that his mood was equally dark, but maybe he was heading into brighter days?

“You got any juice?” I asked as I walked to his kitchen.

It was an excuse for me to check out the rest of the place, to see just how deep his depression was at the moment. At least there were no overflowing ashtrays or empty pill bottles scattered around. It was actually surprisingly tidy, almost like he was expecting company. Sadly, I knew that wasn’t a possibility. Christopher barely allowed *me* in, let alone someone outside the family. The isolation wasn’t healthy, and I hated to see him hiding from the world. I wanted to be there for him, but the time was coming for me to start giving my brother some tough love.

“Do I have juice?” he called after me. “Pick your flavor. Orange, guava, mango, demonberry...”

“What the hell is demonberry?” I asked as I pulled his Subzero open.

“Ha, gotcha! Just checking to make sure you’re listening.”

I gazed at the fully stocked refrigerator and breathed a sigh of relief. At least he was eating.

“I always listen to you,” I said as I made my way back and sat across from

him. “You should know that by now.”

“I do. And I appreciate it. But no need to walk on eggshells today.” He balled up the empty pastry bag and threw it at me, nailing me on the forehead. “I’m feeling good.”

“Asshole.” I glowered at him, hiding the fact that I was happy he was doing better. I waited until he glanced away to toss the bag back at him, drilling him squarely on the nose.

“Do you want to go, bro?” Christopher asked with mock tough-guy attitude, pumping up his chest. “Because I’ll throw down with you right now. Let’s do this.”

I laughed. “Listen, I don’t want to hurt you. I haven’t been slacking on my workouts like *some* people.”

Christopher’s phone rang and he grabbed it from the coffee table. “Oh shit.” He hopped up to answer it. “Hey, Anderson, what’s wrong?”

Anderson Williams, Christopher’s divorce attorney. Calling this early in the day wasn’t a great sign. I watched my brother start pacing as he listened, noting the way his expression shifted from confusion to the hardness we’d all become so familiar with. As much as I wanted to be support for him, it wasn’t my place to eavesdrop. He glanced over at me and drew his hand across his throat slowly. That was my cue to head out.

I walked a few steps closer to him. “You sure?” I asked in a low voice.

He frowned and nodded, then turned away from me. “Hold on, hold on, she said *what?*”

I let myself out and thought about Christopher’s state of mind on the ride back to the office. Navigating New York traffic on a workday was hell, and even though I had a half dozen sports cars to choose from, I appreciated that I could count on my driver, Hector. Especially since I had so much to mull over after the visit with my brother. His ex had put him through hell, and by the sound of the call, it wasn’t even close to over. My phone buzzed with a text right as Hector came to a stop outside the building.

“*Mission accomplished?*”

Damnit, it was as if my grandmother had spies everywhere, despite being officially retired. I knew she still had access to the company calendar, and I was absolutely certain she also had her fair share of plants who kept her updated on the gossip that I avoided getting into, but did she also have access to the surveillance cameras? I sent her a photo of the cake box.

“Give me some credit,” I texted back.

My phone rang because she hated texting. “I *do* give you credit, just checking up on you, sweetie. You saw Christopher this morning, yes?”

I wasn’t surprised that she seemed to know my every move when it came to our family and our business.

“Yeah. He seemed good at first...but then Anderson called while I was there, and it sounded pretty bad. He’s gonna be a mess after that. I need to take him to dinner or something.”

“James,” she sighed. “Yes, you should be there for your brother, but don’t forget about taking care of yourself. You get too wrapped up in his problems.”

It was just like my grandmother to turn the conversation back onto me. I might not have had addiction and divorce in my past but I’d definitely been through my fair share of tough times.

Not that I wanted to think about them.

“Hey, Bern, I just pulled in and I need to get moving. Busy day on the books. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

“Of course, any time, my dear. Tell Lorraine I said happy birthday.”

The second I got to my floor I realized that I needed to drop the cake off in the kitchen refrigerator five floors up. This stupid tradition was making me later than I already was. Frustrated with myself for being so disorganized, I stormed back to the elevator and slapped the button, feeling like an absolute dork for being tasked with cake duty when it was something another assistant could’ve handled. But I wasn’t about to go head-to-head with Bernie on her silly traditions. There were bigger, more troubling issues we needed to address.

Where the *fuck* was the elevator? I pushed the button three more times. It finally hit my floor, and the doors opened so slowly that I wanted to reach in and pry them open. Was it something building management could fix? I was so frustrated that I didn't even glance up until I was all the way in the elevator.

“*Mr. Branson!*”

The shriek made me jump, and it was then I realized that the door had slid shut behind me and I was now alone in the elevator with none other than Natalie Reynolds.

And she was topless.



Natalie

“Don't look at me!” I yelled. “My coffee—I mean my *shirt*, I tripped and —”

The man kept his eyes downcast and held up a hand to silence me. “So this is how you're starting off your first day? Undressing in our elevator?”

I froze with my arms crossed over my chest. “I'm...I'm not *undressing*.”

“Littering, too,” he continued, pointing to the empty coffee cup rolling on the ground between us. “Maybe give this new position a little time before treating our office like your living room?”

He finally raised his eyes to mine, obviously expecting some sort of groveling out of me.

“I *tripped* and *spilled* my *coffee* on my *blouse*,” I said slowly, over-enunciating like he didn't speak English. “My empty cup.” I pointed to it. “My soaking wet blouse.” I held up the ruined thing and accidentally exposed

my bra-clad boob to him.

To his credit, he only let his eyes dip to my chest for a half-second. His scowl didn't budge despite the fact that I was practically falling out of my bra. I glanced down and noticed the edge of my nipple peeking over the coffee-stained lace, so I recrossed my arms.

“And what was your plan after you removed your blouse?” he asked, staring at the floor. “Branson Designs welcomes individuality, but we do have a dress code, you know. I don't think...” he craned his neck to briefly scan my chest, “...a demi-cup, vertical seam, embroidered mesh and lace bra makes the cut for appropriate attire. Especially with that coffee stain.”

I felt my cheeks go hot. It was easy to assume that James Branson was just a numbers guy, or a nepo-hire for the company, but his split-second assessment of my lingerie proved that he knew his shit.

“Yeah, I was going to parade around in my bra all day, you nailed it,” I said, sneering at him. “No, I happen to have a spare T-shirt in my bag. Don't worry, I'll still look presentable.”

“I never said you don't look presentable,” he replied quickly, holding my gaze and sending a shiver up my spine.

I crossed my arms tighter, knowing full well that doing so pushed my breasts higher. The pressure in the elevator shifted, and it wasn't just due to the rapid ascent.

“I said parading around half dressed is not *appropriate*,” he continued, still staring at me in that disconcerting way. “We have bathrooms, you know.”

He probably assumed that I'd fold, but I straightened my back and didn't blink.

“Yeah, and exactly how am I supposed to find those?” I replied. “It's not like there was anyone waiting to show me where to go. Real welcoming place you have here.”

He grimaced, finally looking a little apologetic. “We *do* have HR reps meet new hires—but you were already on record as an employee on the retail side, so that must have slipped through the cracks.”

“Well, then I guess you can add this to my employee file.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Adaptable. Self-starter. Walks into a situation and immediately —”

“Takes off her shirt?” he said with a smirk.

“—starts solving problems,” I finished, pulling on my T-shirt. “Problem,” I said, gesturing to my coffee-soaked shirt, Vanna White-style. “Solved,” I concluded, gesturing to myself.

“I’ll make a note of it,” he said. “right after the singing stuff. And don’t forget the pornography.”

“Excuse me?” It came out in an indignant yelp.

The elevator finally slowed to a stop, and the asshole turned to me with a half-smile.

“*Does that blush upon your cheeks mean I may continue my journey,*” he said in a low voice.

“What...what do you even mean—” I froze when I realized that he was quoting my audiobook. “Oh, come on. That was an accident!”

He shrugged a shoulder, standing in the doorway of the open elevator with his foot keeping it open.

“Will you get out of my way so I can get out already? I need to get to my workstation.”

“*You may,*” he replied, and moved his foot so the door closed before I could say anything back.



“Worst first day ever,” I groaned as I collapsed onto the floor, eyeing the suspicious stain on the corner of the area rug. Where had *that* come from? “And now you’re making me do pushups.”

“Technically, it wasn’t your first day,” Stephanie reminded me. “And it’s good to sweat out your frustrations. Five more, let’s go.”

I grunted my displeasure. “It was my first day with a brand-new asshole of a boss.” I raised myself into position again. As much as I hated training with Steph in our little family room, she was right: I always felt better once I was done.

“That James guy?” she asked, squatting beside me, to make sure I was getting low enough with each rep. “The one who gave you the job?”

My arms were screaming but I wasn’t about to give up. I wasn’t a quitter.

“No, James the hot asshole is my boss’s boss.” I knocked out a shaky pushup. “I report to a guy named Clint, and oh my fucking god, he’s the worst.” I paused at the top of the pushup to look at Steph. “Insulted me in every way possible. Said my work was amateurish, even though it’s exactly what got me promoted in the first place.”

Talking about Clint made me so mad that I managed to finish the last reps strong.

“Nice work,” Steph said, giving me a smack on my shoulder. “And that dude sounds like he sucks.”

“No kidding.” I rolled onto my back. “I asked a question about their approval process, and I swear to you, Steph, the guy *laughed* at me and said it was a stupid question! Like, in front of the entire team. On my first day.”

“Oof.” She plopped down next to me. “Not good.”

“Exactly! I was seriously having flashbacks to Dylan.”

“Dylan,” she sneered. “Worst boyfriend ever. I think you’ve got PTSD from that relationship,” Steph said. “So are you going to quit?”

I lifted my T-shirt to wipe the sweat off my forehead. “I thought about it when Clint called me a hack, but then I remembered my new salary and swallowed my pride. Next semester’s tuition is due soon.”

“Can’t you, like, go up the chain of command? Talk to his boss or something?”

I choked out a laugh. “You mean *James*? Yeah, he hates me too.”

“Oh, come on,” Stephanie said. “He wouldn’t have given you the job if he hated you.”

I filled her in on the elevator situation, and she practically busted a gut laughing at me.

“I was wondering why you were wearing a different shirt when you got home! So he saw your tits?”

“Steph, no! I was in my bra,” I explained, realizing that it didn’t make the situation any better.

“I bet you made his day,” she crowed. “Alone with his gorgeous half-dressed employee... He’s probably jacking off thinking about you right now!”

“Would you stop writing fanfic about my boss already?” I shouted at her, only half kidding. Secretly, a part of me liked the idea of me invading James’s brain. “He’s a dick too. They all are. But they won’t get the best of me. I’ll show them.”

“Yup, I know you will.” Stephanie flowed into pushup position and started knocking them out like she could do a hundred. “You always do.”

She was right, but I had a feeling that the big boss was going to make me work very hard to make it happen.

NATALIE

It was my turn to pick the music so of course Beyonce was cranking, but the upbeat dance music did nothing to lighten the mood in the creative department.

I glanced around at my new colleagues, hoping to connect with someone, *anyone*, but each head was bent over their drafting tables hard at work. The space had seemed deceptively cheerful the first time I walked in, with a double-height ceiling, gigantic windows, and music pumping through hidden speakers, but I'd noticed right away that no one was talking. I'd thought it might have been everyone needing to get used to the newbie, and I'd hoped that once I got through the awkwardness of the first day, people would relax and open up, but it felt like the entire creative floor was a minefield, and I had no idea at any given time what was going to cause an explosion.

Or, more specifically, what might cause *Clint* to explode.

"*Natalie*," the sing-song voice echoed down from his loft office.

I gritted my teeth and glanced up to where Clint was standing, overlooking the design floor. We had intercoms; it would've been easier for him to page me that way. But Clint seemed to like the spectacle of calling me out so that the entire floor could listen in. I saw a few heads bob up, but no one glanced directly at me. They knew what was coming.

“Yes?”

“I need you to grab me a coffee from the kitchen,” he ordered. “I’m right in the middle of something and I can’t be interrupted.”

I bit my tongue and refrained from saying that he’d already interrupted himself with his stupid request.

It was the third time in a week he’d treated me like his personal gofer, and I needed to put a stop to it if I expected to be treated with respect. I mean, I was hired to be a *designer*, not an assistant, but Clint clearly didn’t get the message. I took a deep breath and did my best to keep the fury out of my voice. “Clint, I’m also in the middle of a task. I’m sorry, but now’s not a good time for me to take a break.”

The entire room seemed to freeze. I guess saying no to Clint wasn’t a thing?

“And what is it that’s so important that you can’t follow a direct request from your boss?”

I stood straight up and unfurled my shoulders, staring up at him like he was a demented Juliet. “If you’ll recall from the email you sent this morning, you took me off of the fabric sourcing project and switched me to the trench coat competitive analysis, which is due by the end of the day. I still have quite a bit to get through, given the tight turnaround.”

Calling it “tight” was generous, but I wasn’t about to come right out and accuse Clint of trying to sabotage me.

“Oh, that’s *right*.” He seemed delighted by the reminder of my insane workload. “You do have a lot to accomplish.”

I was shocked that he actually copped to it. I was about to lob another passive aggressive comment back at him when a voice piped up behind me.

“I’ll go. I’ll get your coffee, Clint.”

I glanced over and saw my colleague Rhea gathering her purse, and I wanted to run over and hug her. I’d adored the woman since the first time we shook hands. Her buzzed gray hair and oversized colorful earrings made her seem like an eclectic auntie. She was one of the older employees who had been

around long enough that she was immune to personnel shifts, and she navigated Clint's temper tantrums like a bored kindergarten teacher. She was basically untouchable, and I was happy that she seemed to be on my side.

"Rhea," Clint chided. "That's probably not a good idea. Don't you also have something due to me by the end of today?"

She nodded as she walked towards the hallway. "Yup, a Q3 manufacturing plan. I could do it in my sleep. Don't worry, you'll have it before four."

She threw up a peace sign and waddled away before he could respond.

I stifled a laugh as I sat back down and refocused on my laptop. I needed to get cracking if I expected to finish in time—which, truth be told, I didn't think was possible. But I was going to die trying.

"Hey," a low voice said behind me. "How's it going?"

I turned around and found Lavonte pretending to examine a nearby swatch board. I hadn't talked to him much but based on the way he dressed, he seemed like a fun guy. He managed to get every color of the rainbow on his body, from the bright wraps in his hair to the pom-poms on his sneakers.

"I'm making it happen." I sighed and flicked my eyes up to make sure that Clint wasn't watching. "I'm about halfway done."

"Halfway?" he squeaked as he ran his finger along a chiffon sample. "Woman, that's impressive!"

I shrugged. "I never miss a deadline, especially from someone like Clint. Although I'm getting a little worried given that it's already three."

"Well, allow me to throw you a lifeline," he murmured, glancing up towards Clint's office. "Go to the shared file called 'inspo,' then drill down to the file called 'lewks.' It's hidden, on purpose."

I chuckled as I navigated through the files, then gasped when I got to the one he told me to open. "Lavonte! Is this *finished*?"

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Not one hundred percent. Clint assigned me the same competitive analysis a few months ago, then transitioned me off right as I was finishing up. I didn't realize that he'd

passed it on to you.” He gave me a little smile. “We gotta look out for each other, you know? Life around here ain’t easy. Consider it my welcome gift.”

“This is incredible, thank you!” I said, reaching out to grab his hand and give it a squeeze.

“It’s nothing. But you can bet I’m gonna call on you when my ass is in trouble, got it? You owe me.”

“Any time.” I smiled at him.

Even though the vibe in the department skewed prison yard, I felt like I was making a few allies. Rhea had tenure and a Teflon attitude, and Lavonte was good with secrets. Maybe I was going to be okay after all? If I focused on the positives—colleagues who seemed to be looking out for me and work that I loved—maybe I could get past the world’s worst boss? Within an hour I’d managed to combine Lavonte’s work with mine, and I sent a triumphant email to Clint with the document attached.

“Natalie,” Clint’s voice bounced off the walls seconds later. “Please come up here.”

Every eye shifted to me as I did the walk of shame across the room. Jacinda, the fit expert in giant, black-rimmed glasses, scrunched up her nose at me as I passed her workspace, a look that expressed both pity and solidarity. I climbed up the metal stairs, knowing no one was watching, yet everyone was.

“Yes, Clint?” I said warily. “I just sent you the analysis. Did you get it?”

His workspace was cluttered with boxes of forgotten samples and his wall was a mass of inspiration photos. Clint insisted that we keep our desks tidy, but he clearly didn’t follow his own rules. Frankly, I’d gotten the impression over the past week that he played up the idea of “messy creative genius” to hide the fact that he was actually about as creative as a rock—if rocks were loud, obnoxious, ineffective micromanagers.

He had his feet kicked up on his desk, his brown-and-white wingtips on top of a stack of work that someone had probably slaved over. Clint was always dressed impeccably, like every suit he owned was tailored just for him. But unlike our fearless leader James, whose suits made him look imposing, Clint dressed like he was the lead in a 1940s musical. The thick tweeds, plaids,

vests, and bow ties made him seem deceptively approachable. I'd been lulled into thinking that the quirky bald man could actually be a mentor to me. It had only taken a few hours to learn better.

"Oh, did you?" He glanced towards his laptop. "Well, that's not what this is about. Change of plans; I need you to submit a fall color scheme to me by Friday."

My jaw dropped before I could remind myself to keep my face neutral. "That's...that's *weeks*' worth of work. I'd need to access the archives and get trend analysis and talk with Connie and Adam to find out the creative direction we're taking and —"

"Yes, all of that." Clint grinned and tipped his head at me. "I suppose you'd better get to work, then!"

"No...what I'm trying to tell you is that it's basically impossible to finish by Friday."

"Is that a fact?" he mused. "Well, given the shoddy designs you've submitted thus far, and the analysis you just sent that's no doubt incomplete, I find it shocking that you'd say no to anything I assign you. Were you not told that you were hired on a contingent basis? That this is essentially a trial period?"

I steeled myself because I knew that he was wrong. "No, that's not what my contract said, Clint. I was hired full time—no exception, no trial. I'm an official Branson employee."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "It might look that way on paper, but I've been running things here for years now, so let me tell you how it *actually* goes. This entire company runs on what my department creates. What I say goes, and if I say that a new hire isn't pulling her weight, well..." He wiggled his fingers in a prissy goodbye.

No. This couldn't be happening. I knew I was doing a good job, so why did he have it out for me? I *could not* lose this job. Forget paying tuition—if I got fired, I wouldn't be able to pay rent. I had no cushion in my savings account, and I'd quit my other part-time gigs, so if Clint fired me, I was fucked.

"But... I've been hitting my deliverables since I got here." My fury faded to fear as I realized this tyrant held my future in his hands. "I don't understand

why you're unhappy with my performance.”

“Well, it's not the first time a James Branson hire has gone south,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I'm usually the one who handpicks my team, so being forced into bringing you on is... Well, let's call it an adjustment.”

“James knows what's best for his company, and that's why —”

Clint's eyes went wide with theatrical shock. “I can't believe that you're this *uppity* given your brief tenure with us,” he insisted. “Honestly, the more we talk the more obvious it is that you're not a fit for Branson Designs, Natalie. Not on the *design* side, anyway. Maybe retail was the right place for you after all. It wouldn't do to get...*above* yourself.”

My blood turned to ice when I realized what was happening. No way. I took a deep breath and tried to compose my thoughts, because as furious as I felt, I wasn't going to let him push me into doing something stupid and saying something that would justify firing me.

I needed this job.

“You'll have the fall color scheme by close of business tomorrow,” I managed. “You have my word.”

“Noon tomorrow,” he countered, smiling wickedly.

And that's when I realized that the man was actually trying to sabotage me. He clearly didn't like me, and worse, he hated the fact that James had hired me without his approval. Torturing me was a way of getting back at James.

I fumed on my way back to my desk, alternating between trying to come up with a way to complete the impossible task in time, and wishing I could report Clint to someone who mattered. The woman in the HR department who James had finally connected me with—so I could set up my insurance and 401K and everything else that full-time staff got that part-timers in the store didn't—had acted like the president of the Clint Miller Fan Club. If I went to her, everything I said would probably go straight back to Clint, which would make my life in his department even tougher.

I was stuck, but I refused to let the asshole get the best of me. I threw myself into my chair and opened the files. My eyes started to fill with tears as I

realized that finishing in time was impossible, but I blinked them back.

“Natalie...” Clint’s singsong voice drifted across the room.

I felt tension spread across my back as I looked up towards my tormentor.
“Yes?”

“I meant to mention that the design pack you sent to me yesterday was in the wrong format.” His voice was loud enough that no one could tune it out.
“You need to redo it.”

I’d worked on the pack until midnight the night before it was due, and had even coned Steph into double-checking the thing to ensure that it looked perfect. The program used for design packs was glitchy—crashing whenever you breathed wrong—so I’d been forced to start over a bunch of times. The whole process had been a nightmare, but I’d finished it, and I was proud of what I’d managed to do without any guidance from him. Clint now telling me that I’d done it incorrectly was enough to siphon away any of the calm I’d been working so hard to maintain.

I stood up and slammed my hands onto my drafting table, and every head in the room swiveled to me.

“You didn’t say that it needed to be in a special format, Clint,” I shouted up at him. “I’ve only been here a week and I’ve gotten *zero* training. You’re setting me up to fail, over and over again!”

My outburst didn’t seem to faze him. Clint shrugged at me. “We hire self-starters. Normally, people can figure it out. But I wasn’t the one who hired you.”

He disappeared from view while I came close to hyperventilating. Lavonte gave me a sympathetic smile from across the room.

Rhea walked in at the end of Clint’s speech, carrying two coffee cups. She detoured to my desk.

“Hey, you okay?” she whispered to me.

I tried to calm myself but it was too late. I was over it, *all* of it. Working hard yet still being unappreciated. Not getting any guidance. My own boss trying

to make me look stupid in front of my colleagues. And being treated like an intern.

“Am I okay? *No*,” I said. “I just realized that this isn’t going to work.”

Rhea started to say something, but I’d already jumped out of my chair. Nothing she could tell me would change the way I felt, and someone was about to get an earful about it. I stormed towards the elevator, ready to burn the whole place down.

JAMES

“I quit!”

I looked up from my laptop to find a gorgeously disgruntled Natalie Reynolds standing in the center of my office, arms crossed and eyes on fire. Why was it that every time we came into contact with one another she seemed to have her dial turned up to eleven?

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I quit. I absolutely cannot work a single day longer for *Clint*.” She said his name like the word tasted bad.

She started pacing, her heels clicking her unhappiness with every step. I tried to ignore the ways the muscles in her calves worked as she stormed around my office.

“Did he accidentally turn off your key card or something?” I asked, steepling my hands on my desk. “I know you’re sensitive about that.”

Natalie froze and stared at me, her face a mask of fury. “Are you turning this into a *joke*? I’m trying to discuss a legitimate problem and you’re making fun of me?”

“Not at all,” I said smoothly, hoping she’d take it down a notch. “But you do tend to jump to conclusions. Just trying to figure out what we’re dealing with

here. Please, go on, but do me a favor and try not to shout.”

She looked like she was trying to keep from screaming at me. “I feel like you’re dangerously close to telling me to calm down, and if you do, I swear you’ll regret it, boss man,” she seethed.

“Please, I know better than to tell a hysterical woman to calm down,” I replied quickly.

“*Hysterical?*” It came out in a strangled voice, and I realized I’d fucked up big time. “Is *that* how you see me?”

Natalie stomped a few steps closer to my desk and I saw the fury in her eyes—but I also saw that she seemed close to tears. My stomach sank as I realized she was genuinely upset. Not just worked up, not just dramatic, but *hurt*. Something was really wrong, and it was bigger than the beef between us.

I grimaced, realizing that I needed to backpedal, and fast. “Apologies, that wasn’t what I meant. I’m sure you have a legitimate concern, and I do want to understand it. But before I accept your resignation after just one week of employment, can you explain what’s going on? HR will need to know, and of course I’m curious as well.”

She finally seemed to exhale, blinking back the tears without letting them fall, and the tension in my office dialed down a few notches.

“Oh, don’t worry, I made a list,” she said as she tapped on her phone. “First, Clint has belittled me from the very first day in front of the team for not knowing how to do things.” She locked eyes with me. “I’m still figuring everything out, there’s a learning curve, you know? Especially since I’ve gotten zero training from him.”

“Of course,” I agreed, already uncomfortable with what she was telling me. “What else?”

“Second, he’s making unreasonable demands of my time. He expected me to complete a fall color scheme work-up in twenty-four hours! That’s, like, *weeks* of work!”

I frowned. “That’s concerning.”

Natalie took a deep breath.

“And third...he called my designs amateurish.”

Her expression shifted back to wounded at the admission, and I suddenly wanted to throttle Clint.

“Interesting. In saying that, he also insulted *me*.”

“Right?” she asked, incredulous.

I focused on my laptop, “I’ll need to make some calls and set up meetings to get to the bottom of this. It’s going to take some time.”

“Or you could walk yourself down to my floor and see it firsthand!”

I’d never believed in the idea of “showing management’s investment by wandering around,” like I didn’t trust my employees to do their job if someone wasn’t looking over their shoulders. But maybe it was time to show my face, and if necessary, bust some skulls?

I studied Natalie. It had taken balls for her to come to me with this. I didn’t exactly appreciate her leapfrogging the normal chain of command for lodging complaints, but I could tell that she was at the end of her rope. I pushed back from my desk.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

The normal working buzz in the office quieted as Natalie and I headed for the elevator. I rarely showed my face outside my office, and I never consorted with underling new hires. Doing both probably set the internal gossip machine into overdrive.

Fantastic. Exactly what I *didn’t* need: people speculating what the beautiful newbie and the big boss were up to. I could feel the frown spreading across my face as I pushed the elevator call button.

We both seemed to remember in the same moment what had happened the last time we were alone in the elevator.

“I hope you’re planning to remain clothed this time,” I said, staring straight ahead at my reflection in the mirrored wall.

She sputtered for a second. “And I hope you manage to not ogle me.”

I whirled to face her. “Excuse me?”

“You looked at me like I was the last slice of bacon at an all-you-can-eat buffet!” Her eyebrows were knitted together angrily in a way that could almost be considered adorable if she wasn’t so damn infuriating.

“How could I not? You were waving your arms around like you *wanted* me to see how perfect you looked.”

She opened her mouth to respond, then froze, and I realized how what I’d said must’ve sounded. Pink flooded her cheeks.

“Let’s just focus on what’s going on with Clint, okay?” I grouched. I glanced down to adjust my sleeves so I wouldn’t have to meet her eyes again.

Damnit. *How* did this woman unnerve me so easily? I’d bedded supermodels and starlets without so much as a flicker in my pulse. But this woman... Something about her cracked my foundation, and I didn’t like it one bit.

The elevator doors slid open to the chaos that was an integral part of the creative process. If I had my way, the entire floor would’ve been gutted and Marie Kondo-ed, but Bernie made me swear I’d let the right brain team members keep things as they were.

I stepped in front of Natalie and took the lead through the piles of clothing on the ground in the hallway, gritting my teeth at the mess. There were probably thousands upon thousands of dollars’ worth of ideas among the discarded designs, both good and bad, but no one seemed to care.

“You don’t come down to this floor often, do you?” Natalie asked.

“I don’t. How did you know?”

She pointed up towards the speakers. “Music. Loud music. And no complaints!”

And it was then I realized that the throbbing in my head wasn’t just due to what was about to happen with Clint.

“Is this...” I began.

“Yup. Beyonce.” She pumped her fist in time to the beat, and for a moment I was brought back to the night in the shop, when she’d nearly mopped my face off. Natalie had been trouble since the moment I met her.

So why was I getting ready to fight for her?

We walked into the main studio space, and I felt like I was in a different world from the one I was used to. The floor with the executive offices radiated an atmosphere of quiet concentration, not the unfettered energy of the creative space. The oversized windows were draped with garlands and other glittery decorations from past fashion shows, and a few of the windows were papered over with design concepts for upcoming launches. There were more piles of clothing dotting the space, along with every variety of creative desk decoration. The room was the equivalent of an exploded box of crayons.

“James!” a voice boomed loudly enough to be heard over the bassline, setting my teeth on edge.

It was Clint from his bird’s-eye perch above the design floor, where he could oversee every aspect of what his team was up to.

I glanced up and gave him a terse nod.

He seemed to realize there was no way I was going to meet him in his space and headed down the metal staircase. As usual he was tricked out like a dandy in a gray three-piece suit and orange bow tie, so over the top that I half expected him to throw a bowler hat on top of his bald head as well. The man waxed his gray-speckled mustache into perfect points, so *how* did I not know he was a problem? He was practically cosplaying as a cartoon villain.

I noticed that he didn’t even glance at Natalie as he strutted across the room. Everyone hunkered down over their drafting tables as he walked by.

“What an honor! And what brings you to my humble abode today?” he asked.

“We need to talk,” I said simply, pointing to one of the glass walled conference rooms off the main design floor.

Now he shifted his eyes to Natalie, as if he sensed things were about to get real—and that it was her fault.

I was shocked she'd remained silent given how she usually responded to stress. Why was I hoping for a bit of snark from her?

Hold on. Did I *like* this woman's sass?

Natalie sat at the head of the table, a bold move because it forced Clint to make a decision; take the chair opposite her at the other end, or leave it for me? In a surprise move, he opted to stand with his arms crossed defiantly.

The man clearly didn't know what was in store for him.

"Sit," I said, motioning to a chair at the center of the table.

Clint's face shifted from mild disdain to a flicker of fear as he collapsed into a chair. "What's going on?"

"Do you have a problem with your newest team member?" I gestured to Natalie, who was impressively stone-faced.

He scowled. "No. How could I, at this point? She's barely been here a week."

"Agreed, how could you possibly judge her performance in such a short period, especially when she's still learning how things are done here?"

He nodded, still looking confused.

"That's why I found it so strange when Natalie came into my office to tell me that you belittled her in front of the rest of the team for not understanding company protocols."

Clint's head spun to Natalie and his expression darkened. "Why would you say —"

I held up my hand to cut him off. "I can talk to the rest of your team to corroborate her story, but I wanted to run it by you first."

He seethed silently.

"She also mentioned that you wanted a Branson-specific palette from her within twenty-four hours. Could *you* turn one around that quickly, Clint?"

"We're not discussing my abilities. We're talking about a former retail employee's challenges adjusting to life in a high-functioning corporate

department. *My* department.”

“*Your* department.” I repeated back to him. “In *my* company.”

I glanced at Natalie and could see the hint of a smile playing around her lips.

“Biggest question: what do you think about Miss Reynolds’ designs?” I asked.

His mouth opened and closed a few times like a fish on dry land, as if he was finally figuring out that he was headed for the gut bucket.

“They’re...they’re fine, for a beginner. They show a glimmer of promise, with the appropriate guidance from someone like me.”

I cocked my head at him. “Really? Is that what you told her?”

“I might’ve suggested a few changes,” he said and scoffed.

“I believe the word you used was ‘amateurish’?”

“*And* he called my gowns ‘department store prom rejects,’” Natalie added.

“But...critiquing is what I do. That’s my role. I’m quality control,” Clint sputtered, his face going a shade paler. “I call the shots.”

“Is that *really* your job, Clint? Or are you supposed to be guiding the creative team? Supporting them as they bring their sketches to life?”

“Supporting?” He laughed. “Please. They’re supposed to support *me*. Without my vision, this team would be a shambles! You seem to forget what was going down when I—” He stopped abruptly, as if finally remembering who he was talking to.

“Clint also implied that he has a problem with me because you hired me without sign-off from him,” Natalie said.

The hole he’d dug for himself was getting deeper by the minute.

Natalie and I locked eyes, as if finally understanding that we were on the same team. The warmth I read in her expression nearly knocked me off track.

No. Focus.

“Now hold on, I never said that.” Clint slammed his hand down on the table and Natalie jumped.

I didn’t respond as the sound echoed around the room.

“James, come on. Why are you doing this?” His voice took on a pleading tone.

“I’m not doing anything. You managed it all by yourself.” I turned to Natalie. “Would you mind sending Katrina in? She’s our last creative hire, about six months ago. I’d like to get her insights about her time with us.”

Natalie gave me a curt nod and stood up. Clint nearly tipped over his chair in his haste to beat her to the door.

“Hey, Clint, why don’t you give us the room? I’m really curious about how your team feels about you. I’m sure it’ll be...*educational*.”

His shoulders slumped and he walked out the door.

Over the next two hours I interviewed every member of the creative team while Clint tried not to get caught watching us over the ledge of his balcony. The issues that had been percolating were bigger than I’d realized, and I cursed myself for assuming that the situation was under control just because I hadn’t heard any complaints. More than a few people mentioned taking their concerns to HR, who sided with Clint without ever actually investigating the situation—and who never bothered to share any reports with me of any issues at all. Looked like HR could use a shakeup...but not as badly as the creative team.

After the last team member walked out I called Clint back to the conference room.

He walked in sans blazer, not seeming to realize that he’d sweated through his shirt. He took a seat opposite me and I steepled my hands and leveled my gaze at him.

“Interesting couple of hours. I learned quite a bit about the way things work around here. Your ‘management style,’” I made air quotes, “if you can call it that. Gaslighting, overworking, belittling, stealing designs...”

“C’mon, James. Don’t do this. We’re practically family. We have *history*,” he whined.

I nodded agreeably and watched his expression brighten. I was loyal to family, definitely, but the cousin of my brother’s witch of an ex-wife sure as hell didn’t count. Back when Christopher had been running the creative department, he’d hired the guy because he’d been too in love with Amanda to ever tell her no, but that certainly wasn’t a problem that *I* had. Oh, how I was going to enjoy his take-down.

“That we do. But what’s most important now is the fact that we don’t have a *future*. I’m terminating you, Clint, effective immediately.”

His mouth dropped open.

“You can either pack up your stuff and go quietly, or you can choose to be a dick and try to fight it. In that case, I’ll have security walk you out. Your choice.”

“Because of *her*?” he roared, pointing over his shoulder to where Natalie was working at her desk. “You’re firing me because of her? She’s *nothing*. Not even worth a second thought. She’s a waste of desk space!”

I clenched my fists under the table. “Clint...I think you need to stop talking. For your own good.”

For a second I thought he was going to burst into tears, but I quickly realized that he was powering up for a tantrum. He jumped to his feet, sending his chair crashing into the wall behind him.

“You are going to regret this, James Branson!” he screamed, pointing his finger at me. “I’ll... I’m going to...”

I drummed my fingers on the table, waiting for him to come up with a feasible way to injure me or my company.

Clint seemed to realize that he was powerless and stomped out of the room like a belligerent child. The rest of the floor froze to watch the show.

“Don’t look at me, you assholes!” he shrieked.

Natalie came rushing back in once Clint had climbed up the stairs to his

office, eyes bright. “Did you...”

I nodded. “I did. Way too late, according to the feedback.”

Something flickered across her face but she camouflaged it quickly. “Thank you.” She clutched her hands over her heart. “Thank you for listening to me. For believing me.”

“I figured you wouldn’t come barging into my office without a good reason.” I paused. “But that’s going to have to stop, got it?”

“Of course! I won’t have a reason now that he’s gone. I’m sure you’ll find someone perfect to replace him. You obviously know how to hire talent.” She gave me a half-smile and gestured to herself.

“Don’t worry, I already have someone in mind, at least for the interim. Not sure you’re going to approve, though.”

Her smile quickly turned into a frown. “Why would you say that? Who’s my new boss?”

I swept up the notes I’d taken during the meetings and straightened them into a tidy pile.

“You’re looking at him.”

NATALIE

Everyone in the design room seemed terrified.

It was our first team meeting since James fired Clint, and while we all felt relieved that he was gone, I could tell the damage from his reign of terror ran deep. No one wanted to say a word.

“No wrong answers here, folks,” James said from his place at the head of the table. “I promise you. We’re just brainstorming. Letting those creative juices flow.”

He was trying to sound friendly and approachable, but no one seemed to be buying it. I knew firsthand that he wasn’t as bad as Clint, but I guessed that he was just a distant figurehead to the rest of the team. All they *really* knew about him was that he’d fired Clint without hesitation—which probably didn’t make anyone feel all that great about their job security. Everyone around me was staring at their tablets, which were networked to the smartboard behind James.

I, on the other hand, was trying not to stare at *James*.

He still drove me absolutely batty, and his arrogance was truly incredible, but *damn* it...why did he make being a dick look so good? He’d rolled up the sleeves of his fitted dress shirt and his tanned forearms flexed every time he gestured. And he was wearing glasses! He’d had them on for a second when

I'd barged into his office to quit, but I'd been too upset to let how hot he looked in them register. Now I could appreciate how they made him look like a naughty professor. A sexy, too smart for his own good, full of himself, jackass, brainiac bosshole.

With an *incredible* ass.

"Ideas? Anyone?"

I realized that I'd been staring at James as I daydreamed, and now he was staring right back. I mean, I didn't blame him because I'd put a little extra effort in looking extra good, knowing that he was going to be running the meeting. We'd had too many encounters where he'd seen me frazzled or flustered, and I wanted to prove to him that I was capable of being polished and in control. And, well, the fact that my favorite dress dipped low in the cleavage area wasn't my fault. The man was already well acquainted with my breasts thanks to our elevator encounter.

"What about doing a clothing line based on the Pantone color of the year?" Lavonte suggested in a voice far quieter than his usual cheerful baritone while fiddling with his drafting wand.

"Yes! I like it!" James clapped his hands together loudly. "I'm not sure what the color is for this year, though. The concept is great, but we have to make sure it works."

"It's called Sand Dollar." Lavonte squirmed a little at being on the hot seat.

"Sand Dollar," James said, nodding thoughtfully. "I like that. Sounds beachy. Put it up on the smartboard so we can discuss it."

We could all map the Pantone color spectrum with our eyes shut, so a few people around the table shifted in their seats as they waited for the car crash to come.

"Ta-da," Lavonte said in a shaky voice, as Pantone 13-1106 filled the screen.

"Oh," James said. He pursed his lips, and I could tell he was fighting to find something positive to say. "Huh."

Sand Dollar was a color that could only be defined as "unforgiving." It was

the color choice of someone who wanted to blend in with sidewalks. It reminded me of lumpy cardigans, boring minimalist interior design, and tea with too much milk. Very few people could wear it and look good.

The James I was acquainted with was quick to shoot down anything that didn't fit with his vision, and I studied him as he tried to find an encouraging response. Could he do it?

“Well, Lavonte, that's, uh, that's definitely *sandy*,” he finally managed. “Team? What do we think?”

There were vague murmurs from around the table, and I could see Lavonte shrinking in his chair.

“I love the idea of working with the color of the year,” I volunteered in a clear voice, above the buzz. The rest of the team might be freaked out by James but I sure as hell wasn't. Maybe leading by example would help them realize that James wasn't all bad? “But not this one to start off with, though. I think we could make it a little more personal to Branson. What if we combined each color of the year with a retrospective from past collections? Pantone started doing it in 2000, so we could do a twenty year look back at our top designs from each year, rendered in that year's color. What was our best seller in 2000?”

I glanced around the table and Lavonte mouthed “thank you” to me.

“Seeing as I've been here the longest, I'm the company's unofficial archivist,” Rhea volunteered, raising her finger in the air. “Year 2000's top design was actually a throwback to our iconic Easy Dress.” She lowered her voice. “Which was a knockoff of Diane Von Furstenberg's wrap dress, but *shhhh!*”

“And the color of the year in 2000 was Cerulean Blue,” Lavonte added, turning the bland sandy smartboard screen to a brilliant sky blue. “How *gorgeous* would that be?” He quickly sketched a figure over the color and within a few minutes it looked like it was ready for production.

“Okay, now we're getting somewhere,” James said with a satisfied nod. “Put that concept at the top of the list. What else?”

The hubbub around the table died down again. What was the deal? Why was

everyone so darn afraid to show some creativity? I felt like I couldn't turn mine off, so I threw my hand in the air again.

"You don't have to raise your hand, Natalie," James chastised lightly. "Go."

"This is a total longshot concept," I began. "And it's probably not doable —"

"Just say it," James sighed. He'd kept his frustration in check for Lavonte, but here it was again, rearing its ugly head just for me. I thought we'd reached a truce? What the hell was going on?

"Haute couture," I spat out, glaring at him.

His eyebrows shot up.

Yes. Take that.

"You really think we can find an audience for bespoke fashion?"

"I think we all know that handmade, one-of-a-kind clothing is created by designers to grab attention for their workhorse lines. We have enough gifted designers in this room that we could come up with an amazing capsule collection that'll get us a ton of press, and then we lean on the ready-to-wear fashion that's our bread and butter."

The buzz around the table picked up as the designers discussed what they could contribute to a special collection. Branson was known for expensive, elegant clothing lines but couture was next level, something they'd never considered.

"Not bad," James finally said, in the world's biggest understatement. "That's a big change in direction that I—I mean *we*, need to think about. Anyone else?"

"I'm not done," I said, sitting up straighter. "I think we should hire a house ambassador."

It was out of left field, but a few people clapped and cheered.

"Is that a fact?" James said, leveling his gaze on me. "You think we need a face to represent the Branson brand? And who would you pick?"

I shrugged. “I have a few ideas but I figured you, as the arm candy for supermodels, would have opinions.”

Lavonte snorted, then slapped his hand over his mouth.

“*Excuse me?*” James asked, glaring at me. “Arm candy?”

I’d clearly hit a nerve but I wasn’t backing down. “You date models. Lots of them. So my assumption was that you probably have thoughts about who is and isn’t appropriate for Branson to partner with.”

“Arm candy,” he repeated, venom in his tone.

Ooh, he hated that! Well, good. From what I’d seen, there were few things that could shake his reserve, and I felt downright giddy at the thought that I’d stumbled on one of them. I wondered what name I could throw at him as a suggestion that would rile him the most.

Rhea had filled me in on his history with the one-named supermodel Heidi, who seemed most at home stalking catwalks in lingerie. The woman was literally perfect in every way, except for the fact that she gave tell-all interviews trashing James every time they broke up, which, according to my quick research, happened quite a lot back when they were together.

Our eyes were locked in a standoff, and I could see his jaw flexing, like he was grinding his teeth at me. James was probably used to people buckling when he fixed his ridiculously clear blue eyes on them, but I held my ground. The back of my neck inexplicably tingled under the weight of his gaze, and it felt like excitement, not fear. There definitely was a part of me that *liked* locking horns with the big man. And since the phrase “arm candy” had gotten such a delicious reaction, I couldn’t resist getting in another crack.

“Is there a better word choice?” I asked with mock innocence. “Sugar Daddy? Benefactor? PR couple?”

Everyone at the table seemed to suck in a breath at the same time.

“Let’s leave my personal life out of the equation,” he finally said, his tone making it clear that I needed to shut the hell up.

“Skyler Honeywell,” someone piped up, and we all turned to look at Jacinda.

“She would be incredible. She has a huge social media following, and the girl knows how to dress. And work the camera. She’s got a look unlike anyone else on the runway.”

James picked up his phone. “I don’t know her...”

I let a laugh slip out and his eyes shot to me. I pretended to be busy sketching. A photo of a beautiful woman with black almond-shaped eyes and tanned skin popped onto the smartboard.

“She’s very fashion-forward,” James said as he studied the image of the undeniably gorgeous woman. “But the tattoos... I’m not sure that’s the direction —”

“That’s the *exact* direction Branson should be going,” I interrupted. “Skyler represents everything that’s new and unexpected in fashion. That’s where Branson needs to be.”

I was shocked when applause broke out around me, and when I looked at James, he seemed to be as well.

He let out a long sigh. “Seems I’m outnumbered, then. I need to check the feasibility of hiring someone for an ambassador role. In the meantime, it’s a go to start the groundwork for the Pantone project.” James gathered his things to leave, then paused. “Natalie.”

The room went silent as we all waited to see how he’d retaliate against me.

“Yes, sir?”

He winced at the honorific.

“Your couture idea is our lead project. I want your theme by the end of next week, along with your first sketch. Once I approve it the rest of the team can begin their work on it.”

Everyone at the table went wild and I beamed with pride. My pie-in-the-sky dream concept was going to be a reality! What James didn’t know was that I’d been working on it since my first day, and I already had the theme and half a dozen sketches. I wasn’t sure if my idea was going to get approved, given how daring it was for such a traditional design house. I’m sure James

was envisioning something easy and pretty, like “Think Pink” or “Gowns Galore.”

My theme was “Deconstruction.” I had no illusions that it would be an easy sell...but that was a battle for another day. Right now, I just wanted to celebrate the bliss of having someone actually take my ideas seriously.

The mood lifted even more once the elevator doors closed on James. Someone cranked the music back up and we all talked over each other, trying to come up with the most fanciful couture concepts.

“My dear.” Rhea made her way over to me and clasped my hands in hers. “You worked a miracle just now.”

“No, not at all.” I frowned. “That was spitballing that happened to stick. I got lucky.”

“It’s bigger than that.” She shook her head, her massive earrings jangling. “It’s like you broke a curse or something. Everyone is excited again!”

I looked around at my colleagues, and it did seem like they were coming to life. While the air in the creative floor had always been charged, it was because they were all like frightened animals, scuttling around to avoid an attack. Now, everywhere I looked I saw smiles. But I wasn’t about to take credit for the shift. As much as I hated to admit it, James was a part of it too, for being open and willing to listen to us instead of shaming us for suggesting crazy ideas. After all, design was supposed to be where the beautiful insanity happened.

“This is how it used to be, before Clint took over,” Rhea explained. “Christopher was such an incredible mentor.”

“Who’s that?”

“Oh, you don’t know? James’s older brother Christopher used to run creative. Everyone adored him. And he was so talented. But something happened with him, and everything went downhill so fast. It was heartbreaking to watch, but we were all powerless.”

I was surprised to learn about a beloved Branson. He had to be the sunshine to James’s storm clouds. “What went wrong? What happened to him?”

Rhea wrung her hands and glanced around the room. “I wish I knew, because then maybe I could do something to help him. He just...*changed*. Christopher went from this friendly, charming guy to...a shadow. No-showing for important meetings. Missing deadlines. It didn’t make sense because Christopher was the quintessential perfectionist. Then one day, we came to work to find an email saying that he was taking an indefinite leave of absence. The Bransons circled their wagons around him and never told any of us a thing. Clint had been his second in command, so he was the natural choice to step up and take over. He wasn’t that bad before—not great, mind you, but not bad. But it was like once he got a taste of power...”

“It turned him into a tyrant?” I offered with a half-smile.

“Exactly. Everything went sour after that. But now...I feel hopeful for the first time in a long time. And James isn’t that bad at all. He seems to genuinely care about the company, and us. I’ve only heard rumors about him, and it turns out they were greatly exaggerated.”

I laughed. “I’m not so sure about that.”

Rhea grinned at me. “He seems to really like you.”

“Please! He can barely tolerate me.” I fiddled with my tablet, a blush tickling my temples.

“Hm.” Rhea pursed her lips. “That’s not how it looked to me. But what do I know? I’m just a crazy old lady.”

She gave me a mischievous wink and headed back into the throng of designers, leaving me to wonder if she might be right about the man in charge.

JAMES

I'd skipped dinner again.

I glanced at the clock on my laptop. How was it already close to ten? I'd promised myself that I was going to head out on time—or as close to “on time” as was possible for me—and then stop by to see Christopher on my way home. But doing two jobs meant triple the work.

Not that I minded. Getting lost in my work was safe. I could control those little columns in the spreadsheets. And god knows I liked staying in control.

My stomach grumbled, but I still had a little more to do, and I wasn't one to leave a task half-finished. Given our prime location, there were a dozen five-star restaurants just blocks from the front door, or I could have something delivered, but I didn't have the inclination to invest the time to do either. Maybe a snack from the cafeteria would hold me over? One of those tiny bags of trail mix or salted almonds that Lorraine insisted everyone enjoyed?

I strode towards the elevator, relishing in the fact that the space was empty. I liked the peace. The times I had to venture down to creative left me feeling jangly. *How* did those people work in such an upside-down environment?

Those people. The elevator doors slid shut and, like always, I was reminded of the shirtless spitfire I couldn't seem to stop thinking about—and not just because of her incredible ideas. The truth was, the woman had also been

invading my dreams lately, sometimes brandishing a mop at me. In the most recent one she was swaying seductively in just a skirt and bra, her eyes locked on mine. When she reached behind her back to unclasp the bra, I'd woken up with a start, only to find myself dealing with a rock-hard cock, like I was a horny teenager again.

Even just thinking of her now as the elevator sped down was enough to feel the telltale pull between my legs. I hoped I'd been discreet the time I'd caught her without her shirt, because all I'd wanted to do was stare at her perfect tits. I'd noticed that she didn't exactly cower in the corner during our elevator ride, which suggested to me that she didn't completely mind the fact that I'd caught her topless. And there was that one moment when she straightened her back and seemed to *invite* me to stare.

I glanced down. Fuck. I hoped my hardness would calm by the time the doors opened.

Enough.

Thankfully, there was no one to witness me adjusting my pants when the elevator doors opened. I forced myself to think about projections as I rounded the corner to the kitchen, but screeched to a stop when I realized that I wasn't alone.

I absolutely could not escape the woman. What the hell was Natalie still doing here?

She had her back to the entryway and was bent over something on the table, wearing gigantic headphones that blocked out the world, so I could tell she had no clue I was behind her. As usual, Natalie was wearing an outfit that defied explanation but was also somehow totally her. Tonight she was in a cropped jean jacket covered in military-inspired patches with a very short sheer black shirtdress under it, and combat boots. The woman transformed every day, sometimes looking like she'd stepped out of CBGBs in the '80s, and others like she worked in a hippie food co-op. I walked over, half-expecting her to turn around to face me like she could *feel* my presence, but she was so immersed in whatever she was doing in her sketchbook that I managed to walk right up to her without her sensing that I was there.

I peered over her shoulder and discovered her sketching swimwear, one of

the few categories Branson didn't carry. There were three versions of the same print on the page, from a tiny bikini, to a more modest tankini, to a full coverage swim dress. All were rendered on size-appropriate bodies, which I appreciated. One of my biggest pet peeves was how some design houses showed their plus-sized garments on non-plus-sized bodies. It not only did a disservice to an important part of the client base by making them feel invisible, it also didn't realistically depict how the garment would look on a woman in the size category.

The music in Natalie's headphones must've shifted, because she started swinging her ass like a stripper. I took a half-step backwards, but it was too late, she'd gone into a full tilt grind and my crotch was the accidental beneficiary. The moment we touched, we jumped apart for totally different reasons.

Natalie screamed and whipped around to face me.

"WHAT THE HELL?" she yelled as she ripped her headphones off. "Stalker!"

"Sorry." I held my hands up to placate her. "I apologize, that was my fault."

"You're damn right it was your fault!" she panted, clearly riled up by the shock. "Why are you sneaking around again?"

"I wasn't sneaking," I replied calmly, even though I didn't like her tone. "And remember whose name is on the sign out front. I can go wherever I want."

"Oh, so that includes *hovering* over your employees while they work?"

I pointed towards her sketchbook. "We both know that's not work. Branson doesn't have a swim line."

Natalie frowned at me, shamed into silence.

"It's after hours, so it's fine," she finally said.

"What's it for?" I asked. "Not a competitor, I hope."

She plopped onto the chair at the table. "School," she admitted. "I was sketching the couture stuff, but it triggered an idea, so I just switched gears. I

guess I got caught up in it and lost track of time.”

“Do you mind if I look?”

Natalie shrugged and pushed her sketchbook towards me.

“You can flip through,” she said.

I turned a page and saw that the next one had six swimsuit designs, all featuring patterns that were unlike anything you’d normally see at the beach.

“Explain the assignment to me,” I said, leaning in closer to study them.

“We’re supposed to unite two aspects of design that don’t normally go together, so I picked fine china and swimwear.”

“What?” I chuckled at the unique concept. “Seriously?”

“Look closer at the prints,” she said.

I studied them. “The blue is a…”

“Traditional Wedgewood pattern. And the brown ones above it are Woodland Spode. See the little rabbit on the bodice?”

Her voice was soft, like she was a little shy about her drawings. I remembered how proprietary she’d been about the sketchbook when she realized that I’d found it. Now, it almost felt like she was sharing her journal with me. I was touched that she was letting me see something that she normally kept private.

“Absolutely amazing,” I said, hoping she could hear my sincerity. I wanted her to know how talented I thought she was. “Really unique.”

“You sound surprised.”

I frowned at her. “Not at all. That’s pure appreciation. And a little awe at your ingenuity. I already knew you had the spark, that’s why I hired you. The creative meeting just proved me right. And now this…” I gestured to her sketchpad. “You keep surprising me. How did you get your start?”

She looked almost girlish as she grinned at me, so different from the strong, combative woman I usually saw. “Designing was my escape when I was

little. Let's just say my childhood was tough, so I disappeared into my sketches. I redesigned every Disney princess's wardrobe!" She laughed. "Then when I got a little older, I started doing these funky drawings on white T-shirts with a Sharpie. My classmates actually bought them. It was my first taste of turning my art into commerce, and I was hooked. And now look at me. Living the dream."

I appreciated her enthusiasm. It hit me that *I* was the reason she was living her dream...that crazy night in the stockroom had led to her new beginning.

"You deserve it. You're really talented, Natalie. This swim collection is something else."

"I'm glad to hear you approve. I need to ace this class, and my professor is hard to impress. Have you heard of MG?"

I shook my head. "The name sounds familiar, but I don't know the details. He's a designer, right? Does lots of private label stuff for discount chains? What's he all about?"

She leaned forward onto her elbows on the table, and I had to work hard to keep my eyes from darting down the front of her dress.

"He's an egomaniac, that's for sure. And he can be a little too hands-on for my liking."

"How so? Does he make changes to your designs, right on the page?" I asked. "Because I imagine that's quite an invasion."

"I wish." Her face screwed up like she wasn't comfortable talking about it. "He's more literally *hands* on. He finds excuses to touch me, and I hate it. When he looks at my book, he gets way too close, and he always tries to massage my shoulders." She shuddered as if she could still feel his hands on her.

I felt an inexplicable protectiveness swell inside of me. "Do you need someone to —"

"I'm fine." She cut me off a little too quickly. "I can take care of myself."

I realized that I'd overstepped and shifted my focus back to her sketchbook. I

turned past some rough concepts that were undoubtedly for the couture project and ended up on a doodle page.

“You’ve got a solid grasp on fine art figure drawing as well,” I said, noting the various people she’d sketched.

I looked closer at the drawing of a shirtless man on the top corner of the page. Unlike the other people she’d drawn, Natalie had spent time on the details, adding shadows and depth to it. The more I studied it, the more familiar the person seemed, until I figured out that the man in the sketch looked a lot like *me*. I debated calling her on it.

“Have you ever heard of automatic writing?” she asked, seemingly oblivious to what she’d just shown me.

I shook my head.

“It’s writing without conscious intention. You put your pen down and let instinct take over. I do that sometimes when I’m sketching. I don’t focus on anything, I just let my hand guide the drawing instead of my brain. It helps me if I’m stuck. That’s what I did on this page.”

I nodded slowly and glanced back at the book. So Natalie’s subconscious was filled with thoughts of me...shirtless? I guess we were even, since her topless doppelganger kept invading my dreams.

I cleared my throat and tried to remember what our Q4 numbers were looking like. Anything to keep from dwelling on the fact that Natalie and I were nearly shoulder to shoulder, and I kept catching hints of her gardenia perfume whenever she moved.

I needed to shift our focus back to business. There was no way either one of us could afford to get tangled up in something sticky, despite how much I wanted her.

“How’s the couture project coming along?” I asked, taking a half-step away.

“Phenomenal, actually,” she said, beaming at me. “I’m having so much fun with it. I can’t wait to present it.” She paused. “By the way, you need to know that everyone is really happy now that Clint’s gone. Thank you for... well, for listening to me. I’m not used to that.”

My heart cracked open at the softness in her voice. I got the feeling that Natalie didn't let people in easily, and I was honored that she felt like she could be real with me.

"I hope you feel you can come to me any time," I said.

She giggled. "Honestly? I wasn't sure about it at first. The 'hysterical' comment hit a nerve. I almost walked out."

I closed my eyes and winced. "Yeah, that was a mistake. I blame Bernie—my grandmother. She used the word a ton before we understood how un-PC it is. It's still trapped in my lexicon, but I'm trying to stop saying it."

"The women of Branson appreciate it." She laughed. "Hey, speaking of the old guard, Rhea and I got to talking about the way things used to be, pre-Clint."

I felt my back teeth start to clench. I thought the world of Rhea, but she was an unrepentant gossip. "Oh?"

Natalie nodded. "She talked about how wonderful your brother was, and how much the creative team loved him. Chris?"

"Christopher," I corrected quickly with a nod. "Yeah, he was quite a visionary. *Is* a visionary," I corrected myself.

"Right, which is why I was thinking that he might be a great resource for the Pantone project," she said in an excited rush. "Would he be open to chatting about which designs he thinks would be best for it? A quick conference call with the team? Or even just me. Whatever works for him."

Natalie was circling close to a part of my life that I kept walled off. She didn't belong there.

Suddenly, the spell between us was broken. The overhead lights felt too bright, and I swore I could hear them buzzing, which aggravated the headache I only then realized I had.

"That's not an option," I said smoothly, taking a few steps backwards towards the door.

She furrowed at me. "But he'd be such a big help. We could keep the call

super short, like ten minutes —”

“I said *no*.”

It came out sharp, and Natalie’s eyes went wide at my tone. I felt a twinge of remorse, but I soon stifled it. She needed to know that getting Christopher mixed up in Branson business wasn’t an option. My brother was still recovering; he didn’t need the daily drama of the company’s battle to stay in business.

“Fine,” she said, her face crumpling. “Sorry I asked.”

“He’s busy,” I said stiffly. “He doesn’t have the bandwidth to get sucked back into Branson.”

“Okay,” Natalie managed.

“I’m going to head back to my office.” I turned to go, but then I caught sight of the way her head was bowed like I’d reprimanded her.

“Don’t forget to call security if you need an escort out to your car,” I added, my voice a little softer. “It’s late.”

“Yup, got it.” She flipped her book open and went back to sketching without another word.

I wrestled with myself as I walked back to my office. On the one hand, I was admittedly disappointed that I’d gone ahead and ruined what had been a fine conversation. We were actually getting along for a change, like we were literally on the same page.

But maybe the shock back to reality was exactly what I’d needed. It was a reminder that we weren’t partners, weren’t friends. I was her boss, and she was my employee. There was nothing more to it than that. Between looking after my family and working to keep the company afloat—while doing two jobs and trying to squeeze more hours out of every day—I didn’t have time for anything more, no matter how much I wanted it.

And oh, how I wanted it...

NATALIE

The reply email popped up in my inbox and I squealed. I glanced around the design floor to make sure no one noticed, because what I was doing had to remain top secret. I'd gone against my better judgment, and now it was time to find out if it was going to pay off. I held my breath and opened the message.

Hi Natalie,

What a nice surprise to get your note. I still think about the creative team all the time, and it sounds like it's grown quite a bit since I was last there. Welcome to Branson—if my brother hired you, then you've got to be a superstar.

I blushed.

I love the idea of a color-based retrospective and I wish I could help, but the early years of designs only exist on paper. I meant to have them digitized but never got around to it. That said, since many of them are my work, I still have them in my possession. Unfortunately, I'm not comfortable sending them via mail or messenger since they're fragile archival documents. I can send you photos of them, but you won't get all of the nuance. Sorry I can't be of more help. Please let me know if that works for you.

Sincerely,

Christopher Branson

Okay, it was a start! I bit my lip as I weighed my options. Do I accept photos, or...go big? I started typing before I could second guess myself.

Hi Christopher,

Thanks for getting back to me so quickly! I'm super interested in getting my hands on those drawings so I can really examine them and then do your work justice in the retrospective. Would it be possible to maybe swing by your place to see them? And then if you trust me, maybe I could transport them to the office to be digitized? No pressure, and thanks in advance!

Best,

Natalie

My heart pounded as I pushed send because I knew I was going behind my boss's back, and if he found out, he wasn't going to be pleased. The way James had shut me down last night made it clear he didn't want me interacting with his brother at all, but Christopher was a grown man. If he didn't want to work with me, he could say as much. He didn't need his brother making the call.

And if all went according to plan, James would never even know.

The rest of the day flew by despite the fact that I kept refreshing my email, waiting for a reply from Christopher. I was about to admit defeat as I packed up to get ready to go to class, only to check one last time and get rewarded by a response from him.

Sure, you can come to my place to see them. Tonight works for me any time after eight. I'm in Hoyt Towers. Just call my cell when you get here.

His number was listed by his signature. Success!

I rushed off to class on a high that lasted until I was getting ready to walk out of the classroom, when MG cornered me. My hackles went up, but I tried to hide my discomfort with him. I wasn't about to jeopardize my grade by offending my mega-famous instructor. Tonight he looked a little like a bridge troll, his longish brown hair more disheveled than normal and his vintage

Gordon Lightfoot T-shirt obscured by a variety of scarves around his neck. His fans tried to claim his messy look was his unique style, but to me he always looked like he'd just woken up and thrown on whatever was on his bedroom floor.

“Nat, girl, you outdid yourself with those swim sketches,” he said as he reached out to clasp my elbow. “I’m really impressed with you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. This was fine, I guess. The touching I could do without, but at least it was my arm and not my shoulders.

“Thank you, it was a fun project.” I tried to maneuver myself so that I was closer to the door.

“Has anyone ever told you that you could model your own designs?” He looked me up and down slowly. “Because I see it. You in that little Wedgewood bikini?” He shuddered. “I can only imagine!”

I laughed self-consciously. “Oh, no, that’s not my thing. My roommate, on the other hand, is a personal trainer. Whenever I need a body, I count on her.”

He laughed. “I’d count on *your* body. If you’ve got it, why not use it?”

I glanced towards the lone person left in the classroom, hoping for an interruption, but Bradley had headphones on and was oblivious.

“Not gonna happen.” I laughed again but it came out strained. How the hell was I going to get out of this? “Anyway, I should —”

“Listen, I have some thoughts about your work I’d love to share with you. Let’s go grab a drink.”

As he stared at me I wondered if my grade would be in jeopardy if I turned him down. It was so unfair! Bradley didn’t have to fend off our instructor. Thankfully, I had an excuse.

“Sorry, but I have a meeting in twenty minutes. Actually, I need to run. But thanks for saying nice things about my work. I’m thrilled you like it.”

I sidestepped around him with a wave before he could respond and jogged down the hallway, breathing with relief. Now it was on to the next potentially stressful event: showing up at a stranger’s apartment at night.

I dialed Steph on my way over to Christopher's place. "Mr. Touchy-Feely did it again. And this time he asked me to get a drink!"

"Nooo," she groaned in commiseration. "How the hell are you going to make it through this semester?"

"I know!" I pouted into the phone. "Maybe I should stop washing my hair and wearing deodorant on class nights?"

"He might like you *au naturale* too. I'd be careful."

"Speaking of being careful, I'm about to do something risky. I'm going over to the original creative director's apartment to look at his old sketches. I wanted you to know, in case I go missing."

"Natalie, what the hell? It's late! Do you even know him?"

"I know of him...everyone in the department says he was the nicest guy ever."

"*Was* the nicest guy," she chastised. "He doesn't work there now. There's got to be a reason why. For someone who's really smart you sure do some dumb shit."

For a second, I felt uneasy—but then I pushed it aside. "Don't freak me out. I'll be fine. But just in case, he lives in Hoyt Towers."

"Fancy," Steph replied. "Maybe he'll use a silk rope to strangle you."

"Stephanie Marie Riggins! *Stop it!*" I scolded.

Ten minutes later I was standing at his door with my heart hammering away in my chest. The doorman had checked me in, so I had another witness.

Footsteps, then fussing with a few locks, and the door swung open.

"Hey there, you must be Natalie."

My nerves calmed immediately.

Christopher Branson was a golden retriever to his brother's German shepherd—a shaggy-haired, smiling, mess of a man in sweats and a stained blue T-shirt. I obviously didn't know him, but there was something about his energy

that instantly put me at ease.

“Hi, Christopher, it’s so great to meet you! You have a giant fan club at Branson. I feel like I already know you.”

He flushed, eyes dropping to the ground as he shook my hand, looking embarrassed at the compliment. “Well, thank you. That’s nice. C’mon in.”

I followed him into the impressive space and noticed every lamp was on, like he was aware that I might feel a little weird about coming over to his place alone at night.

“Can I get you something to drink? I have every type of water available, half a dozen different juices, kombucha, tea, coffee...”

“Wow, you’re really stocked up,” I said with a laugh.

His flush darkened, but his smile widened. “Yeah, I have some help in that department. An overly involved delivery person. She keeps encouraging me to try new stuff, like celery water. Why is that even a thing?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Oof, no thanks. I’ll just take a glass of good old-fashioned tap water, please.”

“Everything is spread out on the table, go take a look,” he called from the kitchen.

I walked over to the massive circular table under a modern chandelier and found a treasure trove of work, all in pristine condition despite how old they were.

“How can I tell who designed them?” I asked as I looked through the stack. “The signatures are hard to read. Does that say Adam?”

“If you flip them over you’ll see background details like who designed it, the date created, and which collection the design was included in. The earliest ones were by my predecessor Armando Amoroso, who was hired by my grandmother.”

I flipped over a drawing of a white fit-and-flare sundress. “This sketch is forty years old!”

Christopher placed my glass of water at the far end of the table. “Yeah, it’s crazy because we could produce that dress right now and it would sell out.”

I went through the drawings carefully. “Are they all in order?”

He nodded. “All of Armando’s stuff is in that pile, and mine is in the other.”

As much as I loved looking at the vintage designs, I moved over to Christopher’s work since it was the reason why I was there.

The one on top was of a woman in a gray business suit, wearing sunglasses and a badass attitude.

“Damn, I don’t want to mess with her.”

“Yeah, that was our ‘Women Who Work’ line. Hugely popular.”

I checked out a few more drawings, then stopped to glance up at him. Christopher’s expression was sad, almost wistful.

“These are incredible,” I said. “You have such a gift.”

He gave me a tight smile. “Thanks.”

“Do you miss it?” I asked softly, aware that it came close to prying.

He stared at the designs fanned out in front of me before answering. “Yeah. I do.”

“Why don’t you come back?”

I was pushing my luck, but everything Rhea had said about the old days with Christopher sounded so great. I wanted that for the creative department again. If the problems that had caused him to leave could be fixed, then maybe there was a chance he could come back. So I wasn’t about to let the moment slip away without at least trying to get to the bottom of what had gone wrong. It wasn’t like James was going to tell me.

“I’m not in a place where I can even think about that.” He sighed. “I hit a rough patch a while back, and I’m still getting on my feet.”

“Was it work stuff?”

He let out a harsh sigh. “Not at first. I was married and let’s just say that it was a challenging relationship. Between trying to keep my now-ex-wife happy, which felt like a full-time job, and working my real job at Branson, I got pretty overwhelmed. I wound up doing some stuff that I’m not proud of, and I uh, I had to take some time away to deal with it. I’m still working my way back to stability.”

I nodded. There was no way I was going to keep asking questions about something that was obviously still painful for him.

“I’m lucky, though. My little brother is my very own life coach. He looks out for me.”

I managed to hide my shock. *This* I really couldn’t resist digging into. “Seriously?”

“Hard to believe, right? I know how he comes across, trust me. Has he insulted you yet?”

“Oh, maybe a few times.” I grinned at Christopher. “He told me I can’t sing, he called me hysterical. You know, stuff like that.”

“Yup, that’s James. But I’ll have you know that he’s a gigantic softie underneath it all.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“I’m serious. He might seem like this no-nonsense businessman, but the only reason he works so hard is to make sure his family is taken care of.”

I felt a pinch in my chest at the mention of family. How lucky the Bransons were to have each another.

“And if he sent you here that means he really trusts you,” Christopher continued.

I hoped my face wasn’t as red as it felt. “Oh, I, uh, I’m sort of diving into this project on my own. We didn’t actually talk about me coming over.”

It was in that moment that I realized I was going to have to come clean with James and let him know what I’d done. Hopefully Christopher would go to bat for me if necessary.

“Even better. He loves a self-starter,” Christopher said.

Why did my heart stutter out of rhythm at the thought of James loving *anything* about me? The man was a bosshole through and through...wasn't he? I thought I'd taken his measure, but if Christopher was right, then I hadn't met the real James Branson yet.

“Speaking of being a self-starter...would you feel comfortable with me taking these designs back to the office to be added to our archives? I promise I'll treat them like museum docent.”

“Yeah. That would be incredible. We're way behind on that sort of stuff, so thank you for taking the lead.” Christopher smiled at me. “I can tell already that you're a phenomenal addition to the team.”

I blushed again as I wondered how in the world two such different men could be brothers.

NATALIE

The hand traveling up my thigh set off sparks along my skin.

We weren't supposed to be doing this. It was wrong, but it felt so right. My body was aching for him.

His breath was hot against my neck, and each kiss was a brand. James was *claiming* me.

“Do you want me to stop?” he rasped in my ear. He nipped my earlobe and my head fell back from the sheer pleasure of it all.

Did I? My brain listed all of the reasons why I needed to push him away and be done with him forever, but I was desperate for his touch.

His mouth found mine again, and as we kissed, our lips betrayed the need we both felt. I arched against him, my nimble fingers searching for his skin beneath his velvet vest.

Velvet?

“No matter what happens after, know that my thoughts will always be filled with memories of you. The soft skin of your breasts, the warmth between your legs, begging for my attention...”

His fingertips finally brushed against my soft folds, and I bit back a cry. It

was the first time he was touching me, but James was playing me like a maestro. I felt ready to unravel almost immediately.

“If you were still in your petticoat, I wouldn’t be able to do this,” he said as he stroked me, gentling my legs wider apart.

Hold on. Petticoat?

James must have sensed hesitation because he pulled away, his eyes stormy. “May I continue my journey?”

I was about to answer but everything went sluggish, like I was underwater and struggling back to the surface. Someone was yelling at me to hurry up, and it didn’t sound at all like James.

I opened my eyes and slapped off my alarm.

It was just a dream. My hand was shoved in my pajama bottoms.

I wanted to scream out in frustration. It was the third time I’d had a rake dream with James replacing the star of the novel, and the third time it had ended before I could get off. I was so horny I could barely see straight.

My fingers caressed my stomach as I tried to put myself back in the dreamy headspace, but my alarm went off again, effectively killing the mood for good.

Lavonte texted me on the way to the office with a skull emoji, saying the “vibes were off.” He didn’t respond when I asked for details, so I prepared myself for whatever was going down. As always, I stopped in the kitchen first thing for a cup of coffee and ran into Rhea.

“Did you hear?” she whispered in a conspiratorial voice, glancing around the room even though it was obvious that we were alone.

“Lavonte texted and said something is up, but he wouldn’t tell me what’s going on. Fill me in. The stress is killing me.”

She looked around again. “Have you seen Lorraine lately?”

It took me a second to connect the name with James’s assistant. I shook my head. “I don’t really know her, except passing by her desk a few times.”

“Well, she’s been up to something. Or should I say *someone*. Turns out she’s pregnant!”

I frowned in confusion. “Isn’t she, like, in her mid-forties?”

“Oh yes, she is.” Rhea nodded, clearly enjoying being the office newsie. “And it gets better; she had an affair with Tony in vendor relations!”

“No way!” I gasped. “They’re both married!”

“Indeed they are. *Quelle scandale!*” Rhea pursed her lips in a prim expression. “Since she’s a geriatric pregnancy, she needs to go on bed rest for the final four months, so James is down an assistant. Worst time for it too since he’s doing two jobs and trying to hire a replacement for Clint. He is *not* going to be fun to have around.”

She was right. James had been doing his best to keep all the balls in the air, but it was clear the strain of trying to be all things to all people was wearing on him. Not that he’d admit it. We all noticed the emails time stamped as being sent at two in the morning, which meant that the guy was basically working nonstop.

I pondered how the news was going to impact our day-to-day lives. It wasn’t like James hung around the creative floor, but he did pop in throughout the week, and we had a group check-in meeting every Friday morning. Was his typical grumbly mood going to turn darker due to the stress?

Rhea and I gossiped our way back to our floor and as I settled into my workspace, an absolutely insane idea started flitting around my brain. There was no way I could commit to it, and I tried to bat the concept away, but the more I attempted to talk myself out of it the stronger the pull to go for it became.

It all came down to the fact that I loved everything about my job now that Clint was gone. The creativity, the freedom, my colleagues, the *paycheck*... I was right where I needed to be. But fashion was a fickle business, and talent was easy to cycle through since there were so many other hungry designers out there dying for a position like mine. And it wasn’t like James owed me anything. He could throw me out on my ass if he wanted to. If he wound up constantly in a bad mood because of all the extra work on his shoulders, the

odds of him being in a firing state of mind seemed high. And who would he target? Gee, maybe the girl who's been arguing with him since the day they met?

But what if I made myself indispensable to Branson, and more importantly, to James? Then there'd be no way to get tossed aside like I didn't matter. I had too much experience with the feeling, and I never wanted to be in that position again, especially now that it felt like I'd found a home on the Branson team. Besides, I'd seen what his go-to response was to an unexpected gap in the workforce—he stepped up to fill it himself. Surely, that was an approach he'd respect in others, too.

“What are you up to, woman?” Lavonte asked as he walked by my desk. “You’ve been staring into space since you got here. You’re planning something.”

I grinned at him. “I’ve got a crazy idea.”

He chuckled. “I like that about you. Seems to happen quite a bit. I mean, who else would invite themselves over to the reclusive Christopher Branson’s apartment? You’ve got balls, girl.”

It was exactly the reminder I needed. “Why thank you, Lavonte! You’re right, I *do* have balls. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be back in a bit with some hot goss.”

He did a little shimmy. “Oh yes, mama, bring me all the gossip!”

Five minutes later I was once again standing at my boss’s doorway feeling a little shaky. Was it because I’d had a sex dream about him? Possibly. More likely it was the risk I was about to take.

A chance to make myself the most important member of his team, despite what it would do to my workload. But honestly, before I’d gotten the promotion, I was working three jobs on top of school. It wouldn’t be *that* hard to have school on top of just *two* jobs. I glanced over at Lorraine’s empty desk and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

I strode into his office with my head high and my shoulders back. “Good

morning.”

James scowled at me from behind his laptop. Whatever he was doing certainly had him in a bad mood, but I was about to change everything for him.

“What is it? I’m in the middle of something,” he barked, gesturing to his screen.

I ignored his tone. “I think you’re going to want to hear this. I have good news for you. I found a replacement for Lorraine.”

He frowned. “Already? Who is it?”

“You’re looking at her.”



I stared at Natalie, trying to ignore the fact that she was perfectly turned out in a short black-and-white minidress that was modeled after one of our most popular ’70s designs. Had she made it herself, from the pattern in our archives? It fit like it had been sewn right onto her body. I was so focused on cataloging what she was wearing that what she said didn’t even register at first.

“Excuse me?” I finally managed. “What are you going on about?”

“Oh, come on, focus, James!” She frowned at me. “I said that I was stepping up to be Lorraine’s temporary replacement. To help you.”

What? No, that wouldn’t do at all.

“Well, that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” I shot back, ignoring the way my pulse ratcheted up a few notches at the thought of us working that closely together. “You don’t know the first thing about Lorraine’s job. I’d probably have to spend more time training you than actually having you support me. And what about your own work? When would you get all of that done?”

Her expression shifted to a petulant frown.

“Well, that’s a strange way to thank me for stepping up.” She crossed her arms, and I could feel her glaring at me from across the room.

“I didn’t *ask* you to step up.” I kept my eyes trained on the spreadsheet on my screen. “You need to stay in your lane, Natalie.”

“*Exactly*, just like you did,” she replied in a mocking voice. “Mr. Spreadsheets is now running the creative department. That’s not a skill set leap at all. Makes total sense that a numbers guy is telling designers what to do.”

We scowled at each other in silence for a few seconds. The woman was insufferable.

And worse, she was right.

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my throbbing temples. As much as I hated to admit that I needed help, the truth was I did. Big time.

I was nearly losing my mind trying to juggle the jobs of CEO and creative department head. Lorraine had been helping me vet potential candidates for Clint’s position and now that she was gone, I was being forced to not only find his replacement, but hers as well. And to make matters even more challenging, our quarterly numbers were looking worse than I’d expected. I couldn’t dedicate myself to turning things around when I was being pulled in some many different directions.

But could I handle having even more Natalie Reynolds in my life? *That* was the real question. I had no doubt that she’d pick up on Lorraine’s work quickly, but being my assistant basically meant being my shadow. I had a tough enough time sitting across from her during design meetings. She was a distraction.

No...a *temptation*. One I wasn’t about to mess with. My life was complicated enough.

“I can do this,” Natalie said. “And you need to admit that you need some help. You *need* me, James.”

If she only knew how right she was, even if it was not in the way she meant. My eyes drifted down to her legs before I could stop myself.

“Why would you offer to take on even more work?”

“Because you took a chance on me,” she interrupted, her stormy expression shifting to vulnerability. “I was nothing but an hourly employee before you stepped in and gave me my dream job. You changed my life, and helping you out when you need it is the least I can do in return. I sort of feel like I owe you, James.”

Her eyes were almost pleading, and she seemed more real and honest than I’d ever experienced. I wasn’t used to this side of her, the softer Natalie Reynolds.

As much as I enjoyed going head-to-head with Natalie, I liked this version of her too.

I swiped my hand over my face. Yeah, I was overwhelmed, and the solution Natalie was presenting, while not perfect, did sound like it could work for the short term. The biggest task for my assistant right now was helping sift through the applications for the new head of the creative department, and no one had a better idea of what the position needed than Natalie. The problem in the scenario was *me*. Could I trust myself around her? There was always a buffer between us during the creative meetings. I had other people I could focus on—which was vitally important, since every time I looked at her beautiful face something dangerous flared up in my chest.

“Besides, if you work yourself into an early grave I might wind up with another boss like Clint,” she continued. “So consider my offer a little selfish.”

The devilish smile playing on her lips felt more like the Natalie I’d gotten to know.

“Fine,” I sighed. “Yes, you can fill in for Lorraine until I find her replacement. Thank you for the offer. I appreciate it.”

“Excellent,” she said as she plopped into the chair on the other side of my desk. “What’s first?”

I stared at her. “You plan to start *now*?”

“Well, duh. I need to get up to speed on what’s going on so I can manage my tasks and create a workflow. I’m actually ahead on the couture project and

the Pantone retrospective stuff. That, uh, that one's been keeping me busy but I'm still on track."

Her cheeks went red at the mention of the retrospective, and I wondered what she was up to. Clearly there was something going on there that she didn't want me to know about. The woman didn't have a good poker face.

"The first thing you need to do is go through the applications for Clint's job. We've been getting a ton of them but obviously not everyone is qualified. Lorraine has been weeding through the ones that aren't a fit at all and then forwarding to me the few that actually sound like they could do the job. In addition to that she was attempting to set up interviews with a few of the ones I liked."

"Ooh, so you mean I get to help pick my next boss?" Natalie rubbed her hands together gleefully. "I could totally game the system to make sure the person I like gets through to you."

"Well, *obviously* I want you to like whomever I pick," I replied. "I want the whole team to feel good about Clint's replacement. They had to deal with him for far too long. And you, even in that one week, suffered because of him. I won't let that happen again."

She paused and stared at me in her annoyingly intense way. I braced for impact.

"I think it's important that you know that everyone seems to be okay with you leading the team. For now, I mean," she said. "Kind of weird considering you have no design background."

A backhanded compliment. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out how to effectively lead people. And what makes you think I don't know anything about design?"

"Well, your brother was the—" She stopped abruptly and dropped her gaze to her hands.

I felt my jaw clench at the mention of Christopher. "My grandmother made sure everyone in the family had a chance to shadow every department, from quality control to sales support. And yes, even design. You might be shocked to discover that one or two designs in our archive have my name on them."

Her eyes went wide. “*Seriously?*”

I chuckled. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Natalie.”

She hopped out of her chair and gave me a wicked grin. “Well, now that I’m your assistant I guess I’m about to find out your secrets.”

She had the gall to *wink* at me, then turned on her heel, and I watched her gorgeous ass sway out of the room.

Hopefully not *all* of my secrets.

NATALIE

“How am I supposed to plank when my phone won’t stop buzzing?” I complained to Steph from my painful position on the floor. “Maybe it’s a sign I should take a break?”

I glanced up at my tormentor with a hopeful expression as my arms trembled.

“Don’t you dare.” She scowled, looming over me. “You’re so close.”

My phone was blowing up with incoming texts, but I knew better than to stop before Steph allowed. She punished half-assed effort by adding extra sets.

“Three...two...one. You’re done, nice work,” she finally said.

“I hate you.” I collapsed onto my stomach with a groan. “I really hate you.”

“No you don’t. Admit it, you need this release. You aren’t having sex so you gotta get that endorphin high somehow.”

“Steph!” I squealed, reaching out to smack her foot.

“What? You know I’m right.”

I rolled onto my back and wiped the sweat from my forehead. “There’s no one I *want* to have sex with. I’m fine being a nun right now. Besides, work is keeping me too busy to even think about sex.”

Between my design work and being James's beck-and-call girl, I felt like I was on a treadmill that wouldn't stop cranking up. I'd managed to vet three potential candidates for Clint's job and scheduled them for interviews with James, only to have him hate them all. The resumes for Lorraine's position kept piling up but none of them came close to having the scope of skills that James required. I kept pushing him to at least consider someone who wasn't one hundred percent perfect, but he wouldn't hear of it.

"You sure about that?" Steph asked, plopping down next to me on the ground. "Because I seem to remember predicting a certain hate-fuck in your future."

"Oh my god!" I felt my face go hot. "Absolutely not."

"Hmf," she said. "I don't believe you for a second. You want your bossman, you want your bossman," she sang out, poking me in my aching stomach.

"Knock it off!" I rolled over and grabbed my phone. "The only thing I want from James is a little peace and quiet. There's like half a dozen texts from him about work stuff."

Steph snorted. "Boundaries much?"

"More like 'burning the candle at both ends much.' He works even longer hours than I do." I scrolled through my messages, frowning. "Uh-oh, there's also three more texts from the Bridge Troll."

"What's his deal?" she asked.

"The latest one says, 'Nat, we need to talk about the assignment you turned in. Meet me at Corrigan's. We can have drinks and see where it leads.' Then he put a winking emoji. *Gross.*"

Steph made a gagging face. "Isn't that against the rules or something? Can't he get in trouble since he's your instructor?"

I shook my head. "Everyone's just so thrilled that someone so high-profile agreed to teach the class. He's basically untouchable."

"You need to put a stop to it somehow. It's only going to keep escalating. He clearly doesn't know how to take a hint."

“What can I possibly say? I don’t want to piss him off and have him fail me.”
I sat up.

Steph drummed on her knees with her lips pursed, and I started to worry because I knew she was cooking up something dangerous.

“Why don’t you invent a boyfriend?” she asked. “No, hold on, I’ve got a better idea! Pretend *James* is your boyfriend!”

I laughed at the thought of it. “He is pretty intimidating.”

She poked my side. “Do it! Text the Bridge Troll back and tell him you just got home from dinner with James, and now it’s time for some sexy times. Say you’ll be away from your phone for hours because he’s such an incredible lover.”

“Seriously? That’s a little creepy to talk about that kind of stuff with him.”

“*He’s* creepy! You need to meet him on his level. Come on—nothing else is going to get through to him.”

“I guess...” I said, still a little reluctant. “But I wouldn’t even know what to say. My idea of dirty talk comes straight from a romance novel, and that’s *not* the kind of tone I want to be taking with him.”

Steph’s face lit up in a smile that long experience had taught me to beware. “Hand it over,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

Just because I knew that I *should* beware didn’t mean I actually would. I was extremely bad at saying no to Steph. Hence all of our workouts. “Okay, okay.” I handed her my phone. “But try to keep it at least a *little* discreet, okay?”

“I’ll be the soul of discretion,” she promised. “How about this?” she said, reading out the text as she typed it. “‘Sorry, not possible. My boyfriend James and I are getting ready for some fun,’ then a lips emoji and an eggplant emoji.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Gotta use those emojis since that’s his love language.”

My phone dinged almost immediately, and Steph made a face as she read out

his response. “Ewww. He asked what James has that he doesn’t. This is where we need to sell it. Time to double down,” Steph stated eagerly, clearly enjoying her role as my ghostwriter. “Describe how absolutely smoking hot James is, and how much you love his massive dick.”

I fell over backwards, laughing.

My phone dinged again. “Speak of the devil, it’s James wanting to know where the TPS reports are filed on the server,” Steph relayed. “But I think we should respond to the Bridge Troll first.” Steph’s eyes lit up with glee as she typed rapidly on my phone. “My boyfriend James is hot enough to be a model, with blue eyes and an eight-pack. And his dick is perfect. It’s so thick I can barely get the whole thing in my mouth. He loves it when I deep throat all eight inches of him.”

“Oh my *god!*” I shrieked, covering my face in embarrassment. “I can’t tell my teacher that! Delete it, right now!”

“Too late—already sent,” she said breezily. “But come on, it’s for the best. If you don’t get through to him that you’re really not interested, he’ll keep at it.” She wagged her finger at me.

“Ugh, fine,” I said and stood up with a groan, clutching my thighs. “You’re evil, you know. Those squats killed me. I’m going to be in so much pain tomorrow.”

“You’ll thank me during bathing suit season, trust me.” Steph laughed as she headed for the kitchen.

My phone started ringing and when I looked at the screen, I noticed it was James. “Huh, James must really want those reports, he’s calling me.” I answered and tried to ignore the fact that his dick had just been the topic of conversation. “Hey, what’s up?”

“You tell me,” he said tersely.

My anger flared immediately at his tone. James didn’t own me, I had a right to spend my evenings how I wanted.

“Hold on, are you actually getting spicy with me because I didn’t immediately send you those reports? I was in the middle of something, sorry

I wasn't ready when you cracked the whip," I shot back. "The reports are in the G drive, but if you give me three minutes I can just send them to you."

The line went silent for a moment, and I prepared for whatever bullshit James was about to dish out. We'd been doing okay working as a team, but there were moments when his boss-hole side reappeared. Like now.

"I'm not calling about the reports," he said in a tone I'd never heard before. "I'm calling about your text."

I frowned. "What are you talking about? What text?"

"Does 'eight inches' ring a bell?"

My blood turned to ice water, and I nearly dropped my phone.

"And something about 'my boyfriend James'?" he continued. "Care to explain that?"

Now his tone was unmistakably angry. I paced in circles and Steph came out to watch me with her eyes wide.

"James, I am so sorry you got that text! That wasn't meant for you at all. It's not what you think. I was sending it to... I totally didn't mean... Uh, yeah, it was super crass and inappropriate but there's a *reason* why!"

Steph slapped her hand over her mouth and jumped up and down.

"I'm listening," he said simply.

I paced in tight circles, trying to find the right way to explain why he'd gotten a message from me about what he was packing.

"Okay, um, remember I told you about my instructor? The creepy guy? Well, he's been amping up his creepiness and asking me out, so w—I mean, so I pretended that you were my boyfriend. And I, uh, got a little crude to sell the point that I was taken and not interested. I was hoping that if I got super descriptive he'd get the hint."

Another pause as he seemed to process the information.

"So you opted to use me, your *boss*, as your imaginary boyfriend?"

I was so fired.

Blaming Steph felt like a cop-out. After all, I'd handed her my phone—it wasn't like she went behind my back. There was no need to complicate an already ridiculous story with the facts.

“You and I were texting, so I guess you were on my mind?” I squeaked out as an excuse. I neglected to tell him that he was also top of mind when I closed my eyes every night. And that I'd met all eight inches of him in my dreams.

“This guy is really harassing you?” James asked, his tone less scary. “He's escalating now?”

“Yeah. It's pretty bad. I don't know how to handle it.” I cringed. “I guess that's obvious.”

Steph was frozen, staring at me with a twisted smile on her face, like she was enjoying the torment I was dealing with.

“I can help you with that,” James said. “That is, if you *want* my help.”

“How...how do you mean?” I asked warily, because I was sure his offer would have some sort of strings attached. Maybe I'd have to promise him twenty-four-hour phone accessibility and a five minutes or less response rate?

“You need to prove to him that I'm a real part of your life and not just a fantasy or a story you made up. Why don't I pick you up after your next class? It might help him get the message.” James paused. “And that I'll beat his face in if he doesn't get the hint.”

The protective growl in James's voice sent warmth through my chest. I felt like I could finally breathe again. He wasn't going to fire me! In fact, he was actually stepping up to help fix the problem. It was the last thing I expected after mentioning his dick in a text. Maybe he liked the fact that I said he was packing eight inches?

“You okay?” Steph mouthed to me.

I nodded and settled onto the couch, and she sat down in the chair opposite me so she could have a good view to continue observing the car crash that was my life.

“Seriously? You wouldn’t mind?” My heart swelled at the thought of James stepping up to be my knight in shining armor. *This* seemed like the James that Christopher had talked about—the one who really came through for the people who mattered to him. Not that *I* mattered to him, of course—but he did need me clear-headed and calm so I could do my best work for him.

“There’s nothing I hate more than men in positions of authority taking advantage of their power. I’m sure he thinks he can intimidate you into going out with him. I’d be happy to help you prove him wrong by squashing this bug of a human.”

I beamed at the ground, because I knew if I looked at Steph she’d try to make me laugh. “That would be amazing. And totally above and beyond. I need to come up with a way to thank you.”

Steph snorted at me, and I looked up at her against my better judgment, only to see her doing a vigorous hand job motion. I threw a pillow at her head.

“You don’t have to thank me, just keep up the good work around the office,” he said.

“That’s my job; I get paid to do that. What you’re offering me is something more. I definitely need to thank you for your help.” I bit back a grin. “I have a fantastic idea! What if I serenade you? I know you love my singing.”

He chuckled. “*Absolutely* not.”

“Oh, come on,” I teased, settling into the couch and crossing my legs. “I could do a ‘Beyonce’s greatest hits’ concert for you! Can’t you just picture it? One solid hour of me hitting those high notes. You’ll love it.”

“I’ll pay you not to,” he shot back.

There was a lightness in his voice I’d never heard before. The big bad boss man was actually having fun with me!

“Ooh, this is getting interesting,” I purred. “How much are we talking here? Because I don’t come cheap, Mr. Branson.”

“Lots. Lots and lots of money.”

I could hear the smile in his voice.

“You’ve got my attention,” I said. “But I really do think you’d be missing out.” I cleared my throat. “*Mi-mi-mi-mi*,” I sang, purposely sounding rusty and off-key.

Steph laughed at me.

“Stop!” he pleaded. “Stop it right now. It’s *painful*.”

I pouted. “Boo. You’re so mean.”

“I’m offering you money not to sing, I’d say that’s a pretty fair trade-off.”

I grinned. “Okay, you’ve got a deal. We can work out the exact terms when you pick me up from class.” I paused. “And seriously, thank you for stepping up to help me.”

“No problem.”

The line went quiet, like we both weren’t quite sure what to say next, but it seemed like neither of us was ready to hang up.

“Um, those TPS reports,” I said, grasping for a safe topic. “I’ll grab them off the server and send them to you as soon as we hang up.”

“Right, right, of course,” he said, back in business mode. “Appreciate it.”

“Okay, um, good talk!” I said, blushing when I remembered the dick-centric reason why he’d called me. “I mean, *weird* talk, but we figured it out, right?”

“Yup, see you tomorrow.”

We both hung up and I stared at my phone in silence.

“Wow,” Steph said.

I shrugged at her. “It turned out okay in the end.”

“Nat, your *face*! I haven’t seen you light up like that in ages. You should see how big your smile is.”

I squirmed because I knew she was onto something. “Stop. We were just being stupid.”

“Exactly, you were having fun and *flirting*. I’m shocked that you remember

how to do it! But you were actually pretty good. I guess it's like riding a bike."

"I absolutely was not flirting with my boss!" I tried to glare at her, but my face felt like it was fixed in a perma-grin. "I was trying to save my job, which I almost lost thanks to your X-rated texting."

She threw her hands up at me. "Okay, okay, whatever you say. I'm just calling it like I see it. So he's going to help you out?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he's going to pick me up from class so we can sell the couple thing to MG."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Hm. How kind of him to swoop in and save you. Sounds like a dedicated 'boss.'" She made air quotes around the word.

I ignored the implication. "That's exactly what he is and nothing more."

"Maybe, if you're lucky, you'll get to see if our guesstimate was right?"

"Huh?" I didn't like the devilish gleam in Steph's eyes.

She held up her hands like she was measuring something. "Eight inches?"

"Knock it *off*!" I shouted, and we both fell over laughing.

JAMES

I banged on Christopher's door as best I could while clutching his present in my arms. In the past my brother's birthday was cause for a huge celebration. His ex loved any excuse to spend his money and would throw lavish parties in his honor, even though we knew it was all for her. Now, we were lucky to get Christopher out the door for a cup of coffee.

I sighed. Someday I'd get through to him and the old Christopher would be back. I wouldn't accept any other option.

I heard footsteps that sounded way too quick to be his since my brother was a lumberer. When the door flew open, I was greeted by the last person I expected to see.

"Natalie? What the hell are you doing here?"

She froze, then her eyes darted around like she was searching for a place to hide.

"Uhhh...hi, James."

She gave me a quick little wave, and I tried to ignore the fact that she looked absolutely stunning in a damned hoodie, ripped jeans, and Vans.

"What's going on?" I demanded. *"Why are you in my brother's apartment? Is he okay?"*

Natalie glanced over her shoulder, then came out into the hallway, closing the door behind her. “I can explain, but you need to let me get everything out before you interrupt me. And you can’t get mad at me.”

“I refuse to promise that,” I said.

“Well, then I’m leaving.”

She turned to head back into the apartment, but I reached out to grasp her arm. She glanced down at my hand wrapped around her bicep and I released her quickly, aware that I’d crossed a line.

We don’t touch, because touching was dangerous.

“For fuck’s sake, Natalie.” I sighed again. “I promise I won’t be an asshole to you. Just tell me what’s going on. This is *my* family we’re talking about.”

A shadow flickered over her face, then she took a steadying breath. “Okay. So Rhea told me that Christopher still had a bunch of the archival designs on paper, and I felt like in order to do the best job possible on the Pantone project we should have access to *everything*, so I...” Her cheeks pinked as she paused. “I emailed your brother to ask about them.”

I opened my mouth to scream at her and remembered my promise. I crossed my arms and glared at her instead.

“He was very receptive!” she added quickly. “*He* invited me over, I never would’ve invited myself, I swear to you. I might make dumb choices sometimes, like calling you my boyfriend, but I’m not that stupid.” Her mind seemed to drift back to the eight inches conversation again, but she quickly refocused. “Anyway, Christopher and I had such a great time that...well, I’ve stopped by a few times since then to collaborate with him. And it’s been amazing.”

For the briefest moments I felt a flash of something sour, imagining Natalie and my brother spending time together. Sitting side by side at the table, swapping ideas. Could they be...?

But Christopher was no match for someone like Natalie, especially in his current state. Despite the woman he’d married, he was usually drawn to quiet, nurturing partners.

Nothing like Natalie the spitfire.

“So has he been...okay?” I asked tentatively. I wasn’t used to getting status updates about him from anyone but Bernie.

Natalie broke into a huge smile. “He’s been phenomenal! Super helpful, and he’s given me the best feedback on my stuff. Like, crazy, insightful advice. He’s so sweet.”

Relief washed over me despite her gushing about my brother. Hold on, I was jealous of the time they’d spent together?

“You’ve got that right. Christopher is one of a kind.”

“I see you brought him a present.” She pointed to the gift. “I feel like such a shit because I had no idea it was his birthday. He didn’t even mention it when we set up the meeting for today. Bernie had to tell me!”

I froze. “Hold on...my *grandmother* is here too?”

She nodded, grinning at me. “It’s an impromptu party! Come in!”

Natalie led the way, and I walked into a space that felt totally transformed. Of course my grandmother had brought balloons and flowers, though I had a feeling that the loud music was probably thanks to the worst karaoke singer in history.

“Look what I found haunting the hallway.” Natalie laughed as she walked into the great room.

“There he is!” Bernie cheered. “Come here, you!”

My grandmother swept towards me with her arms outstretched, her flowy teal Branson-designed top billowing behind her. I could tell she probably just had her gray hair styled into her usual chignon for the occasion. As I pulled her close, breathing in her familiar perfume, I felt an unnamed tension release from the back of my neck. Dad died when I was just a baby, and Mom and Bernie raised Christopher and me together. Hugging her always felt like coming home.

“What the hell were you two doing out in the hallway for so long?” Christopher asked. “I was about to send a chaperone out to find you.” He

pointed at Bernie.

I glanced at Natalie and she blushed.

“Just work stuff. Anyway, happy birthday, dummy.” I held up the gift. “It’s a book.”

“Gee, thanks for ruining the surprise,” he joked.

What I didn’t mention was that it was a limited-edition coffee table book by famous fashion photographer Clarence Avignon, that he’d signed and annotated. One of our original designs actually appeared in the pages.

“You’re just in time,” Bernie said. “We have food on the way.”

“Yes, we decided to order the most ridiculous stuff we could think of, so prepare for some fun finger foods,” Natalie added.

I sighed. I’d planned for a quick visit, but it was clear I was going to be there for a while.

“Sit, sit!” Bernie ordered. “Sparkling water, everyone?”

She headed for the kitchen before any of us could answer.

I took a seat on the couch opposite where Christopher was perched, and Bernie’s gigantic Chanel purse was taking up much of the real estate on the other chair, so Natalie had no choice but to sit beside me.

“Your employee here tells me you’re working her to death,” Christopher said, glancing between us.

My mouth dropped open as I glanced over at Natalie. “Did you seriously tell —”

“No! I absolutely *did* not say that, you troublemaker.” She pretended to swat Christopher. “I believe I said he’s a fantastic boss, and I’m learning a lot.”

“Well, thank you.” I bobbed my head at her. “And Natalie, for her part, is an exceptional employee. She’s got an incredible eye, and she’s intuitive about the way things work at Branson. I’m really happy with what she’s producing.”

Natalie shifted in her seat and grinned at me. “Stop! You’re embarrassing me.”

“What? It’s true,” I insisted.

“Turns out we make a good team,” she said, eyes still on me. “Shocker, given our introduction.”

I laughed at the memory of our first meeting. So much had changed since then. “Yeah, I never could’ve imagined it, considering how you nearly took me out with a wet mop.”

She covered her face as she giggled. “I was protecting myself from a presumed stalker!”

Christopher glanced between us. “What the hell are you two talking about? Mop? Stalker?”

The door buzzed, and Bernie rushed out of the kitchen. “The food is here, I’ll get it!”

Christopher jumped up, and I noticed that he was in clean jeans and a button-down shirt instead of his usual gym shorts and oversized T-shirt.

“That’s Julia,” he said, tucking in his shirt. “She’s great, you’ll love her.”

“You’re on a first name basis with your *grocery* girl?” I asked.

“Snob.” He frowned at me. “Don’t call her that. She’s working her way through school. This is her side job.”

The sound of cheerful bustling filled the space, and I joined them as the delivery person unloaded. Once I saw Julia I understood why Christopher was so quick to defend her. She was adorable, with a shiny blonde ponytail under her baseball cap and a giant smile that made me want to smile back at her.

“I brought you birthday flowers,” she said shyly, handing a bouquet filled with sunflowers and yellow roses to Christopher. “Is that weird?”

I watched my brother’s face and realized that he was struggling to remain even keel. My heart clenched when I saw him blinking quickly, staring at

Julia with unabashed awe.

“No that’s...that’s amazing. No one has ever given me flowers before,” he said in a quiet voice. “Thank you.”

Bernie seemed oblivious to what was going on as she snatched them away from him. “Beautiful! Let me put these in a vase. Julia, you can unload everything on the dining room table. Boys, be the gentlemen I raised you to be and help her.”

“I’m James.” I held out my hand to Julia and she shook it, smiling.

Natalie was already hard at work, unpacking the overflowing bags.

“What the hell did you crazy people buy?” Christopher asked, holding up a box of Cracker Jacks.

“Awful, wonderful, delicious snacks! Finger food, like it’s a kid party,” Natalie answered.

“And I snuck in a couple of extra surprises,” Julia said. She opened what looked like a pizza box to reveal a giant cookie cake covered in frosting.

Christopher walked over to her. “Did you pay for this?”

She nodded shyly.

“We *talked* about this, J!” he exclaimed, attempting to scold her despite the huge smile on his face. “You need to stop buying me stuff. I’m serious. Your tip is going to be ridiculous today.”

“I’ll second that,” I said as I stacked five packages of steaming chicken tenders on the table.

Bernie joined us with the flowers arranged in a crystal vase that was no doubt one of the few things that Christopher’s ex hadn’t taken. “Oh, Julia will be *very* well taken care of today, don’t you worry.”

My grandmother had her faults, but being a bad tipper wasn’t one of them.

“Okay, I think that’s everything,” Julia said as she packed up her bags. “I’m going to head out. Christopher, I hope you have a wonderful birthday. James, Natalie, and Bernie, it was nice to meet you.”

“Wait, wait,” Christopher said quickly, moving closer to her. “Can’t you stay? Please join us. There’s way too much food.”

“Really?” She glanced around at us meekly. “I *am* done for the day...”

“Get this woman a plate,” Natalie insisted. “The more the merrier.”

The rest of the afternoon passed with the five of us gathered around the table, swapping stories, eating, and laughing. Christopher seemed more alive than I’d seen him in ages, and I noticed that his eyes seemed to be perpetually glued to Julia. Thankfully, she was equally enthralled with him, finding excuses to touch him and serve him food. All under the guise of treating the birthday boy, but I could tell there was more to it.

I also noticed how at ease Natalie seemed among my family. But then again, that seemed to be one of her gifts. She could charm anyone if she put her mind to it. I hadn’t been on the receiving end of it much at first, but lately? Lately it felt like Natalie and I had reached a place of stability. If I ignored the damned attraction that was boiling in my veins, we’d be just fine as colleagues. In time I’d find a replacement for Clint so I wouldn’t have to see her at the creative meetings, and Lorraine’s replacement would take over for her. Natalie would revert back to being just another Branson employee.

Not someone I couldn’t wait to see every day. And definitely not someone I couldn’t stop dreaming about.

After a few hours of teasing and laughter, the table was strewn with empty boxes. Julia stood up and started cleaning them away.

“Would you knock it off?” Christopher said. “You’re my guest.”

“I’m just helping,” she said. “And I actually need to go in a minute. I have class tonight. But thank you for inviting me to stay. I had the best time.”

Her eyes were shining when she glanced at Christopher.

“Me too,” he said. “Let me walk you out.”

Bernie glanced at us once they were gone, a smile on her face. “Well, well. Did you see what I saw?”

“They are so into each other!” Natalie said, slapping the table for emphasis.

“He needs to ask her out for real.”

“Agreed,” I said. “She seems good for him.”

“Who seems good for who?” Christopher asked as he walked back into the room. “What are you talking about?”

“*Whom.*” Bernie crooked a finger at him as she corrected his English. “You, my dear. We’re talking about how you and that lovely young lady seem besotted with one another.”

He barked out an awkward laugh. “Oh, god, no way. Not at all! Julia isn’t into me like that, she’s just being nice to a repeat customer.”

It was my turn to laugh at my brother. “You’re really dumb. You can’t tell when a woman is flirting with you?”

He stared me down. “Look who’s talking.”

Bernie chuckled, well acquainted with our sparring.

I shifted in my seat. “*Excuse me?*”

“I know sparks when I see them,” he said as his eyes slid to Natalie.

At that she hopped out of her chair and started cleaning the table like she was a server on the clock, her cheeks bright red.

“I think it’s time for me to head out as well,” I said, piling empty containers on my plate.

“Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt,” Bernie said gaily, clearly enjoying the drama.

I glanced at Natalie, but she was busy stacking every empty container in her arms. Based on the way she bussed the table, it was obvious she’d spent time as a waitress.

“Christopher, this was a ton of fun, but you know we still have work to do,” Natalie said with mock seriousness. “I’ll let you off the hook since it’s your birthday, but next time? Back to the grind!”

He threw his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, boss. You got it.”

Natalie started for the kitchen.

“James!” Bernie belted out, her voice projecting loudly enough to stop Natalie in her tracks. “I hope you’re planning to drive this young woman home. There’s no need for her to take the subway when you have your driver idling out front.”

It was just like my grandmother inserting herself in my life. *All* of our lives. She always thought she knew best. And the worst of it was, she was usually right. So I knew better than to try to argue with her even though the thought of getting Natalie alone in my car made my pulse race.

“I guess that settles it. I was going to hang out with my brother for a bit, but if Bernie says I’m leaving, then I’m leaving,” I said. I turned to Natalie. “May I take you home?”

One of the empty boxes in her arms almost jiggled to the ground and she stooped to pick it up. “Uhhh, sure. That would be fine. I mean, thank you. Let me just...” She nodded towards the stack of packaging in her arms and speed-walked to the kitchen.

Christopher watched her leave, then turned to me with the corner of his mouth quirked. “Don’t blow it,” he said in a quiet voice.

I didn’t answer, choosing instead to suddenly become very interested in the Patek Phillippe on my wrist. I wasn’t about to tell my brother that we were nothing but colleagues, and that’s all we would ever be.

NATALIE

“Okay, this is *way* better than the subway,” I said as I slid into the black sedan idling outside Christopher’s building. “Thanks again for the offer.”

James nodded at the driver and got in next to me. “Traffic won’t be too bad now, and it’s no problem at all.”

“Yeah, but Brooklyn has to be way out of your way.”

“Sure,” he agreed with a shrug. “But I’ve got my phone and my laptop—I’ll be able to get work done on the drive home. It’s the same thing I’d be doing if I got home earlier.”

I wanted to say something about how it wasn’t healthy to be such a workaholic, but it felt kind of rude to pick at him when he was doing me a favor—especially when he had a lot more reason to be upset with me than I did with him.

“So you’re not mad at me for reaching out to your brother?” I glanced over at him nervously, because for all I knew, he’d been secretly stewing about me infiltrating his family the entire time.

“At first? Yeah, I was. But now I see that it’s probably good for him to be tangentially involved in the business. He needs to keep his mind engaged.

And I can tell that it makes him feel appreciated to get a little hero worship from you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and watched the world pass by outside. I wanted to know more, though. To learn why this exceptionally gifted man had closed himself off to the world. Bad breakups could do that to you, sure, but what Christopher had gone through definitely seemed like much more. The relaxed post-meal vibe in the car made me realize that this was my chance to find out exactly what had happened. I wanted to get the full story so I could be the best support possible for him, because I really liked him.

“He told me a little about his ex,” I offered gently, hoping James would take the bait.

“Amanda.” He rolled his eyes. “I wish he’d never met her. The woman is *still* making his life hell.”

“How bad was it?” I asked, crossing my fingers that he wouldn’t shut down or tell me to mind my own business.

We hit a bump, and our knees were jostled together for a moment. Strangely, neither one of us pulled away immediately.

James moved back to his side slowly and sighed. “If you’re going to keep working with him, you should probably know, just so you won’t accidentally trigger him.”

James hit a hidden button and a solid partition slid up between us and the driver. It took him a few moments to begin.

“Christopher fell head over heels for a woman who was totally wrong for him,” James began. “Amanda is very image-conscious. She wanted Christopher to be a part of the see-and-be-seen crowd. Tons of events, parties, openings. He wanted her to be happy, so he went along with it, but it really wasn’t his scene. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but my brother is kind of an introvert. He’s great in small groups, but he hates big events where he has to be ‘on’ the whole time. He can fake it when he has to, but he gets depleted pretty quickly.”

“I wasn’t sure if that was due to what he’d been through or...”

James shook his head. “No, that’s who he is, so you can imagine how impossible it was for him to go partying with Amanda. And she refused to give him any leeway. She always got what she wanted. I hated what it did to him.” James paused and when I glanced over, his eyebrows were drawn together. “He was so exhausted, so wrung out that he, uh...he turned to pills.”

My heart dropped at the revelation. “Oh no!”

“Yeah. He saw it as his only option to get his job done during the day and keep his energy up at night. And he made it work for a while, but then everything turned upside-down. He wanted to start a family, but Amanda refused. She wasn’t honest about not wanting kids before they were married. Christopher had always wanted to be a dad, and for the longest time he thought Amanda would come around. But no matter what he promised, from hiring a live-in nanny to offering to buy her mother the apartment below him so she could help too, nothing changed her mind. She was adamant that she would never be a mother.”

I watched his face, illuminated by the neon signs outside the window.

“Christopher took even more pills to help himself cope with the way his life was turning out, and he became addicted. And as you might imagine, *everything* spiraled. He became erratic at work, and the quality of his projects took a serious downturn. I’m ashamed to admit how long it took me to realize what was going on. He always had plenty of excuses to cover for it in our personal interactions, and it got overlooked for a while at the office. Bernie had started stepping back ten years ago, after her first heart attack, and a lot of the company reviews she used to do herself got split up and delegated among a bunch of people. The right hand didn’t know what the left hand was doing, and no one put the pieces together that there was a real problem in the creative department. But it all came to a head three years ago, when Bernie had the second heart attack and I took over as CEO. I had no choice but to step in and get him into rehab. Let’s just say the intervention was *messy*.”

“His wife didn’t help?”

James snorted. “Amanda didn’t care. She was still getting everything she wanted thanks to his bank account, and that was all that mattered to her.”

“So that’s what he meant...” I trailed off again, finally putting the pieces

together. “He was vague, but I get it now.”

“He doesn’t like talking about it,” James said, fiddling with his watch. “No surprise there.”

“So I’m guessing Amanda wasn’t waiting for him with open arms when he got out?”

His harsh laugh filled the car. “She filed for divorce while he was in rehab! Talk about for better or for worse, huh?”

“Oh, poor Christopher,” I whispered. How could anyone be so cruel? I didn’t know Amanda, but I hated her anyway.

“Obviously when he came home he needed more time to process everything. To grieve the life he thought he was going to have.” James’s voice was soft and he went quiet for a few seconds. “Christopher told me that he wasn’t ready to come back to work, and I was fine with it. Clint was working with him closely—he actually stepped in and covered for Christopher a lot when he kept disappearing on us—so promoting Clint seemed like the natural step, even though in retrospect it was my worst business decision ever.”

I laughed softly.

“I wanted Christopher to have all the time he needed to feel whole and stable again, but I worry about his progress. If staying in was making him feel better, then that would be one thing, but I feel like shutting himself off is just leaving him without much of anything that brings him joy, you know?” James turned to look at me. “In a way, I’m grateful that you’re a meddling rule breaker.”

My mouth dropped open and he reached out to quickly squeeze my hand.

“I’m *kidding*. I think you being there, making him part of the business again, is good for him. Thank you.”

My face went hot. The brief grasp of his hand coupled with the compliment knocked me off my axis for a second.

“Well, if there’s one thing I understand, it’s toxic exes.” I huffed out a laugh to try to ignore the warmth simmering where he’d touched me.

“Oh?” James raised an eyebrow at me. “I’m listening.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to spill my messy past. I’d finally convinced James that I had my shit together...would talking about Dylan make me look like a loser?

But then again, he’d trusted me enough to tell me about Christopher. For whatever reason, the Mercedes sedan was a temporary safe space. A luxury confessional of sorts.

“It’s not as awful as what Christopher went through, but it was still pretty heart-wrenching to me. I fell in love with someone who made me question everything about myself. I went from this confident, can-do person to, well, to a shadow. I realized after the fact that my ex, Dylan, was a gaslighting narcissist, but in the moment, I just thought he was controlling because he loved me so much.” My voice went quiet. “It wasn’t like I had many role models when it came to healthy relationships.”

“Did he ever put his hands on you?” James growled, leaning towards me.

I shook my head. “No, thank god. But towards the end I really thought he might. So I shut up and backed off, just wanting to maintain the status quo. Because I was terrified of losing him.” My voice shook at the memory. Not because I missed Dylan, but because the empty feeling of being on my own was always right there below the surface. I’d stayed with him for way longer than I should’ve because back then, solely because the idea of being alone wrecked me.

“He dumped me,” I said. “Told me I was a loser and no one would ever want me. That I was damaged goods. And I believed him for the longest time.”

“Natalie...”

“You know what’s worse? He found someone else immediately. Like, it was so fast I bet he’d been cheating on me the whole time.” I sniffled. “But I feel *bad* for her, you know? Because she got pregnant, and now she’s trapped with him forever.”

James didn’t say anything for a minute. He stared out the window, and I felt stupid for sharing my story, because he obviously didn’t feel the need to talk about it.

He finally turned to me, his expression a mix of anger and compassion. “That man was an idiot. For the way he treated you, and for what he made you believe about yourself.”

I let out a harsh breath. “You know what’s weird? I still wonder if I’m to blame. Maybe there’s something broken in *me*, you know? Maybe I’m replaceable, and he sensed it. That’s probably why he was able to move on so quickly.”

James, to his credit, looked genuinely bewildered. “What are you talking about? That makes absolutely no sense, Natalie.”

I glanced out the window and saw that we still had a long way to go. No matter if I took the train or caught a ride with someone, the trip from Manhattan to my apartment always felt like it took an eternity, and the conversation during this drive was making it feel even longer. I stared out at the Brooklyn Bridge while I gathered my confidence to keep talking. Since we were in full confessional mode, I decided to open up even more.

“No, if you look at my history it sort of makes sense.” I swallowed the emotions welling at the base of my throat and forced myself to keep talking. “I’m a former foster kid. I don’t even remember my parents—they died when I was a baby. My childhood was spent packing up all of my belongings in a Hefty bag and moving from house to house. I didn’t even have a proper suitcase. It made me feel worthless, like *I* was trash.”

James made a pained noise and reached out to take my hand again. I forced myself not to thread my fingers through his. He was offering me comfort, not intimacy.

“No one ever wanted me to stay.” My voice was a whisper as I admitted my deepest, darkest secret to him. “All those foster homes, and there was only *one* person who I ever got close to—my foster sister Steph. We’re still best friends and roommates, and I love her more than anything...but it does something to you, growing up knowing that there’s no adult you can turn to. I was a confused, scared, unhappy kid just looking for someone to love her, but I kept getting tossed out the door, over and over. To this day it makes me wonder if I’m not...” I struggled to say it. “Not *loveable*.”

I cleared my throat to keep from succumbing to the tears welling in my eyes.

“Natalie.” James squeezed my hand. “Look at me.”

I didn’t want him to see the raw emotion I knew was written all over my face. I was embarrassed that I’d confided in him, because the man was my *boss*. There was no reason for him to get mixed up in my mess. I stared at my lap.

“*Look at me,*” he said a little more forcefully.

I finally composed myself enough to raise my eyes to meet his, and his expression was so tender that I almost didn’t recognize him.

“Unfortunately, you’ve spent your life mostly surrounded by people who didn’t appreciate your special magic. But that’s on *them*, not you. I hate that you were hurt so badly, and so many times. But the way they treated you shouldn’t define the way you feel about yourself. I know there’s a part of you that’s still hurting, but I also know that you’re willing to fight for yourself. You’re a warrior. You lead with your fists. I know firsthand what you can do with a mop.”

I managed a half-smile.

“Those hurts are in your past. I hope you feel like things are different now. You have a bright future, and people all around you who appreciate you and want to see you succeed.” He paused and placed his other hand on top of mine. “Like me.”

I sniffled, working hard to suppress my sadness. The fact that James was holding my hand barely registered, because I was too focused on not crying.

“The way people treat you is no indication of your worth,” he continued. “It’s a reflection of *their* shortcomings and hang-ups. Everyone at Branson thinks you’re so special. And I hope you understand that.”

“Everyone at *work*,” I said. “But that’s because I always give one hundred and ten percent. I figured out when I was just a kid that if I worked harder than everyone else, I’d get approval from teachers, from my foster parents—from my bosses, eventually. But being useful, being valuable...that’s not the same as being loved or being wanted for *me*, not just for what I can do.”

“Natalie, I’ve not been honest enough with you,” James said in a low voice. “I said that your colleagues think the world of you, but what I meant is, *I* do.”

And not just because of your work. You're always in my thoughts. Hell, you're in my dreams. You're a...a *distraction*."

I wasn't sure how to answer him because he almost sounded upset, like he was angry about the fact that I was in his head.

James turned to me, still clutching my hand. "I'm sorry, but I can't stop thinking about you, wanting to —"

"Wanting to what?" I whispered.

"This." He untangled his hand from mine and leaned towards me slowly, then placed his finger under my chin and drew me closer to him. He paused, his blue eyes scanning my face, giving me the opportunity to back away.

It was pointless because all I'd wanted to do since we sat down next to each other was throw myself at him. The drive had finished the process of revealing a completely different side of James the bosshole, the kinder side of him that his brother had hinted at, that I'd seen glimpses of before.

And I liked him. So much.

I leaned closer until our lips were centimeters apart. Everything would change if we kissed. Absolutely everything. The moment seemed endless while we both waited to see what would happen next.

"You're killing me," James finally whispered, placing his hand on the back of my head and gently drawing me to him.

I melted against him as our lips connected. The kiss felt a little desperate, like we couldn't get enough of the heat coursing through us. I grabbed onto his shirt near the collar, crumpling the fabric in my hand. I wanted to make sure that he couldn't slip away from me, that he wouldn't try to break off what we were finally doing.

We were at an awkward angle sitting side by side, and I started to move my leg over his so I could slide onto his lap. I wanted to grind against him, circle my arms around his neck and *possess* him. I wanted to feel his strong hands clutching my waist, and get lost in his arms.

This kiss, the way our mouths moved in tandem, was unlike anything I'd ever

experienced. I felt unhinged with desire, and all I could think was *keep going*.

And then the car lurched to a stop and the driver rapped on the divider.

We jumped apart in shock. How had we gotten to a low-rent, far-flung neighborhood in Brooklyn so damn quickly?

I touched my fingertips to my lips because they felt electrified and a little tender after just a few minutes of kissing. I wondered what my body would feel like if we'd had more time.

“Um...I guess we're here,” I said, scrambling to grab my bag.

“Indeed.”

“Thanks for the ride.” I shut my eyes in embarrassment. Worst word choice ever. “I mean, thanks for getting me home safely.”

“Happy to. Can I walk you to your door?” James asked.

I pictured him escorting me up the stairs and then the awkward moment where we had to figure out a way to say goodbye even though we'd just been making out in the back of his Mercedes. This man was my *boss*; it didn't matter that he'd just kissed me like no one else ever. Tomorrow, we were going to be forced to sit across a conference table and pretend that we were just normal colleagues and not two people who desperately wanted to fuck.

Did we, though?

Well, I only knew for a fact that that it was what *I* wanted, but based on the way James had kissed me, it was a safe bet he was more than willing to get naked with me.

“No, that's okay!” I finally squeaked out. “It's a safe neighborhood, I'll be fine, thanks.”

I hopped out of the car and leaned over to say goodbye. James was staring at me in the half-light, looking hungry enough to pull me back inside to pick up where we'd left off.

And I wished he would.

“See you tomorrow,” I said, still pretending that everything was normal.

James let out a long sigh, as if he realized that I wasn't going to change my mind. "Yes, you will. Good night, Natalie."

I slammed the door shut and waited for the car to drive off, but James had clearly instructed the driver to wait until I was inside. I jogged up the walkway and gave a little wave as I darted into my building, and the car finally slid away.

Alone in the tiny lobby, I leaned back against the wall to catch my breath.

How was I going to ever look at that gorgeous mouth of his again and *not* think about how it felt to have it pressed against mine?

JAMES

“Thanks for your hard work, everyone. I’m liking what you’ve been submitting to me. Any questions?”

I glanced around the table at the creative team and noticed that Natalie was the only person not looking at me.

Lavonte raised his hand and I nodded towards him.

“Liking or *loving*?” he asked tentatively.

I chuckled. “Fair question. Let’s say I’m liking most of it and loving some of it.”

He opened his mouth.

“And no,” I cut him off, “I won’t say who gets which distinction. Just keep doing what you’re doing, okay?” I shot a look at Natalie, but she only maintained eye contact for a second before glancing away again.

Was she regretting what happened on the drive to her place?

“As always, reach out if you have questions,” I said as I stood up. “And thanks for your hard work.” I rapped my knuckles on the table and turned to leave.

“Donuts!” Rhea exclaimed loudly enough to get me to stop. “You can’t go until you grab a donut.” She pointed to the pink boxes spread out on a nearby table.

I usually watched what I ate, but donuts were a weakness, so I followed the crowd over and wound up standing right behind Natalie.

“Hey,” I said.

She turned around, clutching her phone, looking like she’d just gotten bad news. “Hi.”

I felt a stab between my eyebrows at her expression. “You okay? What’s going on?”

“The Bridge Troll is back.” She frowned.

“Excuse me?”

She smirked. “That’s my nickname for MG—the teacher I told you about. He’s been out sick with COVID and teaching on Zoom, but he’s finally well enough to come back to class. Which means I need to brace myself for the grope-fest to come.”

My hackles went up at the thought of some power-tripping teacher putting a finger on her. “My offer to help you stands. Let me help *educate* him.”

“You were serious about that?” Relief flooded her face. “Can you pick me up tonight after my class?”

I felt a clench at the thought of being with Natalie after-hours again. “Of course. Send me the address and we’ll teach this asshole a lesson.”

Natalie gave me a shockingly shy smile. “I really appreciate it. Thank you, James.”

I wasn’t well acquainted with a less than boisterous Natalie, but I liked this version of her too. I liked *all* of them, which complicated things, because she’d been avoiding me since the kiss. And she could barely look at me during our weekly meeting. I’d clearly overstepped by kissing her, and now I was kicking myself for making the first move.

Sure, she'd responded like she wanted it as much as I did, but that could've just been the heat of the moment. The faces I passed in the hall on the way back to my office didn't even register as I dissected what had gone on between us in the back of that car. I lived my life following my instincts, and never second-guessed what I did, but when it came to Natalie, I felt like a different version of myself.

That kiss. That fucking kiss. It took everything in my power to keep from letting my hands trace the curves of her body. I'd dreamed about them enough, fantasized about exploring every inch of her. But we were still in uncharted waters, so I'd remained on my best behavior.

That night in my dreams was another story. I'd woken up rock hard, and the only solution was to rub one out while I thought about all the things I wanted to do with her.

My day took off the moment I sat down at my desk, which made it easy to push thoughts of Natalie from my head. But as the afternoon wore on, I found my thoughts drifting to the role I was about to play as Natalie's boyfriend. It wasn't like it would be difficult I was more concerned about how far we were going to take it.

Actually, I was *excited* to see how far.

Natalie had told me how to find the room in the building and as always, I'd arrived early. I waited outside the door, listening to the droning voice that had to be her instructor. I stepped to the door to glance in the window and immediately caught Natalie's eye. The soft smile she gave me sent my pulse racing. Did she *blush* at the sight of me?

Once she looked away, I stole a few seconds to study her. She kept her bare legs tucked beneath her desk, no doubt hiding them from her creepy instructor, and nibbled adorably on the end of her drafting pencil when she wasn't using it. I felt like I was in one of her stupid romance novels, because even the sight of her collarbone was enough to make my mind wander.

A few minutes later, people came piling out of the room, and I stood back and watched as Natalie rushed to load up her bag. Not quickly enough, because a squat man with messy long hair approached her. I stood in the doorway, making sure that he was our target, and Natalie's eyes shifted to

me. When she widened them at me I knew I was up.

“Hey babe,” I said in an overloud voice as I strode into the room. “All set?”

“*Baby!*” she squealed in a high-pitched voice I’d never heard before. “There’s my handsome man!”

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. She was *really* laying it on thick. I walked over to her and slid my arm around her shoulders possessively, tempted to give her a quick kiss but unsure if it would be welcome. Before I could give it any more thought, Natalie placed her hand on my cheek and pulled my face to hers, planting a kiss on me that sent my dick tingling, despite the mixed company. I took advantage of the unexpected PDA and pulled her to me, wrapping my arms all the way around her and kissing her back with even more intensity.

“Well,” a peevish voice said from behind us. “I guess I’m not needed here.”

Natalie laughed against my mouth, and we pulled apart slowly.

“Sorry.” She giggled. “Any time I’m away from my man longer than a couple of hours, I just *miss* him, you know?”

“Hmph,” MG replied.

“Sorry, I’m being rude,” Natalie said, pressing her fingertips to her lips like she was trying to hold on to the kiss. “MG, this is my boyfriend James. James, this is my instructor, Mark Gleeson. Everyone calls him MG.”

I screwed up my face like I was trying to remember something. “MG... MG... Oh yes, of course! You recently did a line for Kmart, right?”

“No.” He frowned. “It was a capsule collection for Marshall’s. Very successful.”

I nodded. “I’m sure it was, how nice for you. I remember when you did a line for Bergdorf Goodman. *Long* time ago, huh?”

There was absolutely no shame in designing for discount stores. It could be big money with the right sort of partnership. But I had a feeling that mentioning how things *used* to be for him would sting. Based on what I knew about male designers, I had a feeling that MG had an ego and wasn’t happy

that his star had been falling for years.

“I’m so lucky because MG keeps telling me that he wants to give me extra tutoring,” Natalie added.

The man took a half step away from me. “I, uh, I always offer extra help to students who show promise.”

“Oh, is *that* it?” I exaggerated my response, like I was pretending to buy what he was saying. “Okay.”

“Your girlfriend is very talented,” MG said, shuffling a few more steps away, no doubt taking note of the size difference between us.

“Don’t I know it.” I grinned, squeezing Natalie against my side. I winked at MG. “In a *bunch* of different ways. Have you ever heard this woman sing?”

Natalie full-on snort laughed.

“No, I haven’t,” MG replied. “Is she good?”

“She’s something else, that’s for sure.” I brushed a stray hair off her cheek and kissed her. “Lucky me, huh?”

“If you say so.”

He rushed back to his desk, and I took advantage of the show we’d choreographed by wrapping Natalie in my arms again.

I stroked her cheek with my thumb. “Too much?” I whispered in her ear.

“Never,” she breathed, nuzzling against my touch. I was no longer sure if her responses were part of the act or something else entirely.

I wasn’t about to let the moment get away, so I drew her to me and placed my lips on hers again, cupping her cheeks gently. Natalie circled her arms around my waist and made a little whimper that was a mix of delight and surprise.

We kissed as the noises coming from MG as he packed his bag got louder and louder, making it clear that he wasn’t impressed by what we were up to.

Natalie finally managed to pull away. “We should go. Unless you want to make that exhibitionism fantasy of yours a reality?”

I laughed. “Maybe someday...”

I grabbed her hand, leading her towards the door. She tripped along behind me, giggling.

“See ya, buddy,” I said in an overly cheerful voice. “Nice meeting you.”

MG glanced in our general direction and gave us a halfhearted wave, frowning.

Once we were outside the building, Natalie bent over and burst out laughing. “That was *amazing*! He’s never going to bother me again.”

“Glad I could be of service.” I bowed gallantly beneath the light of a streetlamp.

“No, seriously.” She straightened up and walked over to me, placing her hand on my arm. “I can’t thank you enough. I need to make it through this class, and I wasn’t sure how I was going to keep it up with him harassing me.”

The way she looked up at me, her eyes filled with gratitude and something else I couldn’t quite pinpoint, made me wish I had another excuse to kiss her.

“If he dares to try it again, let me know,” I muttered.

“I’m not sure what more we can do to convince him we’re together. I mean, that was a full-on, hardcore make-out session. What’s left? Fucking on his desk?” She slapped her hand over her mouth as soon as she said it, eyes wide, like she realized that she’d overstepped.

It was my turn to crack up. “Hey, if we have to, we have to. Whatever it takes.”

Her face slowly returned to normal once she seemed to realize that I wasn’t insulted. “Well...it wouldn’t be the *worst* idea...”

My pulse ticked up as I tried to understand what she was saying, because it sounded like Natalie Reynolds had just propositioned me.

I had to be sure, though. “What wouldn’t be the worst idea?”

Even in the dim light I could see pink flooding her cheeks, but she lifted her chin and looked me square in the eye when she said, “Us. We could consider

it practice...just in case.”

She took a step closer to me, biting her lip adorably.

“Practice...*fucking*?” I asked as my pulse ticked up, adrenaline flooding my system.

Natalie nodded shyly, and it was all the confirmation I needed.

I grabbed her hand without another word and pulled her along towards where Hector was parked down the street.

Natalie turned to me, her eyes wild. “James...are you sure it’s okay? With work and everything?”

I forced myself to slow down. As badly as I wanted to fuck her, I also needed to make sure she felt safe. “The company doesn’t have any fraternization policies. Bernie actually likes to brag about how many employee couples Branson has produced over the years. It’s only an issue if you’re uncomfortable with my position compared to yours—if you feel pressured. So are *you* sure? There’s no wrong answer. I only want this if you do, too.”

We stared at each other, and I could see Natalie’s chest rising and falling like she’d just finished a run. My heart thrummed in my chest, ready for her to change her mind but desperately hoping she wouldn’t. Her lips were parted, and her eyes scanned my face as if she didn’t quite believe what we were considering. She looked absolutely stunning as a gentle breeze tossed loose tendrils of hair around her face.

“Oh my fucking god, I want to kiss you so bad,” I managed in a hoarse voice.

“Then do it,” she whispered back, daring me.

I leapt at her, taking her into my arms and easing her back against the shadows alongside the building as my mouth found hers. Her lips slanted against mine, and I let my tongue dart into her mouth, possessive, hungry for more. The kiss in the classroom had been electric, but this one felt wild with the promise of what was to come. She arched against me, and I was sure she could feel my dick straining against my trousers. There was no longer any doubt about what Natalie wanted from me.

“Take me home,” Natalie murmured against my mouth. “Please.”

The fact that she was begging me to fuck her nearly made me rip off her skirt, bend her over in the darkness and take her right there. I gave her one last kiss, pulling away reluctantly.

“My driver is right over there.” I pointed down the block to where it sat idling in a no-parking zone.

“What are you waiting for?” Natalie asked, pulling me towards it. “Let’s go.”

We nearly jogged to the damn thing, forcing Hector to rush to get out of the driver’s seat to open the door for us.

“Home, please,” I said to him, arching an eyebrow for emphasis. “As fast as possible.”

His quick nod was enough to assure me that he’d make it happen.

The moment the partition was up our hands started exploring. We didn’t say a word, as if we were both so wrapped up in our heat for each other that talking might break the spell. I stroked her leg, and she moved it closer to me, inviting me to explore. My hand traced circles on the soft skin of her inner thigh and she sighed, letting her head fall back and closing her eyes. I slid my hand higher, and I heard her catch her breath as my fingertips crested the edge of her panties. She pushed against me, and I cupped her heat, nearly out of my mind with how badly I wanted her.

I glanced out the window, trying to place where we were, to see if I had enough time to enjoy her. True to his word, Hector was making the trip in record time, and I wasn’t about to start something I couldn’t finish.

I pulled my hand back, getting an anguished cry out of Natalie.

“We’re nearly there,” I said. “And I want to wait to enjoy you fully. I promise you, it’ll be worth the wait.”

Natalie snaked her hand to my crotch and cupped my hard length. “I can tell.”

I chuckled, because she had no idea what was in store for her once I got her naked.

NATALIE

His hands were *magic*.

The moment his apartment door shut behind us, his hands were everywhere on my body, caressing, exploring, and teasing. And James never stopped kissing me. I couldn't even see straight as we tripped through his apartment. Everything passed in a blur, from the soaring ceiling in his front hall to the incredible skyline out the floor-to-ceiling windows. The only thing that mattered to me was the way he was making me feel.

Absolutely ravenous.

I felt like I didn't even know my own body. After wanting him for so long I was wild with passion. I just wanted *him*, every damn inch of him. I massaged his dick through his pants as we made our way to his bedroom, getting groans out of him.

"I can't control myself around you," he whispered in my ear as he cupped my ass.

"Then don't."

He stripped my clothing off so quickly that I heard my thin black skirt rip as he pulled it down. James took a step backwards and gave himself a few seconds to admire me as I stood in front of him in just my panties and bra. He

let out a jagged sigh of appreciation.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Natalie.”

I answered him by reaching up to unsnap my bra and then slid off my underwear, so I was naked. He closed his eyes for a second, like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

James moved towards me, but I put my hand on his solid chest to stop him.

“Wait.”

He scowled at me, probably because he didn’t like taking orders from anyone, particularly during moments like this. But he was still fully clothed, and that wouldn’t do at all. I’d waited too long to see exactly what was going on beneath all of his fitted shirts. I slipped the blazer off of his shoulders and started unbuttoning the tight buttons on his shirt.

“Allow me,” he said, gently moving my hands aside. He grasped both sides of the things, then wrenched it open, sending the buttons scattering across the floor. “You were taking too long.”

He pulled his shirt off and I let out my own sigh of appreciation when I saw his naked torso. The shoulders that strained the seams were even more impressive now that I could fully appreciate them. And his chest? All I wanted to do was run my hands down it, to where two hard lines formed near his hips and disappeared into his pants. I held back and unbuttoned his jeans instead, excited to finally see what I’d spent far too much time imagining.

I sighed as I freed him from his boxer briefs. His cock was perfect, so much so that I dropped to my knees and took him into my mouth as James struggled to step out of his jeans.

“Natalie, I...” he managed as I worked him, taking as much of his dick into my mouth as I could.

His breath turned strained as I caressed him with my tongue. I could tell James was holding back, trying not to push too deep into my mouth. The man clearly knew that he had a monster cock. He pulled my hair tie free and wound his hand in my hair, every so often using it to pull me back so we could both catch our breath.

“I don’t want to...” he panted.

I didn’t listen, and took him into my mouth again, but James reached down and picked me up so that I was facing him. I wrapped my legs around him and he carried me to his bed, kissing me the entire time.

I’d never wanted anyone as much as I wanted James.

He placed me on the end of the bed so that my legs were hanging off the edge of it, then dropped to his knees between them.

“*There* she is,” he murmured appreciatively. He leaned closer to me, and I shivered in anticipation. He ran his thumb along my warm, wet heat, sending a shock wave through my body.

I started to sit up. “But I want you —”

“Shhh,” he commanded, placing his hand against my chest and gently pushing me back onto the bed. “I’m going to make you come on my tongue at least once before I fuck you. Got it?”

He didn’t wait for my answer, instead leaning closer to press his mouth against me. I let out a shocked cry as he slid his tongue inside me and then started working me with his fingertips at the same time. The combination of sensations nearly made me come immediately, but I pushed back the rolling waves of pleasure so I could experience the absolute sweetness of what his mouth was doing to me.

“I should warn you...” I panted as he licked and teased me. “It doesn’t take much for me to —”

I couldn’t form the words as he flattened his tongue against me. I swear I saw stars as he caressed my clit with his tongue, over and over again. The orgasm ripped through me, enveloping every part of my body in an explosion of pleasure. I’d barely finished when I realized that James was standing over me, looking down at me with a wicked grin.

“Ready for more?”

I could only manage a weak nod, watching him as he rolled the condom down his cock. He knelt on the edge of the bed, put his hands on my waist,

and guided me to turn over in one smooth motion.

“Stand up,” he said, his voice somewhere between a command and a plea.

I wordlessly did as he said and he wrapped his arms around me, pressing my back against his chest. He traced kisses up the base of my neck, and it was enough to make my knees turn to jelly. I brought his hand up and drew his finger into my mouth, sucking slowly.

“You’re killing me,” he whispered, his breath hot against my ear.

With that, he put his hands on my shoulders and bent me over. He teased me with the tip of his cock until I was ready to beg him to put me out of my misery. James positioned himself against me.

“Ready?”

I nodded, because I didn’t trust my voice.

With that, he pushed inside of me, and I couldn’t help but cry out. He filled me completely.

James started a gentle rolling movement, pushing in and out of me but pausing each time he pulled away. It was the sweetest torture, but I wanted more.

“Fuck me,” I whispered. “Hard. Please.”

This got a grunt out of him, and he picked up his rhythm. James reached down to caress me, and I wanted to scream, because I was close to coming again. But I didn’t want to yet—I *needed* to keep feeling every inch of him.

But it was too late. The haze closed in around me as my body gave into the pleasure he was giving me. I let out an animalistic moan.

The sounds of my pleasure seemed to push James closer to the edge, and he let go with a roar that echoed around the room.

We both collapsed onto the bed, spent and happy. James took care of the condom, then pulled me closer to him, cradling my head against his chest.

“I’ve been waiting so long for you, Natalie. But it was worth it.”

I pulled his face closer to mine and answered him with a kiss. We clung to each other as our breathing evened out.

“I can’t fall asleep yet,” I murmured against his chest. “I’ll be right back.” I got out of bed and pulled on a discarded sweater since the giant room was freezing. “Then...round two!”

James laughed and leaned over to give my ass a smack. “I need a few minutes to recover, woman!”

“Maybe.” I stuck my tongue out at him and ran to the bathroom to clean up.

Before I left I turned to look at my smarting butt in the mirror and spotted a massive pink handprint on it. I stormed out.

“James! You left a *handprint* on me when you smacked my ass! Look,” I shouted, then immediately froze when I saw that he was on the phone.

His eyes went wide and he grimaced. “Yeah, Bernie, that’s Natalie,” he said sheepishly. “Oh, uh...we’re just hanging out.”

My face burned as I realized what was going on. His *grandmother* just discovered that we were fucking!

James listened for a few seconds, his eyes cutting to me. “I’m not sure what she’s up to this weekend.” A pause. “You think? Okay, I’ll ask her.” He listened again. “I mean, I’ll *tell* her. You’re right, no one can say no to you, Bern. You got it. Love you, bye.”

He tossed the phone on the bed with a sigh.

“I hope you don’t have plans for this weekend, because Bernie has just laid claim to it.”

My heartbeat sped up. What in the world was happening?

“I just have the usual boring stuff planned—laundry, grocery shopping, stuff like that. Why?”

“It’s her eightieth birthday, and she’s having a huge blowout in the Hamptons. She said, and I quote, ‘now that you and Natalie are a couple, she *must* come.’ What could I say to her? That we’re just fucking for fun?” He

chuckled. “If you really don’t want to come and pretend to be a couple in front of my family, then I’ll find a way to get you out of it.”

I felt a splinter pierce the joy I’d been experiencing. Fucking for fun? Pretend couple? Yeah, what we had was still brand new, but it meant something to me. What did it mean to him? Was he really as casual about it as he sounded?

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that we hadn’t made any promises to one another. Besides, Christopher had told me during one of our planning meetings that his brother had experienced his own share of relationship challenges. Maybe James wasn’t ready to put a label on whatever it was that we were doing now. It wasn’t like we really needed to have the whole commitment talk twenty minutes after our first fuck.

“Knowing Bernie, she’s probably already sent a group text to the rest of the family saying we’re engaged,” James continued.

I shook off my concerns and plopped down on the edge of the bed. “Well, if that’s the case, you better get the ring right.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Is that a fact?”

“Yup.” I nodded. “Emerald-cut diamond with a diamond-encrusted platinum band, or I walk. I saw it in the window at Tiffany’s.”

“Tiffany’s is for tourists,” he answered, eyeing me critically. “Do you have a carat requirement, or is that up to me?”

“I’ll let you make that decision. Doesn’t have to be huge or anything.” I fiddled with the bedsheet.

“Well, you should know by now I’m a ‘go big or go home’ kind of guy.”

I lifted the sheet and peeked underneath. “That’s *very* true.”

He laughed and dragged me closer to him, circling his arms around me. “You’re ridiculous.”

We snuggled together for a few seconds until I sat up with a start. “I don’t have anything to wear. Like, not a *stitch* of clothing that could be considered Hamptons-appropriate. I don’t even know what people wear in the Hamptons. Blazers with ascots? Riding pants? Gowns?”

“I can take care of that,” he said gently. “Leave it to me.”

“No, I’m seriously stressing out. What will we do all weekend? Play croquet?”

He laughed at me. “Not quite, but honestly, you’re close. Bernie likes to celebrate, and we want to make sure that this event is a big one. It starts Friday night with a welcome cocktail party for just the family. Then we have brunch on Saturday morning, followed by a day on the beach. Big volleyball game, if you’re up for it. Then we have time to relax in the afternoon and get ready for the main event Saturday night. It’ll be a gigantic outdoor party on the grounds, and everybody who’s anybody will be there. Prepare to be impressed when you hear the guest list. Oh, and there’s one more VIP you’ll have to meet.”

My nerves kicked into overdrive. “Who?”

“My mother and her boytoy. I mean, her boyfriend.”

I felt my mouth drop open. James had never even mentioned his mother, and now I was going to be spending the weekend with her?

“Stop worrying, she’s harmless. Plus, you’ve already got the Bernie seal of approval, so you’re golden.”

“Holy shit, now I’m *really* nervous. I thought the celebrities were bad enough.”

“I’d never put you in a position where you’ll be uncomfortable. Don’t you trust me?”

I shook my head vigorously, hiding my smile.

He huffed out a laugh. “Looks like I have some work to do, then. We’ll be on our own on Sunday morning, since most people will wake up with hangovers,” he continued. “Then there’s a quick lunch, and we’re on our way.” He squeezed my hand. “Trust me, we’re going to have a good time.”

“It’s Thursday night. When will I have a chance to shop? Maybe Steph has some stuff I can wear? And if we’re driving to the Hamptons on a Friday afternoon... Oh my god, we’ll be sitting in traffic for *hours*! I’m definitely

bringing my Kindle to pass the time.”

“Ah yes, your porn collection.”

I reached out to smack him, but he ducked away.

“First of all, we’re taking tomorrow off to pick up some clothing for you.” I started to protest but he put his finger to my lips. “Boss’s order. And second, you don’t have to worry about the traffic.”

I frowned at him. “Are we leaving at noon to beat the rush?”

James shook his head. “That won’t give us enough time to get our shopping done. No, we’ll head out at four-ish.”

“That’s still rush hour,” I protested. “I’ve never been there but even I know how bad it gets.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll look down at the congestion and laugh,” he said, grabbing my arm and pulling me on top of him.

“Look *down*?”

He gave me a sexy smile. “Yes, down. From my helicopter.”

James kissed me to silence the questions I was about to ask, and little by little, with each kiss and caress, I forgot about them, until the only thing I could think about was the way he made my body feel.

JAMES

“Love that dress,” I said as Natalie turned back and forth in front of the three-way mirror, checking out the simple black crepe dress from every angle. “It’s perfect for the cocktail party tonight.”

She turned to me, her expression dubious. “You think so? It’s not too short?” She tugged at the hem, which hit her mid-thigh. “I mean, I love it, but I don’t want to be inappropriate.”

“You can’t go wrong with Gucci,” I answered.

“You didn’t answer my question. This is a big deal, James. Is it too short or not? I don’t want to give Bernie another heart attack. Or your mom! I’m totally fine with short skirts, but this is different. This is family.”

I sighed. “With legs like yours, there’s no such thing as too short. We still need to pick up some heels to go with it.”

Natalie turned to look at herself in the mirror, tipping her head to the side. She ran her fingers down the beaded placket. “What about the sparkles? Are they too much?”

“You’re overthinking. You look stunning and you know it. All they do is reflect a little light, they’re very subtle. And wait till you see what Bernie turns up in. I’m guessing a glittery caftan with marabou trim on the sleeves.”

Natalie spun around. “She’s wearing something from our archives? That sounds like a piece from the 1970s Freedom collection.”

“Wow, you and Christopher really went deep, huh? Yes, Bernie loves showcasing archival pieces. Her private collection is museum-worthy. She has a climate-controlled room for all of them.”

Natalie’s mouth dropped open. “I would *pay* to see it.”

“Well, if Bernie deems you worthy, you’re in.” I grinned at her since we both already knew that my grandmother adored her. That much had been clear at Christopher’s apartment. I’d never gotten so many “this girl is a keeper” looks in my life. “Get changed, we’re on a schedule here. We still need some casual outfits.”

She started fighting with the zipper at the back of her neck, contorting herself. “Listen, I do *not* need \$300 Gucci T-shirts. A couple of fancy party dresses, sure, I get going top of the line for that. But you don’t need to spend that much on everyday clothing. Can’t I just pick stuff out at Madewell or J. Crew?”

I walked over to her and slid the zipper down, planting a kiss between her shoulder blades. “You may.”

Natalie huffed at me, hiding a grin. “Never going to let me live that down, huh?”

“Nope! I love that you get your pornography from books.” I sat down on the leather chair as she disappeared back into the fitting room.

She peeked her head out. “It’s *literature*, not porn.”

I chuckled at her exasperation. “Let’s pick up the pace. I also want to hit Bergdorf’s to see what they have for the party on Saturday. I’m not loving the more formal stuff here.”

She popped her head out of the dressing room again, her face white. “Wait. It’s *formal*? Like, gowns?”

Damn it, the woman was adorable even when she was all stressed out. “No, no, don’t worry. It’s not black tie, it’s just dressier than cocktail. Let’s call it

‘creative formal.’”

She closed the door. “You’d think given my job I’d have a better grasp on what’s what when it comes to dress codes, but I still worry that I’ll make the wrong choice.”

“That’s why I’m here,” I reassured her. “I got you.”

A stunning sales associate with slicked black hair back glided into the dressing area. “How are we doing? What else can I bring for you to see, Mr. Branson?”

“I think we’re good. Hey, Nat, can you hand out that black dress, please?”

A hand holding the dress appeared over the top of the dressing room door and the associate took it from Natalie. “That’s all for today? Are you sure you don’t want to try some of our new suits?”

I shook my head. “Oh no, I’m not falling for that again. The last time I was here you conned me into half a dozen new ones. I’m good, thanks.”

She smiled at me and winked as she turned to leave.

Two hours later we were navigating the shoe section of Bergdorf Goodman after finding the perfect dress for Saturday night. Natalie’s face looked pinched, so I walked over to her and bumped her shoulder with mine. I had to wonder if she felt self-conscious because she was the only person in the store wearing cutoff jean shorts and Doc Martens. We were surrounded by ladies who lunch, who kept glancing over at her. But then again, it was also probably due to the fact that Natalie was a stunning natural beauty, and they were all the product of a surgeon’s hand—and *still* couldn’t hold a candle to her.

“Not finding anything?” I asked.

“No, I’m finding plenty,” she said with a frustrated sigh. “But…” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “I haven’t had a pedicure in ages. My toes are a mess. I don’t want anyone to see when I try stuff on.”

“Ah, so we should add that to our list of things to do before we leave, then. Though I bet they’re perfectly fine.”

She grimaced. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“Well, let’s get to picking quickly, since now you’re going to spending time at the nail salon too.”

“Okay.” She nodded, picking over various pumps and sandals. “I’m thinking I can get a little more creative with my shoes since the dresses are more conservative than I normally go for.”

“*Conservative?*” I chuckled. “Your party dress is fire engine red and totally backless!”

She grinned. “You’re right, but it’s longer than I normally wear. I feel like I need to find some unique shoes to go with it.” She picked up a display pair. “Like these.”

She held up an impossibly tall red stiletto that had a chiffon ribbon that tied around the ankle, ballerina style.

“Well, those are sexy as hell. Try them on.”

“I need something for the cocktail dress too,” she mused as she craned her neck to look at the overwhelming number of options.

“These,” I said triumphantly, holding up a black heel. “Gorgeous, and a little naughty, just like you.”

At first the pumps looked like a basic strappy sandal, but closer inspection revealed that the embellishments along the straps were little pointed studs, and there was a tiny black skull hidden in the heel just below the sole.

“James, these are so me! They’re perfect!”

A bearded salesclerk in a suit homed in on us. “Welcome back, Mr. Branson. Let me get those for you, miss. You look like a size...” He glanced at her boot-clad feet. “Six?”

She nodded, shocked. “Exactly.”

“Excellent. Please head into our private seating area. I’ll meet you there.”

Natalie raised an eyebrow at me as she watched the clerk walk away with her selections. “You’re a regular in the women’s shoe department?”

“I’m a regular in *every* department here. Remember, my business is fashion. Half the time it’s research.”

Natalie followed me to a pair of green velvet chairs that were hidden away in a corner of the private room. “So, I don’t have to be jealous about you bringing your many women here?”

That surprised me. Natalie, jealous?

“Please. I’m married to my job, you should know that.”

She gave me a funny look and sat down in the chair, pulling off her Doc Martens and then tucking her bare feet beneath the chair. “Don’t look at my toes, okay?”

The clerk came back carrying four boxes. “I took the liberty of bringing two other comparable pairs that I thought you might like.” He set them down on the floor and started to pull a stool up in front of Natalie.

“I’ve got this, thank you,” I said, blocking him with my arm.

“Are you sure?” he asked, glancing between us. “I’m happy to help.”

“We’re sure,” Natalie answered quickly, tucking her feet even farther beneath her chair.

He walked away frowning, probably worried about his commission, but I’d already noted his name tag and would make sure to mention it at the till.

“All right, miss,” I said, plopping down on the stool in front of her. “Foot, please.”

“James.” She squirmed. “They’re really gross.”

I ignored her, reaching down to open one of the shoe boxes while holding my hand out to her. “*Foot.*” It was a command.

“Fine,” she sighed, slowly placing her scrunched up bare foot in my hand.

I examined it, turning it back and forth and then bringing it up high.

“James.” She laughed as I raised her foot even higher. “I’m not a contortionist.”

I leaned closer to whisper to her. “I seem to remember some unique positions the other night.”

Natalie’s eyes went wide and then she smacked me playfully, laughing.

“Your feet are fine,” I said, turning it from side to side so I could see all of the angles. “Yes, you could use a pedicure, but they’re otherwise unremarkable.”

She smacked me again with mock anger. “*Excuse* me? Unremarkable? Try again.”

“Apologies.” I bowed my head. “They’re absolutely perfect in every way. The most beautiful feet I’ve ever seen.” I ran my hand along the top of her left foot and continued up her leg, massaging her soft skin.

Natalie glanced around, fully aware of what I was suggesting with just my touch. “Shoes,” she said in a breathy voice. “We need to try on shoes.”

I ignored her and ran my hand up and down her leg for a few seconds, then slipped the red stilettos on her feet, tying perfect bows at the back of her ankles.

“Walk for me,” I commanded.

I half expected her to hobble given how high the things were, but Natalie strode away from me with the poise of a runway model. The muscle in her calves and thighs flexed as she walked, and I shifted to try to suppress the growing tension between my legs.

She glanced around the place on her way back to me and came to a stop right in front of where I was sitting and planted her feet wide, in a power pose. The height of the stool put her crotch at my eye-level.

“You like?” she purred softly, winding her fingers through my hair.

I stifled a groan. “I’m addicted,” I said, quickly running my hand up her thigh and slipping it into the gap between her jean shorts and her leg. I didn’t care if anyone could see us, I needed to touch her now. My finger grazed the silk of her underwear, and she caught her breath.

“*James*,” she whispered. “You can’t. Not here.”

I paused, but Natalie didn't move away from me. We were in a remote enough spot that no one could see us. Testing the waters, I stroked her lightly along the silk.

"How are you wet already?"

She whimpered. "Because I've wanted you all day. I can't stop thinking about fucking you."

I worked her quicker, rubbing little circles over her clit through the fabric. Her knees buckled. How fast could I get her off?

"Oh my god, oh my god, don't stop," she whispered, placing her hands on my shoulders to steady herself. Her head fell backwards as I massaged her even faster.

I could tell she was getting closer by the way she pushed against my hand. I was desperate to make her come.

The sound of heels clacking on marble made me pull away quickly, and the hand that Natalie slapped over her mouth just managed to muffle her anguished cry.

"How are we doing in here?" a voice echoed in the distance.

We managed to right ourselves before the clerk turned the corner, but based on Natalie's flushed cheeks and the awkward way I was hunched over to cover my raging hard-on, he probably had a clue that he'd interrupted something.

"Gorgeous!" he said, ignoring the obvious and pointing at Natalie's red heels. "Are those a yes?"

"They're all yeses," I said quickly. "All four pairs. We'll take them."

"But I didn't even try..." Natalie said, frowning.

"We're in a rush," I said pointedly, raising an eyebrow at her. "We have that appointment we have to get to. Immediately."

She gave me a secret smile. "Right. Yes, I'm so ready for that appointment."

"Wonderful," the clerk said as he gathered the boxes. "I'll meet you at the

register and get you checked out quickly. I believe your card is on file, so it won't be but a minute. Miss, you can wear those out if you like; they look fabulous."

Natalie bent down to quickly untie the ribbons on the red shoes and kick them off. "No, here you go. We'll be right up." She handed them to him.

We both watched him leave, and the second he rounded the corner, we flew together like we were magnetized. I kissed her with pent-up ferocity, and Natalie ground against me. I reached down between us and pressed my palm against the seam of her jean shorts.

"I'm so *horny*," she breathed in my ear. She took my earlobe into her mouth and my dick pressed uncomfortably against my zipper. "What the hell are we going to do? I refuse to fuck in a dressing room. They probably have cameras in there."

"How about in a town car with tinted windows and a privacy screen?" I asked, letting my other hand graze across her breast. "I scheduled an appointment at a nail salon thirty minutes from now. We're going to hit traffic on the way there, which means you can sit on my lap and ride me until we get there."

She closed her eyes in gratitude. "Yes, oh my god, yes. Hurry!"

Natalie pulled herself from my arms and stomped her way into her boots, then grabbed my hand and dragged me towards the register.

The clerk glanced over and gave us a curious look as we stumbled closer.

"Sorry," I said. Natalie was hanging on my arm like she couldn't stand on her own. "We're late for a very important meeting."

"Perfect timing, you're all set. It's five thousand six hundred ten for today, Mr. Branson."

Natalie let out a shocked squeak as I quickly scrawled my signature on the receipt.

"Worth every penny," I said, as I pulled her close to kiss the top of her head. "Off we go. I believe there's a special seat waiting for you at the meeting."

NATALIE

I'd never felt more beautiful, which was perfect because I'd also never felt more nervous.

It was partly because of the three-thousand-dollar dress I had on, but mainly because James couldn't stop staring at me. And kissing me. And whispering naughty things in my ear. We'd come close to ripping the dress off and going at it right after I'd finished getting ready for Bernie's big night, but Christopher had texted James about needing him to come down and play host out front, and it was a request we couldn't ignore.

I felt quivery and awkward as we made our way from our room to where the party was being held on the grounds. James had given me an overview of the guest list, and it was a who's-who worthy of a *Vogue* spread, from designers to models to moguls, with a few actors thrown in for good measure. I was definitely going to be out of my league.

Thankfully, James's mother, Kathleen, had been absolutely wonderful, and I knew she'd be another safe haven for me if I became too overwhelmed by the glitterati. She was a beautiful, cheerful woman in her early sixties, with swifty blonde hair and the same bright blue eyes as her sons. I'd half expected her to be snobby, but she'd welcomed me with a warm hug and introduced me to her partner, Teddy, who looked to be in his early thirties. On paper, they might seem like an odd match, but you only had to see them

together to see how happy they made each other. Apparently, they'd met in a support group for families of addicts that Kathleen had joined after Christopher went to rehab.

The family cocktail party the night before had been wonderful, but that was a small group, and I already knew many of the cousins and nephews and nieces through work. Most of the Bransons had gone into the family business—though there were some outliers, like James's cousin Kevin, who was a venture capitalist. But I'd spent much of the night chatting with Christopher, who seemed to be working hard to put on a happy face.

What we were walking into with this party was something else entirely.

James grasped my hand as we came to the French doors that opened up to the endlessly green lawn crowded with people. "You got this," he whispered in my ear. "You're the most beautiful woman here."

My heart swelled at the sincerity in his voice. Our relationship felt so real that I had to keep reminding myself that I was playing a part for the weekend. I wasn't his girlfriend, it was all an act, just like he'd done for me with MG—who, thankfully, wouldn't be at the party tonight. I'd checked the guest list twice just to make sure. Whether or not everyone bought into the idea that James and I were a couple, at least I wouldn't have to put up with his commentary on it.

"Ready?" James asked, planting a quick kiss on my bare shoulder.

"No, but I don't have a choice." I pointed. "Incoming."

Bernie had spotted us and was gliding across the lawn wearing a giant smile, waving both hands.

"Let's go," James said gently, pulling me along.

I noticed heads swinging in our direction as we walked down the grand staircase to the lawn. Obviously James commanded attention, but I knew that my red dress helped.

"Look at you," Bernie cooed, clasping her hands beneath her chin. "The most gorgeous couple here! Natalie, your dress! Incredible. Twirl for me, darling."

I glanced around and discovered that the lead character from a police procedural I watched and his model wife were staring at us, along with a crowd of other notable movers and shakers. I swallowed hard and did a quick spin while Bernie clapped for me.

“You are stunning in red! And those *shoes*. You need to wear color more often,” she said.

“I agree,” James said. “But my girl looks incredible in everything.”

I reflexively reached out to grab his arm, giving it a squeeze. “You don’t look so bad yourself. Don’t you agree, Bernie?”

James was wearing a fitted dark suit that looked black but was actually the deepest midnight blue. I’d wanted to peel it off him the second he’d put it on.

She leaned closer to us. “He looks better than Adam Reynolds.” Bernie pointed through the crowd, and I spotted the famous actor, aka *People* magazine’s current Sexiest Man Alive, downing a cocktail while a crowd of admirers pretended not to stare.

We were surrounded by so many famous people. I fought off a wave of stress and lifted my chin. If only the scared little girl clutching a garbage bag filled with clothes could see me now! I could do this for her.

I snapped back into reality. “Bernie, we didn’t wish you a happy birthday yet!” I exclaimed, happy to focus on one of the safest people at the event.

She swished her hand at us. “Please, everyone has been saying it since yesterday. I’m tired of being reminded I’m another year closer to the grave. I just wanted an excuse to have a party! And to get gifts, of course. Thank you again, darling,” she said to James, stroking her fingers over her stunning necklace.

“*That* was your birthday present to her?” I asked. “Wait a second, I recognize that necklace! Isn’t it the one from that movie about the heiress in World War II?”

James laughed. “Yes, it is. The movie studio commissioned it, but the jeweler—Veritique—only loaned it to them. They usually keep it in a fancy display case at Veritique’s headquarters, but their CEO is a friend, and he owed me a

favor, so I got him to lend it out for tonight.”

“And I very much appreciate it, darling,” Bernie assured him. “Now come with me, both of you. I want to show you off to everyone.”

She beckoned us to follow her, and James grabbed my hand. “You okay?” He smiled down at me.

“Absolutely not,” I whispered out of the corner of my mouth. “But what choice do I have?”

I tripped along beside James, trying to walk with confidence even though my heels were sinking in the grass. We followed Bernie under the big white tent, and I breathed a sigh of relief when we hit the parquet floor.

“Come, come,” Bernie said, walking backwards gracefully like she was turning sixty and not eighty.

I wondered which luminaries she was going to push me in front of next when I spotted a crowd of Branson employees.

“There she is,” Christopher said, raising his glass to me and giving me a genuine smile. “We were just talking about you.”

A woman who looked suspiciously like Anna Wintour snuck over to our group and pulled Bernie away. I quickly scanned the people circled around us and saw the head of marketing, the social media director, the supply chain VP, and a few other faces I recognized from around the office but didn’t know by name.

“Hi, everyone.” I gave a quick wave. “I hope it was all good things.”

Calliope, our social media guru, jumped in. “One hundred percent! We were just saying how incredible your couture stuff is looking. I can’t wait to get approval to start posting; people are going to go *insane*.”

“And we can’t forget that Nat is doing double duty right now,” James added. “Not only is she kicking ass in creative, she’s also filling in as my assistant.” He slid his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder. “This woman can do anything.”

“I’ll second that,” Christopher said. “She’s been my partner in crime getting

our vintage sketches digitized. Without her they'd still be sitting in my closet. To Natalie.”

He raised a glass that looked like it was filled with ice water, and the rest of the group joined, clinking in a toast to me.

My face was on fire with pride and embarrassment. I wasn't used to this kind of attention, but I sort of loved it. These important people clustered around were celebrating my accomplishments like I was one of their own. It was a foreign sensation after being on my own for so long. I'd never expected to feel like I was truly a part of the Branson family.

Or at least the Branson *work* family.

“We'd join the toast but we didn't even have a chance to grab drinks.” James laughed, miming holding a glass out to the group. “Bernie accosted us the second we got here. Please excuse us.”

James took my hand and led me to the bar, and I tried to keep my cool as we passed famous face after famous face. I noticed more than a few models shooting daggers in my direction.

I leaned in to whisper in his ear as we waited for the bartender. “This is a lot. I don't know how I'm going to make it through the night. I'm feeling very... I don't know, very scrutinized. Like people know I don't belong here.”

He caressed my cheek and held my gaze, then leaned down to whisper back to me. “You're doing great, and you *absolutely* belong here.” He gave me a quick kiss on the lips. “And I'm sorry to tell you that you're not imagining it. Everyone *is* staring at you.”

My mouth dropped open. “I thought I was being paranoid!” I hissed back at him in shock, glancing over my shoulder to see if he was right.

“The women are jealous, and the men are horny.”

I punched his arm. “Stop it.”

He laughed. “I'm serious. You in this dress? Criminal. Although you in *anything* gets attention.”

I clutched his arm a little tighter and leaned against him. James kissed the top

of my head. His kisses were frequent and comforting and exactly what I needed. Each one was a little boost of confidence, like he was trying to show the world that I was here for a reason.

That we belonged together.

The night passed in a blur of champagne, phenomenal food, and laughter. Little by little I managed to let go and enjoy myself, to the point where I was actually cracking jokes with editorial director at *Vogue*. I even met the founder of Snug—Declan Byrne—and his wife, Olivia. The Irish billionaire was surprisingly down to earth, despite creating the biggest social media platform in the world. Apparently, he was a friend of James's and since he and his wife happened to be in town, they'd been invited to the party.

"If this one doesn't treat you right, you let me know," he said to me with a teasing grin. "I'll set him straight."

"Hey now, I thought we were friends!" James pretended to complain.

"We are—which is why I wouldn't let you muck this up," Declan shot back. "You gave me the advice I needed to hear when I was about to let someone amazing walk out of my life," he added, pressing a kiss to his wife's temple. "The least I can do is return the favor."

I couldn't believe how warm and accepting everyone was being, as if I really belonged here. Despite the divide between my basic little life and the important people around me, I felt welcomed. Like I was one of them.

It was the last thing I'd expected.

Of course, being on James Branson's arm probably helped. Bernie was fashion royalty and James was the heir apparent.

Things got wilder as the sun went down, especially when Bernie and Kathleen joined the younger models for a bunch of line dances, to the delight of everyone. The DJ finally slowed the music down, hoping to get couples on the floor. Beyonce's *XO* came on, and I shot James a look.

"Do you dance?"

He cocked his head to listen to the song for a few seconds. "Wait, is this..."

I nodded. “Yup, our favorite artist.”

“It’s not really a slow dance song, is it? It’s sort of in between.”

“I don’t care, we’re dancing,” I said, feeling bold, thanks to the three glasses of champagne I’d downed. A few people at our table clapped when they saw me dragging James out to the dance floor.

He wrapped me in his arms and pretended to glare at me. “*Don’t* sing, got it?”

“Don’t tempt me.” I laughed as we started to sway. “You still haven’t paid me for that time I didn’t serenade you.”

“Oh, you mean that little eight inches situation?”

“First of all, ‘little’ and ‘eight inches’ don’t belong in the same sentence. And second,” I ground up against him quickly, “I think you actually beat my estimation.”

He rumbled at me and leaned closer to nibble my neck. “You better stop or I’m going to drag you off this dance floor.”

“Is that a promise?” I pushed into him again and felt him stiffen.

The song had quiet moments and big, sweeping interludes, and to my delight, James managed to match his tempo to the flow of the music. He held me close, then when the song shifted to a faster beat, he twirled us dramatically across the floor.

We were perfectly matched as we danced, our bodies glued together and stepping in perfect synch. Just like when we made love. There was no doubt we were both thinking about the way we moved in bed—or in a car, or a dressing room, or up against the wall. I let my hand slip down to cup his ass for a second, and he growled and bit the side of my neck.

“So are we dancing, or can I steal you away?” he asked.

“I like dancing, but there’s something else I like doing with you even more,” I whispered in his ear. I ran my fingers through his hair, and he shivered.

“Tell me,” he demanded, his eyes burning into mine.

I rose up on my tiptoes and whispered in his ear. “I like fucking you.”

The song ended and we peeled apart.

“There’s a pool house around that corner.” He gestured with his head as he trailed his fingertips up and down my arm.

I wanted to tease him a little more. “Is that a fact? And what would we do in that pool house?”

James pulled me close again, his breath hot against my ear. “Dirty things. Depraved things. I’ll strip you naked and worship your entire body with my tongue. I’ll make you come half a dozen times before I let my dick get anywhere near you. I’ll tease you until you’re begging for my cock. Then I’ll fuck you from behind, because I know you come fast when we do it that way.”

My entire body felt like it was on fire as he whispered filthy, sweet nothings in my ear. I didn’t realize that he’d been slowly walking me backwards, off the dance floor, through the crowd, and out of the tent until I felt the coolness of the night air brush against my skin.

“This way,” he said, pulling me along.

I was so woozy with desire for him that I practically jogged through the grass despite my ridiculous heels. We kissed as he fumbled with the door of the pool house and didn’t break apart as we awkwardly fell into the room once he’d managed to get it open.

His hands slid up my thighs, raising my dress while I fought to pull the zipper on his pants down.

“No time to take this off,” he said as he brought the dress over my hips. He wrenched my thong down and dropped to his knees in front of me. “Oh my god, you look so hot in those shoes.”

“James,” I managed in a strangled whisper as I kicked my thong away. “We don’t have time for you to—” I swallowed my words as his mouth found my warm seam. I threaded my fingers through his hair as pleasure flooded through me.

He pulled away for a second, letting his thumb work me. “Didn’t you hear what I said I was going to do to you?” he grumbled. “No one is going to miss us, trust me.” He dove back between my legs, his mouth eager to taste me.

I came fast and hard even though he’d barely touched me. The noise from the party covered my cries but I still felt like I needed to shove my knuckles in my mouth to muffle them.

James gave me a devilish look. “There’s one. Five more to go.”

I took a step backwards before he could bring his mouth to me again. James tightened his grip on my butt and tried to pull me closer again.

“No,” I breathed, still riding the waves of my orgasm. “Your turn.”

I unzipped his pants and pulled them along with his briefs down quickly before he could protest, knowing that the second I took him in my mouth he’d be powerless. I dropped to my knees and wrapped my mouth around his length, pressing my tongue along the underside of his shaft and cupping his balls at the same time.

“Nat...” He trailed off as I started to rhythmically pull him in and out of my mouth.

It wasn’t easy to take the full length of him, so I used my hands along the base of his shaft. I found a rhythm, but broke it every so often to kiss and suck his balls. His groans filled the room, until he stepped away from me quickly.

“You have to stop, I can’t take it. I need to fuck you, now.”

“I thought *I* was the one who was supposed to beg, Mr. Branson.” I looked up at him from my knees with a devilish expression.

He pulled me up without a word and walked me over to the couch. Then leaned me over the back of it, giving my ass a playful slap.

I heard him ripping open a condom. I glanced back at him over my shoulder, and he gently grasped my shoulders and pulled me towards him. I arched my back so I could find his lips despite the awkward position. We kissed feverishly, and I could feel his cock gliding against me, just waiting. The

sensation was torture.

“James,” I whispered in a ragged, desperate voice. “*Please.*”

It was all he needed to hear. James plunged into me, and we both cried out with relief as he rolled his hips against me.

Maybe we weren't a real couple yet, but *this* was real. And for now, that was more than enough.

NATALIE

How was it possible that the brunch display made me hungry *and* nauseous?

Bernie, James, Christopher, Kathleen, Teddy, and a few other relatives whose names I'd forgotten were gathered around the long table in Bernie's grand solarium, nursing hangovers and trading stories from the night before.

"I always judge a party's success by how many people fell into the pool, and based on what I saw going on last night, I'd venture to say that this was the best one on record," Bernie said, raising her mimosa in a toast.

"Did people fall in, or jump?" Teddy asked as he looked around the table. "Because I definitely jumped."

Kathleen broke out in giggles and reached for his hand. He brought it to his lips for a quick kiss. They were so in love it was almost embarrassing to watch. I glanced over at James, but he seemed oblivious.

"And some of us were pushed," Christopher added, glowering at Teddy.

At first I couldn't tell if it was good-natured teasing or if the two had an actual beef. But Christopher's face transformed into his usual cheerful expression, and Teddy reached across the table to fist-bump him.

"What happened to you, sir?" Bernie fixed her gaze on James, and he seemed

to brace for impact. “You seemed to disappear for quite a while.”

I felt my cheeks go hot at the memory of the fun we’d had in the pool house before people started jumping in the water.

“What do you mean?” he asked, wide-eyed and innocent. “I was there the whole night.”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied. “Maybe I should check the security cameras, because I have a distinct memory of you excusing yourself with your lovely girlfriend right after you danced.”

“My strap broke,” I volunteered quickly. “On my, uh, undergarment. We only missed a little bit of the party.”

“Speaking of missing things,” Kathleen began, shooting a guilty look at Teddy. “I have some bad news about the couture launch.”

James sighed. “Let me guess: you can’t make it.”

“I take all the blame,” Teddy said, raising his hand. “I booked the trip without checking in with Kathleen on the dates, and now we can’t get out of it.”

With their resources I had a feeling that they could change any plans at any time, but I wasn’t about to say anything.

“You two are always on the go,” Bernie said. “Doesn’t it get tiring?”

Kathleen beamed at Teddy. “Never. I’ve always wanted to see the world, but I didn’t have a chance. But *this* guy makes sure my suitcase is always packed and ready. He’s the perfect travel companion.”

“Where to this time?” James asked warily, clearing his plate at an alarming pace.

“Bucket list trip: a safari!” Teddy said.

“Yes, and because of the weather it’s the best time for us to go. I wish we could be there for the show, but you have to understand.”

James snorted out a laugh. “It’s sort of expected now, Mom. We have an event, you can’t make it. We have a crisis, you’re out of the country. Someone needs a shoulder to cry on, your phone is out of range.” He

shrugged, still not looking at her. “But I guess you have to listen to your heart.”

The table had gone quiet as James tossed grenades at his mom.

“Yes, that’s exactly what one must do,” she said in a soft voice. “It’s something I wish you’d do more of, actually.”

Christopher sucked in a breath. I froze, wishing I could melt into the floor.

“And what does that mean?” James demanded, with his fork frozen in the air.

“Well, sweetheart, you seem to cycle through partners fairly quickly. I hope things are different this time.” Kathleen glanced at me and gave me a warm smile. I managed a lopsided grin back, because the conversation made me want to squirm right under the table. James didn’t look any happier to be discussing his past in front of the group.

“I’d say the Branson Boys have had their fair share of bad luck when it comes to relationships,” Christopher said with a frown. “There’s my mess with Amanda, and let’s not forget what Heidi put James through.”

“It was awful,” Bernie agreed. “That story in *People* was so cruel. I can’t believe she had the nerve to say that you’re emotionally stunted. How dare she?”

“The whole article was filled with lies,” James muttered.

“If that was the case, why didn’t you refute it?” Christopher asked. “Let people know that she’s full of shit.”

I tried to focus on the frittata in front of me, but I was riveted by the conversation, as uncomfortable as it felt.

“You know how that works,” James replied warily. “I issue a statement, then she does, then it’s a tennis match of who can hurt whom more. And honestly, she had the upper hand since she claimed I refused to commit to her. Public sympathy was already on her side.”

“Well, that part is *kind of* true, if you ask me,” Christopher said gingerly. “It’s not like you wanted a lifetime commitment from Heidi.”

James barked out a laugh. “Exactly. Can you imagine?”

I glanced at James and tried to figure out if he meant *any* lifetime commitment, or just one with a shallow, attention-hungry supermodel.

“Enough about her,” Bernie called from her spot at the head of the table. “We’re all in a good place now, yes? The Bransons are happy! Right? We’re all happy, happy, happy!”

It sounded like a plea. Everyone quickly agreed, but when I glanced at Christopher, I noticed that his expression had gone stony. And James didn’t even look at me during the whole discussion, to the point where I wondered if he even remembered that I was seated across from him.

I felt a tension headache coming on from the stress of the conversation, but the moment we were back in our room, James swept me into his arms and gave me a kiss that erased any of my doubts.

“What was that for?” I asked when we finally pulled apart.

“For putting up with all of that bullshit,” he said as he ran his thumb down my cheek. “I hate it when my mom brings up relationship stuff. She hasn’t exactly been a great example over the years.”

He let go of me, then pulled his travel bag out of the closet to start packing up even though the household staff had offered to do it for us.

“Yeah, but now she seems like she’s in a good place. She and Teddy are happy, right?” I grabbed my ratty old gym bag and started packing as well. I’d been embarrassed when I realized I didn’t have suitable luggage, but no one called me out for it.

I hugged the red party dress to my chest before gently folding it and stashing it away.

“They are, to the detriment of everyone else.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

James rolled his shirt from the night before in a ball and shoved it in his bag. “Since she met Teddy, it’s like she’s a whole different person. When we were growing up... I mean, I get that it couldn’t have been easy for her. By the

time she was my age, she was a widow with two kids, living with her mother-in-law. She loves Bernie, we all do, but you know my grandmother has a very strong personality. I don't think Mom had a lot of say in how things went around the house. But she stuck it out, putting family first. She was there for *everything*—every T-ball game, every parent-teacher conference, every science fair. As we got older, we didn't lean on her as much, but we always knew she was there. I think she still blames herself for not realizing how bad things were for Christopher, but she was a real rock during the intervention and the process of getting him into rehab. Then a few months later, she's at a support group meeting, and in walks Teddy." James grimaced.

"I thought you liked Teddy," I managed to say.

James shrugged. "It's not that I think he's a bad guy, but I'm not wild about the way Mom fell in love with him, and suddenly that was all that mattered. Nowadays, she goes M.I.A. constantly, and sometimes it feels like nothing matters but Teddy. My mom is in love with love."

I frowned. Part of me agreed that Kathleen needed to be present for her family's challenges, but blaming the very idea of love for her issues? Besides, it sounded to me like Kathleen had gone a lot of years without having much of a life outside of her family. In a way, wasn't it a good thing that she was finally living for herself?

The conversation ended there. We packed in silence, and I wondered if all the talk about Heidi triggered memories. I'd done a tiny bit of research on their relationship but stopped when I saw the beach photos of them in Capri, with a bikini-ed Heidi draped over James's muscular back. The way he had his hands casually wrapped around her arms, like he didn't want to let go of her, made me want to throw up in my mouth.

James came up behind me and slid his arms around my waist, as if he could feel the nervous tension radiating off of me. He kissed the side of my neck.

I closed my eyes at the sweetness of being pressed against him. "Did I do okay this weekend?" I whispered as I leaned back and breathed him in. I'd been dying to hear what everyone thought about me.

He turned me around and gave me a long kiss.

“You were perfect,” he murmured against my mouth. “A goddess among mortals.”

I laughed. “Ooh, say more.”

“I couldn’t have asked for a better partner in crime,” James said, running his hands down the sides of my body and lighting a fire inside of me.

Did we have enough time for a quickie?

“We made a great team, huh?” I kissed him tenderly, then nipped at his lip, which made him kiss me back even harder.

“Oh yes,” he said, backing me towards the bed. “You’re an incredible fake girlfriend.”

My skin went cold, and I wondered if he felt the chill roll through me. It was a stupid reaction since he’d been straight with me about my role since I’d agreed to go. But still...even after everything we’d shared, did he really consider our time together nothing more than acting?

“What’s wrong?” James asked as he pulled away, eyeing me suspiciously. “It seems like you disappeared for a second.”

I smiled even though my insides were churning. “Nothing, I’m fine! Just thinking about the flight home. I still don’t have my helicopter legs.”

He gave me one last kiss, then walked back to his bag, our sexy moment lost. “Don’t worry, there’s plenty of time for you to learn to love my helicopter.”

Plenty of time? How long was this fake relationship going to last? Or did he think there was a chance of it actually turning real? That was what *I* wanted...but did he? He didn’t seem to think much of love.

I had so many questions...but I didn’t dare ask them. When I was young I’d learned the hard way that asking too many questions and making too many demands could bite me in the ass, so I shut my mouth, smiled, and pretended that I was happy to go along with whatever happened next.

JAMES

The couture launch deadline was approaching and the crunch was on. That, coupled with the hunt for Clint and Lorraine's replacements, as well as the upcoming Pantone project, should've been enough to grind me to dust, but for some reason I was more energized than usual. It wasn't hard to figure out the reason.

Natalie.

Even thinking about her made me want to grin. Had I been in a haze since Bernie's party? A high that made me hum ridiculous Beyonce tunes? Yeah, definitely, because the weekend had been even better than I could've imagined. Natalie had charmed each and every person she'd met, but that was no surprise.

The woman was magic.

She'd fit in perfectly. I'd been a little worried that including her in the family celebrations was going to be awkward, but her strong foundation with both Christopher and Bernie meant that they already had inside jokes that made it seem like they'd known one another for ages. And by the end of the weekend, Natalie and my mom were already planning to meet up the next time my mom made it to New York. It was almost as if she already was... well, family.

I actually sort of liked the thought of it.

I could *feel* the smile on my face as I headed for the elevator, and Frank from accounting gave me an out-of-the-blue high five as we passed one another in the hall. Maybe my upbeat mood was obvious to everyone? The buoyancy I felt was canceling out my habitual poker face, probably making me seem more approachable than usual. And of course, the gossip grapevine was probably working overtime with the news that the big boss had taken an employee to a family function. I'd seen the photos of me and Natalie on *the New York Post's* website, so there was no use trying to hide it.

I had absolutely no reason to pop into the creative department other than the fact that I wanted to see her. I could come up with a concrete excuse for the visit, and I'm sure Lavonte would corner me to press me for feedback as usual, but I knew that Natalie would figure out why I was actually there. I didn't care. For the first time in my life I wanted someone to know that they'd invaded my brain.

Most women I'd dated probably thought they held that place of honor, since I was good about flowers and such. Or, truth be told, *Lorraine* had been good at it. But with Natalie, I didn't want to do the choreographed mating dance. She would've seen right through it anyway. And Natalie didn't care about stuff like a box filled with three dozen rare, imported roses. A new sketchpad and box of colored pencils? That was more her speed.

There was a spot on the creative floor, right before turning the corner, where I could observe everyone without being noticed. As usual, the room was buzzing with music and conversation, with Natalie in the center of it all. She'd been elected the group's unofficial leader, and despite her love of the job, it was clear the stress of trying to keep a handle on everything all at once was getting to her. I watched her smile as she chatted with Rhea, but the second she walked away, her face fell. She was exhausted.

My girl needed a break, and fast.

I tried to walk in unnoticed, but Calliope spotted me and shrieked with excitement.

"I get him first," she shouted, running towards me holding her phone in the air. "Nobody move, or I'll hip check you!"

I chuckled at her exuberance. “Hey, Calliope, what do you need?”

She held her phone out to me. “I want your approval to post this. We all decided that this was going to be our lead image for the couture announcement, but since you’re here, you might as well weigh in too.”

I glanced at the photo and wasn’t surprised to see one of Natalie’s sketches on a woman who looked suspiciously like Skyler Honeywell. The executive team hadn’t made the final decision on hiring the model as a house ambassador, but in typical Natalie fashion, she was making her voice heard whether we liked it or not.

“It’s perfect. Post it.”

“This is going to *kill*.” Calliope bounced up and down and her oversized glasses slipped down her nose. “Yay!”

Natalie was watching us from her position in the center of the room, wearing a tired half-smile that went straight to my heart. I beckoned her to me with a wave of my hand, and she gave me a sassy look and beckoned me right back.

A standoff. A reminder of the give and take that was a big part of our relationship.

I felt a tremor roll through me at my casual use of the word, because it *wasn’t* a relationship. Anything beyond casual was a dangerous distraction that would take my focus away from my family and the business—the things that mattered most to me.

But casual could still be a hell of a lot of fun.

Natalie finally wrinkled her nose and stomped over to me. “Hey, stalker.”

“What?” I sputtered. “I’m right here in the open. How is that stalking?”

She leaned closer. “I saw you watching us before you came in. Don’t try to deny it.”

I laughed. “Busted, you got me.” I studied her beautiful face. “Hey, what’s up with those dark circles?”

She winced and her fingertips flew up to touch the skin beneath her eyes.

“Oof, do I look bad? I need some concealer.”

“Stop. You looked incredible,” I said under my breath. “But a little tired.”

“*Someone* keeps me up late,” she whispered back with a wink. Natalie took a step away from me in an attempt to remain professional. “Now, what do you need, Mr. Branson? Because I’m busy here.”

I glanced at the chaos surrounding us, then Natalie’s pale face, before making an uncharacteristic decision on the fly. “We’re taking the afternoon off. You’re working too hard; you’re going to burn out.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock as she gestured around the room. “Huh? But I... The deadlines... I *can’t*! No way.”

“You absolutely can, because it’s boss’s orders. Collect your things and let’s get out of here.” I fixed my eyes on her.

“James, you’re losing it.” She chuckled like she still didn’t believe that I meant it. “Leaving now is a terrible idea. I’ve got six more designs to finalize, Rhea and I have a meeting at three, and I still need to email Christopher back about some stuff. My day is packed.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to delegate. Take a page from my book.”

She snorted. “You? Delegate? Mister I-Can-Do-It-All?”

I grasped her shoulders gently and turned her towards her desk. “Get your stuff. I’ll talk to Rhea and we can call Christopher on the way. No arguments.”

She opened her mouth, and I placed my finger against her lips.

Natalie ducked her head away, glaring at me. “Fine. This makes no sense, but I guess I don’t have a choice.”

“Exactly. I’ll meet you downstairs in five.”



Natalie

I'd dug my heels in when I'd discovered how James wanted to spend our afternoon of hooky.

Sailing. Just the two of us. Out on the ocean.

I wasn't a huge boat person. I wasn't even a *small* boat person. It's not like a foster kid in the city has any opportunity for water sports.

I slammed on my brakes when I saw the gleaming navy and white thing.

"I'm not so sure about this," I said as James took my hand and led me along the dock.

"We'll be fine, I'm an excellent captain. Don't worry."

I pulled back on his arm. "No, James, you don't understand. This is embarrassing to admit, but...I don't know how to swim. No one ever taught me."

His hand moved to gently clasp my cheek as his eyes searched my face. "I had no idea. Should we skip this? Are you too scared?"

Was I? I mean, usually nothing scared me, but the vastness of the ocean was another story.

"I'm just a little freaked out, you know?"

"Of course." He drew me closer and gave me a gentle kiss. "What if we try something simple? We can take a quick spin close to the shoreline and check in to see how you're feeling. If you hate it, we'll come right back to the dock. If you're having fun, we'll keep pushing on. Sound like a plan?"

I nodded, still feeling uneasy. But I wanted to at least try.

It was a perfect cloudless day, and I didn't want to be the reason why James didn't get to enjoy it out on the water. He switched into boss-mode as he talked me through my responsibilities as first mate, which allowed me to focus on something other than my worries about sharks and whales and

piranhas lurking in the depths.

“You okay?” he called to me as we moved farther from the shoreline. “We can turn back, it’s not a problem.”

There was something about the way James handled the boat that put me at ease. He was so self-assured, so capable, that my fears faded despite the endless blue around us.

I actually felt safe.

“No, I’m kind of having fun,” I yelled back to him. “Let’s keep going.”

Once we were out on the open water I discovered that I very much was a boat person.

At least when James was the one navigating.

“Okay, I’ll admit it,” I said to him, holding my hand over my eyes and squinting at him in the warm sunshine, my hair whipping around my face. “This is exactly what I needed. You were right.”

He reached out to gently cup my cheek, and my heart thumped hard in my chest. Why did this moment feel so different? So...*important*?

“I knew you’d love it. But we need to get you some swimming lessons if we’re going to be spending a lot of time out here. I want you to feel one hundred percent comfortable on and *in* the water.”

I didn’t want to read into it, but it sure sounded like he was planning ahead for us. For a fake relationship, all signs were starting to point to this becoming the real deal.

The afternoon passed in a blur of cool breezes and laughter. Boat James was a different person from Boss James. Freer, more relaxed, but just as confident. I’d worried I’d be nervous once we couldn’t see land, but being with him made me feel invincible. Working together to harness the wind was damn close to an aphrodisiac. We were an incredible team.

And deep down, I held onto the hope that we were slowly becoming more.

Because I was falling for the man. *Hard*.

“Shouldn’t we get back?” I asked, pointing at the setting sun.

“That depends on what you want to do,” he said, sliding next to me on the cushioned bench. “We could head back to shore and go to dinner, or we could stay out here beneath the stars, feed each other fancy cheeses, drink wine, and then fuck in the moonlight. Your choice.”

I reached out to run my hand along his thigh. His tanned legs speckled with fine, white-blond hair had been a distraction all day. “Sounds like the decision is already made. I’ve never had sex on a boat.” I paused. “I’m assuming you have.”

“Hmm...” James cocked his head as he considered the question. “Believe it or not, I *haven’t*. And I think that needs to change immediately.”

I felt the bulge in his pants the second he pulled me onto his lap. I’d worn a flippy black skirt to work and had slid off my panties once we got on the boat without letting James know, so when I brought his hand down to explore between my legs he let out a raspy breath of delight.

“You always manage to surprise me. So soft, so sweet,” he whispered in my ear as he gently stroked me. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Natalie Reynolds.”

James knew exactly how to touch me so I couldn’t find the words to answer him. Instead, I pushed against his hand, burying my face against his neck. He’d barely started exploring me and yet here I was, already close to coming.

“Hold on,” he whispered in my ear. “I’m going to make you beg.”

James swirled his fingers against me for a few seconds longer, bringing me even closer to coming, then stopped abruptly. He leaned back to study my face, a little grin on his lips.

“*James*,” I cried out, agonized. “Don’t tease me like that.”

“You want me to keep going?”

I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him closer, and nodded against his neck.

“Say please,” he whispered, his lips brushing against my ear. “Say it and I’ll

give you what you want.”

“*Please,*” I said in a shaky voice.

With that, he picked me up and carried me to the front of the boat. I closed my eyes as he navigated the narrow ledge, and only opened them again once I felt him gently placing me on a cushion.

James draped his body over mine and propped himself up, caressing my hair. “I’ve wanted to make love to you all day.”

A tremor ran through me, not just because I was desperate for him too.

He’d never called it ‘making love’ before.

But it was exactly what it felt like we were about to do. James was tender in a way I’d never experienced as he worshiped my body. The hot sex we’d had in the past was mind-blowing, but our connection in the moonlight felt different. Deeper. When we kissed, it felt like we were giving part of ourselves to each other. I felt connected to James in a way I’d never experienced, and it left me feeling vulnerable and a little scared at the intensity of emotions swirling inside of me.

When I came I didn’t hold back, releasing a scream of pleasure that echoed across the water. James found his release right after me, shouting my name.

We clung together in the afterglow, panting, smiling, and trading kisses.

There were so many things I wanted to say to him, so many emotions that I felt like I had to express to him. The weight of the unfamiliar sensation made me vulnerable, and a little weepy.

James pulled me to his chest, and I could hear his heart pounding.

“You...you do things to me,” he said.

I laughed softly at the vague comment, but my heart knew exactly what he meant. I wanted to soak up the happiness of the moment so I could remember it forever.

James pulled back to stare at me. “I mean it. You make me want to share things that I’ve never shared with anyone. Like being here, on my father’s

boat. This was supposed to be my getaway from the world. From everyone. But all I want to do now is be here with you. This boat feels like *our* place.”

The sincerity in his eyes nearly brought tears to mine. There was no question what I was feeling for the man.

I was falling in love with James Branson.

I almost felt desperate to say the words to him, but I forced myself not to. Not yet. I had to be sure that I wasn't imagining this connection we were sharing.

But deep down I knew that for the first time ever, I was willing to give this love thing a shot.

The warning voice in my head, the one that always whispered that people were going to get sick of me, that any good thing I found wasn't going to last, was quiet for a change. I could only hope it would stay that way.

JAMES

Launch night.

How I hated those words. All of the work and stress and nonstop promotion were about to culminate in a fashion show and party that could make or break Branson Design's couture line. Reporters always asked if I was excited when we launched new lines, and I repeated all the right buzzwords back to give them the perfect soundbite they needed.

But the reality was, if this particular show didn't hit just right, we were *fucked*.

Not that I could let on to anyone that the situation was dire. Even Natalie didn't have a clue. We'd spent the weeks leading up to the event practically living together, but she had no idea how concerned I was.

The Branson legacy was in my hands, which meant that it was mine to lose. Our family's personal fortunes would barely wobble if the company folded, but the weight of destroying something that Bernie had built brick by brick was too depressing to consider. And then there was our incredible team. Dedicated, hardworking people who would lose their livelihoods if my leadership wasn't good enough. The pressure of it all resulted in a tension headache that made navigating the chaos that much more difficult.

It was almost impossible to remain even-keeled, but somehow I managed to

fake it as I strode through the press pre-party. It wasn't like I had a choice since it felt like cameras followed my every move. I plastered on an overwide smile and pretended that I was thrilled.

Calliope bounded over to me. "Hey, boss! I want to post a pic of you and Natalie together, and maybe a Reel too. You up for that?"

No, but I wasn't about to deny her the social media attention we needed.

"I haven't seen Natalie in a while." I scanned the room. "Let me find her and we'll come get you. In the meantime, can you make sure to get a photo of Bernie with Davina?"

The Branson founder and her first fit model were still tight friends, and the pair of senior citizen beauties were always good for an attention-grabbing photo.

I set out to track Natalie down with a pleasantly bland smile still cracking my face. Crowds parted as I walked through the room, and I could feel the cameras pointed at me. It was one of the many aspects I hated about the social media age: I was *always* being watched.

I waved off a few interviews with promises to chat later, feeling more worried as I realized that Natalie was nowhere to be found. She was the reason we were having a couture show, she *needed* to be present. Maybe she was nervous?

One of the waitstaff pushed through the swinging door that led to the kitchen, and I was shocked to see Natalie before it closed. What the hell was she doing hiding out? I stormed over, ready to give her a stern pep talk, and felt surprise give way to horror when I opened the door to find MG looming close to her. Natalie's face flooded with relief when she spotted me heading towards them.

"James! *Sweetheart!*"

I could hear the tension in her voice.

"Well, hello there, BJ," I said, deliberately mangling MG's name. I smiled affably and reached out to shake his hand. "I wasn't expecting to see you here tonight. Did Natalie invite you?"

I knew that implying he couldn't get an invitation on his own would rankle him.

"Oh, come on, James, stop pretending you don't know me. And I'm here because your event planner invited me." He bared his teeth at me in a smile. "She clearly knows who *shatters* in this town."

The man was slurring. He took a step, then tripped on his own feet, and his hand darted out to grab Natalie in an attempt to steady himself.

He wound up grazing her breast as he clung to her upper arm. Natalie looked at me with wide eyes, trapped like a rabbit in snare, and I felt my hands curl into fists.

"Okay, you need to step away from her," I began, trying not to lose my cool. "Let her go."

"Soft," MG said, ignoring me as he ran his hand up and down her bicep. "Do you like that?"

Natalie tried to wrench her arm away, but he tightened his grip.

"We could share her, you know?" MG leered at me. "I think she wants me. I've seen the way she watches me in class, and it's obvious that this girl likes to fuck. Am I right or what? I bet there's enough of her to go around."

My fist connected with his face before I could even process what was happening.

MG went down hard, his reflexes no doubt dulled by all of the alcohol. He stared up at me from the ground, one hand clutching his chin in shock. "You..."

For a moment, I was so shocked at myself that I just stood there, frozen. I had just lost control at the most important event of my life. Me, the guy who *never* lost control, had gone into a full-on rage at MG's crude, insulting words. When the hell had I become this guy, the one who couldn't keep a handle on himself?

And what the hell kind of damage would this cause if anyone saw the head of Branson Designs decking a fashion icon?

“Oh, buddy, you are fucked,” MG said from the ground as he manipulated his jaw. It felt like he was reading my mind. “Oh, you are so fucked. Wait till I...”

He listed to the side as he got up, and I wasn’t sure if it was due to the alcohol or aftershocks from my punch.

“Where’s Grace from *The New York Times*?” MG hollered, looking around. “Grace? Have I got a story for you.”

Damage control. This has to stay contained, no matter what. I could not allow this to be the big story of the night. I took a fast step closer to him to block him and jabbed my finger in his face. “Listen to me. The only story here is how you’ve been sexually harassing your student. Do you really want to have your own personal “Me Too” moment?”

MG still looked dazed. I got a little worried about just how hard I’d hit him.

“My word against hers,” he finally managed, and my hands curled into fists again. I needed to walk away before I hit him again. I’d gotten away with it once, but I might not be so lucky a second time.

I glared at MG for a few seconds longer, making him shrink back from me, then I turned and exited and kitchen. Natalie followed behind me. When we cleared the door, I turned back to face her.

“Do you think anyone from the party saw that?” I asked.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Um, I’m fine—thanks for asking,” she said, a bit of an edge in her voice. And beneath that edge, I could hear vulnerability. She rubbed her hands over her arms like she was cold—or like she felt the need to protect herself. *Shit.* Of course she’d been shaken by that. What MG said was disgusting. No wonder she looked rattled.

“I’m sorry, *are* you all right?” I asked.

She softened, giving me a half-smile that looked tired but real. “Yeah,” she assured me. “I’m okay. Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

I grimaced at the reminder of the punch. “Let’s just hope he has the sense to keep quiet about what I did,” I said. “That’s the *last* story we need getting out

about tonight.”

“Well, yeah,” she said slowly. “Of course I don’t want bad publicity either. But —”

“If you’re really okay,” I said, cutting her off, “I should probably go talk to that *Times* reporter he mentioned. If I can plant the idea that he’s drunk and acting out, then maybe we can keep control of the narrative.”

“Sure,” she said after a pause. “I’m fine. Do what you need to do. Think about the show, not him.”

I took a second just to admire how beautiful she looked. Natalie was a vision in a black dress covered in slashes, safety pins, and visible white stitching. The theme of the show was “Deconstruction,” and she was wearing a dress that looked like the seamstress wasn’t quite finished with it. The effect was dazzling, a display of creativity and daring. The retail-ready version of her dress would be a part of our ready-to-wear line.

In a flash it felt like the energy in the space shifted simultaneously, as everyone peered behind us. A few shouts erupted.

“*Heidi!*” someone yelled. “Heidi’s here!”

My blood turned to ice. I knew for a fact that my ex hadn’t been invited, but she was the only “Heidi” that could evoke such a dramatic reaction. I turned around slowly.

And there she was, the Queen of the Catwalk, wearing our top-secret fucking *finale* gown. Like all fashion shows, we’d planned to end with a show-stopping bridal gown, deconstructed to look like the wedding night had already been consummated, with the bodice half missing to expose a bustier beneath it and the back of the gown raised all the way up to show off a white mesh-clad ass.

Angular and beautifully androgenous Skyler Honeywell’s ass, *not* the ass of Barbie-perfect Heidi Jones.

Heidi looked incredible in the gown, but that was what she did best. Looking good was her occupation and preoccupation. The woman never did anything without considering how it would impact her body. During our year together

I'd only seen her finish an entire meal once, and that was after fashion week ended in September and she didn't have to worry about fitting in clothing and being photographed from every angle each day.

"No, no, no, no," Natalie moaned. "This can't be happening!"

The press swarmed around Heidi while she preened and posed, giving me a few seconds to try to collect myself. We'd never had this type of security breach before. I was going to murder the culprit.

"I don't know how this could have happened!" Natalie said, her voice shaking. "Maybe she tricked one of the other models? She'd know all of them professionally, right?"

Heidi peered around the room and lit up when she spotted me. "*There* he is! James, get over here."

Every camera swung in my direction. I could only be grateful that they were focused on me now and not five minutes earlier, when I'd been having it out with MG. I didn't *want* a media spotlight on me and Heidi, but at least it would look good to the cameras. She'd chosen her venue well. I couldn't exactly ignore her here. Calling her out would just turn this into a scandal that would detract from the launch of the line. I had to play along to keep the focus where it belonged: on the clothes. So I had no choice but to cross the room to Heidi. Thankfully, she was standing in front of the step-and-repeat banner covered with the Branson logo, which meant that every photo of us would result in good press.

The woman knew how to market; I had to hand it to her despite my fury.

"The man of the hour, looking gorgeous, as usual." Heidi giggled when I reached her. She slid her arm through mine and dropped her head to my shoulder. "Okay, people, do we love my dress or *what?*"

The dress someone had *stolen* from us. I punched down the rage bubbling up inside of me. *Keep calm, smile, and pretend that this was all part of the plan. Don't make a scene. Or more of a scene.*

A cheer went up around us to answer her dumb question. Of course they loved it; Natalie had designed it. The gown was perfect.

“That’s a wedding gown, right?” a voice called out from the crowd of photographers trained on us.

Heidi giggled and nodded, glancing at me with the faux coquettish expression I was way too familiar with. She used to try it on me whenever she wanted something.

“Hey, James, you got something to tell us?” another reporter called out, and everyone laughed. “Big time reconciliation, or what?”

The stunt was heading in a *very* wrong direction, but it wasn’t like I could just announce that I’d sooner marry a rattlesnake. Not in front of a media audience that *adored* Heidi. No, I needed to control this—give an answer that satisfied the mob while not giving anything away.

“Let’s just say we still have some secrets, but you’re going to have to wait until the catwalk to find them out,” I said, with as much fake cheer as I could muster.

My eyes shot to Natalie and her expression was openmouthed shock.

People booed good naturedly at my non-answer.

“My boyfriend likes to keep people guessing, even me!” Heidi giggled and squeezed my arm.

I hoped I didn’t noticeably flinch when she called me her boyfriend. I glanced at her and narrowed my eyes so that only she could see. “Yes, seems we’re all a bit surprised today.”

But even as I said it, I knew it would be good for the company and the new line. The fashion bloggers would be writing about us already, but if we could get the gossip bloggers to spread the word—including pictures—then that could be the spark needed to make this all go viral.

“Hey, James, you got more wedding dresses for us today?” another reporter called out. “Is this your way of telling us you’re launching a full bridal line?”

The crowd applauded and I hid my frown. We’d always considered adding a bridal line but now if we ever did in the future, it would forever be tied to this moment. Hell, Heidi might even try to take credit for it. But that was a

problem for down the road. This night still needed to pay off or there wouldn't be a future for the company, with or without wedding dresses.

“You just have to wait and see,” I teased, pulling out all the stops on my acting abilities. I hoped my expression looked believably happy. Heidi and I locked eyes and I tried to channel my rage so that she was the only one who could sense it.

But she either didn't notice or didn't care as she giggled, then leaned closer to give me a kiss on the cheek. She kept her lips pressed against me while the flashes around us made my vision swim. What choice did I have but to put on my trademark smirk and hope the paparazzi were getting the scoop they needed to help make the evening a success?

I glanced beyond the crowd to where Natalie was standing. Her shoulders were hunched and her face looked pinched, no doubt thanks to the way her world had just flipped upside-down within the past five minutes. Punching that bedbug of a human MG *and* Heidi crashing our show in Natalie's finale dress? How much more would we have to deal with? I found myself starting to move towards her without any conscious thought. If it hadn't been for the hold Heidi had on my arm, I'd have walked away completely. I gave my head a quick shake to clear it. That was the second time tonight I'd seen Natalie and just *reacted*, without thinking it through. It made me uneasy. Since when was I impulsive? Since when did I act without thinking? Since when did I lose control?

Since Natalie.

I had to get my head back in the game. I looked around the room and spied Calliope furiously punching at her phone. She grinned at the screen, then glanced around the room. When she spotted me watching her, she hopped up and down and gave me a thumbs-up with an even wider smile.

From what I could decipher, she was letting me know that the world was enjoying the surprise reunion with my ex. That would put eyeballs on Branson, which was exactly what I wanted. Exposure like this, fake as it may be, was priceless in a crowded marketplace. I felt a genuine smile spread across my face at the thought of all of the social media attention we were going to get. And this was even before the show. Things were looking up.

“Give your girl a kiss, will ya?” a voice shouted at us.

A chant started to kick up around us.

“Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!”

Heidi leaned closer to me with her eyes shut and her plump lips puckered. Part of me wanted to look over to Natalie—to check in, make sure she was okay—but that was an urge I needed to suppress. This night wasn’t about making sure Natalie was okay. It was about saving the company. I had to stay focused on that goal and not let anything distract me, not even Natalie. When this was all over, she’d understand.

Staring into Heidi’s eyes, I braced myself to gently grasp her chin and give her the quickest, most brotherly peck imaginable.

When I looked to where Natalie had been, she was gone.

NATALIE

I'd given the performance of a lifetime.

Hovering in the wings and smiling as gorgeous models wearing our cutting-edge designs paraded down the runway, pretending that my heart wasn't breaking over James and Heidi's revelation. I was there to do a job, not cry like a dejected teenager.

I could do that later, right after I screamed at him.

My heart dropped at the thought of the confrontation to come. We were close to the end of the after-party, and I'd successfully managed to avoid James for the entire thing. I doubted anyone had noticed that I was keeping away, though. James certainly didn't seem to. He'd been busy chatting up various movers and shakers. Meanwhile, I'd been kept busy posing for pictures with Skyler, our brand ambassador. People loved the contrast of my ripped up black gown and Skyler in the deconstructed runner-up bridal gown we'd salvaged for her finale dress. It wasn't as perfect as the one that had been stolen from us, but it was pretty damn good.

Because everything I designed was. The ground might be crumbling beneath my feet, but I knew for a fact that no one could touch my work.

"You holding up okay?" Skyler whispered in my ear. "Tired?"

I nodded but kept the smile plastered to my face and adjusted my grip on the glass of lukewarm champagne, untouched but for one tiny sip. “You don’t even know,” I whispered back. “You?”

Her lovely face broke into a genuine smile. “Best day of my life.”

At least one of us managed to enjoy the shitshow.

I scanned the room and spotted Heidi holding court with a group of photographers that I swore she’d hired herself. I was shocked that she was actually able to stand independently. You’d never have known it from the way she’d draped herself all over James. After a while I’d had to stop watching them together, because it felt like my heart was being torn to shreds, over and over again.

That quicksand sensation I thought I’d left behind forever threatened to pull me under any time I thought about Heidi and James together. I was hollowed out, like all of the sweetness of the past few months with him had been siphoned from me.

Heidi had called James her boyfriend, and he’d gone along with it. And *kissed* her! Had they been secretly dating the whole time? I remembered how stupid, how small I’d felt when I found out that Dylan had moved on to someone new immediately after things ended with me. I’d suspected all along that he’d been cheating on me, but I hadn’t known for sure.

This felt so much worse. Not only because he was cheating *right in front of my face*, in this horrifically public venue. But because...because it was James. Because I’d thought we were building something special. Because I’d thought it might really be love—had finally started to believe that was something I could have—only for it to turn out to be an illusion after all.

God, I should have known better.

Once it was obvious that the night was finally winding down, I said my goodbyes and headed for the main doors solo. I had no desire to confront James tonight. I was too tired and raw to say everything he deserved to hear. My only comfort was that the show had been a success. Maybe that would be enough to keep my mind occupied until I managed to fall asleep? Steph had already texted me a half dozen times since seeing everyone posting about it

on Snug, offering to hire a hit man for James, Heidi, or both of them. I'd warned her that I was coming home but in no mood to talk, and she'd texted back a photo of five bottles of red wine.

I threaded through the crowd with my head down, trying not to attract the attention of the party stragglers. Someone grabbed my hand from behind as I was about to make my getaway.

"Hey, where are you going?" James asked, concern creasing his brow. "What's up?"

I jerked my hand away, then looked around to make sure no one had seen. "I'm leaving," I hissed at him. "I figured Heidi would keep you busy tonight."

His expression showed nothing but confusion. "Why on earth—Oh, come on. You didn't think that was *real*, did you?"

"It...it wasn't?" I asked, my battered heart clenching a little with hope so sharp, it hurt.

"C'mere." He grabbed my hand again and dragged me down the hallway to a hidden utility room. He shut the door behind him and turned to face me. "I promise you I am *not* involved with Heidi. I have no interest in her whatsoever."

"So you...you haven't been secretly dating her all this time? You weren't the one to give her the dress and plan for her to make that over-the-top entrance?"

"Absolutely not!" he insisted. "Couldn't you tell how fucking *furious* I was when she showed up? And no way would I have sabotaged the fashion show by screwing up the finale like that. Did you really think I would?"

A wave of relief washed over me, so deep and profound that I swayed a little, unsteady in my high heels. "No, that doesn't sound like you at all," I admitted. "But with that show the two of you put on..."

"Well, once she called me out like that, my only options were to play along or let it turn into a big, public fight that would ruin the whole night."

“Okay,” I said, my shoulders dropping as the tension in them released. With my hurt and anger no longer running the show, my logical brain took over and I slipped into assistant mode. “So Heidi had her fun and got her night of fame out of her stunt, but now that it’s over, you can cut her loose again. I’ll set aside a block of time for you tomorrow to talk with Calliope so the two of you can start working out how to get the announcement out there that you and Heidi really *aren’t* together again.”

“What? No,” James said.

“You don’t want to wait until tomorrow?” I guessed. “Okay, I think Calliope’s been going light on the drinks—you could probably talk to her tonight.”

“No, I mean, why would I have to make an announcement about Heidi and me?”

“Because you’re not actually together?” I said.

“Yeah, but the public doesn’t know that,” he pointed out. “Have you looked at your socials lately? Because the response to Heidi showing up has been *incredibly* positive. It’s pushing the show at the same time, so I call that a win-win.”

I’d been too nervous to pull my phone out of my purse and check to see what people thought about my work. Plus, I wasn’t in the mood to see photos of James kissing Heidi splashed everywhere, with the speculative headlines about their relationship status.

I felt even more nervous now, because it sounded like James was saying...

“Honestly, it’s probably a good idea for me to keep up this charade with Heidi. We’ve got great momentum, and right now Branson needs all the attention we can get.”

That. It sounded like he was saying that. All the relief I’d felt before vanished, drained out of me in an instant. All I felt now was sick.

“You want to fake date *Heidi*?” I demanded. “And I’m supposed to just go along with it?”

“It doesn’t have to change anything between us,” he insisted.

“But it *does*. It changes everything.” How did he not get this? “You think I’m going to be with a man who’s publicly dating someone else? After what I went through with Dylan, you really think I’d do that?”

“It wouldn’t be real,” he argued. “Just a show for the press.”

“Not real?” I shot back. “Like us, at Bernie’s party? You said that wasn’t real. We were just a fake couple, right? Will you and Heidi be a fake couple like that?”

That, at least, seemed to leave him at a loss for words—for all of a minute or so. But then he straightened up, a stubborn scowl on his face. “You know it’s different. You’re just being stubborn.”

“What about it is different?” I pressed. “I was useful to you, I was good for Branson Designs, so I got a fake relationship out of it. Now Heidi is useful, she’s getting you the publicity you need, so she gets a fake relationship too. I believe that you don’t really care about her.” After the things I’d heard him say, I didn’t really have any doubt about that. “But what about me? Why am I different? Why is what we have different?”

Because I love you.

That was all he had to say. Or maybe *It was never fake with you at all—I was just too scared to admit it*. If he’d only say that, everything could be okay again. All I needed was to know that he truly cared about me—that what we had was real. If he could assure me of that, then I’d do whatever it took to get us through this. I just had to know that I mattered to him, that I was more than a useful employee, a fun sparring partner, a good fuck.

The silence stretched out endlessly...and then his phone rang. He jumped to grab it from the breast pocket of his blazer, and my stomach dropped. Apparently, I was taking second place even in a moment like this.

I guessed that was my answer.

“It’s Christopher,” James said with a frown. “He watched the livestream and he probably has feedback, but can’t it wait?”

“You would think...” I began but realized that James had already answered.

“Hey, Christopher, what’s up?”

I couldn’t even muster any surprise or outrage. I felt all tapped out. Utterly empty. It was as if this proof that my feelings didn’t matter to James at all made them all go away. All that was left was cool logic.

James didn’t love me. I would always be an afterthought. And that meant...it was time for me to leave.

“Okay, that’s it.” I put my hand on the doorknob and James finally looked at me. “I’m leaving. Whatever we had—real, fake—it’s *over*.”

“Natalie, hold on —”

But it was too late. In every way that mattered, I was already gone.



“What did you say, Christopher?” I asked my brother. I was having trouble concentrating on anything but the way Natalie had looked when she left. I wanted desperately to run after her...but hadn’t I spent all evening telling myself that I couldn’t give in to my impulses when it came to her? Family and the business came first, always. That was the rule I had made for myself. And that meant this call with Christopher took priority. “You’re too quiet, I can barely hear you. Is this about the show?”

He’d been mumbling and at first I assumed that he was just overwhelmed by the show, but the more he talked the more obvious it became that something strange was going on with him.

“Amanda...” he slurred.

“Amanda *what*? Speak up!” I was frustrated by his timing and bizarre behavior. But maybe if we could wrap this up quickly, I could still get to Natalie before she got too far away. Surely all we needed was a few more minutes to talk and we could work this out. Surely she didn’t *really* mean it was over.

“Amanda is...engaged. And *pregnant*.”

It came out in a sob, and I suddenly realized what was happening. His ex, the woman who told him after they were married that she never wanted children, was going to have a baby with another man.

“Oh, bud, I’m so sorry.” I sighed. “That’s rough. You want me to come over?”

Christopher made a noncommittal noise.

“Hey, talk to me.”

I heard a lot of rustling.

“I’m just so tired,” he slurred. “I need to sleep now, m’kay? Good night and goodbye, brother.”

Then it hit me. His speech and weepiness felt familiar. “Did you take something? Christopher?”

“Huh? Take what, James? You mean pills?” A snuffle. “Yesh...I took a couple. But I sorta lost track of how many.”

Fuck! My brother had overdosed again and he was alone at home!

“Hey, keep talking to me,” I demanded. “What did you have for dinner?”

I jogged out of the storage closet and ran right into Rhea, who was mercifully alone. Despite her tendency to gossip, I knew I could trust her if I swore her to secrecy.

“Congrats to us,” she sang, waving her hands over her head. “What a wonderful night!”

I held out my hand.

“Rhea, I need your phone, now. Family emergency.”

Her smile faded when she saw my expression, and she sifted through her purse. “Of course, here.”

I handed her my phone so she could try to keep Christopher engaged and

conscious while I called for help. “Christopher isn’t doing well. I can’t get into details but just keep him talking to you while I call 911.”

Her face went white as she held the phone to her ear, but her voice rang out with her usual cheer. “Christopher, my love, it’s Rhea! Hi there, you. Let’s gossip about the show, honey. You saw it right? Wasn’t it incredible?”

She listened for a moment then nodded at me, and I walked a few paces away to call the ambulance and gave them instructions on how to get to my brother. Thankfully, no one was around to witness the latest challenge in this topsy-turvy mess of a night. I walked over to where Rhea was perched on a couch.

“Did you like that part, honey?” Rhea said into the phone, staring blankly ahead of her. “When Skyler Honeywell came out in the ripped-up version of your first ever design? Everyone went crazy!” She listened for a few seconds. “Uh-huh, I know! You *were* a newbie back then. But you had so much talent. Everyone saw it. Your grandmother always said that there’s no one better.” Rhea forced out a laugh. “I know! We can’t tell anyone. It’ll be our secret, okay? I’m going to give you back to James now. You take care, okay?”

Her eyes were round when she handed the phone back to me. “He sounds really bad,” she whispered.

I nodded and pressed the mute key, worried about what Christopher might do if he overheard. “The ambulance is on the way and I’m going to meet them there. I appreciate your help. As always, this is a family matter. Don’t breathe a word about this to anyone. We don’t need negative attention competing with the show.”

“Of course,” she said as she stood up slowly. Rhea pulled me into her arms for a quick hug, catching me off guard. “It’s going to be okay, don’t worry.”

I gave her a cursory pat on the back and stormed off into the night, hoping that she was right.

JAMES

L eading with your heart always ends up like *this*.

Pain. Drama. Stress.

I glanced over at my brother in the hospital bed. He looked pale and small, but he was still here. Broken, but alive. My relief was tinged with guilt. Had I missed the signs? Was I so wrapped up with Natalie and work that I'd neglected the one person who needed me most?

It was too painful for me to even consider. I'd allowed my life to stray from the well-worn path that had kept me in control, and now I was paying the price.

It was just after seven in the morning, and I'd managed to sleep in the uncomfortable bedside chair for a couple of hours. My back was screaming for a real bed, but I wasn't going anywhere until Christopher woke up and we talked. I needed to be one hundred percent sure that he was going to be okay.

At least for now.

I was too tired to think through his next steps. Rehab again? Finding a new therapist? I closed my eyes, overwhelmed with everything I needed to work through, both with my family and my business.

I was tempted to call Natalie, since she and Christopher seemed to share a

brother-sister bond—maybe seeing her would help him—but I soon realized that it wasn't my place to say anything to her. Plus, she probably wouldn't pick up my call anyway. I dragged my hand across my eyes, then ground my knuckles into them. So much had gone on that I'd barely had a chance to think about the Heidi debacle, and how Natalie had responded to it.

I glanced over when I heard rustling coming from the bed.

“Did she call?” Christopher asked in a groggy voice. “Amanda? Did she call you?”

Shit. His first waking thought was of his ex. He was worse off than I realized.

“Hey, dummy,” I said gently, reaching over to squeeze his bicep. “Nice to see you too.”

He gave me a half smile. “Hi, jackass. Guess I did something stupid, huh?”

“You think?”

His face cycled through a series of emotions as he seemed to remember what had led to him waking up in a hospital bed. “Does she know?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. At least I don't think so.”

“Check my phone.” Christopher nodded towards the pile of his belongings on the table across the room. “I, uh, I think I texted her some weird stuff last night.”

I grabbed his phone and walked it back to him so he could unlock it.

“I don't have my glasses,” he said, handing the phone out to me. “You can read it.”

I held my breath as I scrolled to his last series of texts to his ex and discovered it was as bad as I'd imagined. A selfie of him with tears running down his cheeks. Three texts in a row with just the word “Why?” A message saying he hated her, and that he was blocking her. Another one stating that she was going to be sorry. Then an unintelligible string of random letters and numbers. She finally texted back with just a question mark, then a follow-up text that said, “Call me.”

“So?” he asked. “Did I embarrass myself?”

“Uh...I’m gonna be honest. It’s not your best work, bro. The string ended with her asking you to call her.”

“Shit.” Christopher closed his eyes. “I can’t talk to her right now. Can you? Please? Don’t give her too many details, but tell her I’m okay, and I’ll leave her alone now.”

I didn’t have the heart to say that she probably wouldn’t care one way or the other. For that, and for everything else, I was glad that I was the one who’d be talking to her. I wasn’t about to lose the chance to stick up for my brother.

“Sure, you got it. I’m going to make this call on my own, okay? You rest, and I’ll take care of it.”

I strode down the hallway to a small meeting room with a door and made a mental note that I needed to have Christopher transferred to one of the private suites once he was stable. Privacy was paramount, especially given the timing of everything else that had just gone down.

I scrolled through Christopher’s contacts and frowned when I got to Amanda. The profile photo was from their wedding day, with his ex looking radiant in her gown and veil. Seeing it made me feel sad for my brother and everything he’d lost, and even more furious with Amanda for everything she’d taken from him. I pushed her number without even considering what I was going to say to her. I’d never liked Amanda and she knew it, but I was calling from Christopher’s phone, so she’d probably pick up, if only to yell at him for creeping her out the previous night.

I wasn’t expecting the deep voice that answered.

“What the hell do you want now, Christopher?” a deep voice snarled. “You’re a fucking psycho, you know that? You’re a total fucking weirdo, and you need to stop obsessing about Amanda. She hates you, dude. You hear me? When is that going to sink into your thick fucking skull, you freak?”

Thank god I was the one making the call. My fists curled in fury.

“Who are you?” I demanded in a low voice. “Put Amanda on.”

“It’s Tim, you idiot. Amanda doesn’t want to talk to you, got it? You need to leave us the hell alone. She needs her peace because she’s *having my baby*.”

He said it in a taunting voice, which made it clear that he knew how much it would hurt my brother. A haze of red-hot anger shot through me.

“This is *James* Branson, and you need to back the hell off, buddy,” I growled. “Put Amanda on the phone. *Now*.”

“Oh, fuck off,” he shot back. “She’s done with him. If he doesn’t stop calling, Amanda is going to file for a restraining order. You and your psycho brother need to leave us alone.”

He hung up before I could respond, and I was left staring at the phone. I collapsed into the chair so I could figure out my next steps before going back to Christopher’s room.

I had to be honest with him despite his tender state. It was time he understood that Amanda didn’t care about him, and he was only going to hurt himself more if he kept trying to connect with her. But why couldn’t he see that for himself? Was he so blinded by love that he’d lost all sense of reason?

The thought punched a hole through me. Love makes everything fall apart. And I could see that it had started to do that to me. Punching MG, nearly pulling away from Heidi and blowing the biggest PR coup I’d ever seen just because Natalie had looked *sad*. Hell, I’d almost ignored Christopher’s call just so I could try to fix things with her. And if I’d done that, my brother might now be dead. The feelings I had for Natalie...I didn’t want to call them love, but what else could they be? Still, whatever they were, I didn’t want them. Couldn’t handle them. Had no space in my life for them.

Relationships were a waste of time and effort. Someone always ended up hurt. It was better for me to stick to “no expectations” dating with women who only liked me for my bank account. *Those* types of women I could handle. I knew I could never lose my heart to a gold-digging fashionista who cared more about getting the perfect social media shot than actually living a genuine life.

I clenched my jaw, because I could almost feel the stirrings of missing Natalie already. But I wasn’t going to allow it to sway my resolve. Natalie

had said it herself—we were over. And since she was the one who had ended it, I didn't actually need to do anything. I didn't have to find a way to explain to her why it wouldn't work. Didn't have to deal with her response, or with the possibility that it would make her cry. I could just do...nothing, and our relationship would be in the rearview mirror. Out of sight, hopefully, soon out of mind. It was better that way—for both of us.

Christopher was probably wondering what the hell was going on, and why I was taking so long. I let out a long sigh as I tried to come up with a way to tell him that he, too, needed to move on, once and for all.

A nurse bustled out of his room as I walked in, which meant he'd be wide awake for the conversation to come.

"What happened?" he demanded, sitting up in bed. "How did it go?"

I sat in the chair next to the bed. "We need to talk."

"Why?" He shrank back and my heart fractured to see my strong brother so broken. "What did she say?"

"I didn't talk to her, Tim picked up. He said that you need to stop calling." I neglected to add the part about a restraining order.

"That asshole," Christopher said.

"Yeah, he is, but...I agree with him. It's time to move on." I said it softly, sure that he was going to crumble. "She doesn't love you anymore."

He smacked the bed in frustration. "I know that. You think I don't know that?"

"Well, I mean..." I gestured to the machines that were connected to him. "Honestly, I'm not sure."

"James, I want *clarity* from her. I want to have a conversation with her, that's it."

"Then why did you end up here?" I asked, sounding more angry than I meant to. "You're a smart guy, Christopher. You know you're not going to find clarity in a bottle of pills."

He closed his eyes and turned his head away from me.

“What clarity could Amanda even give you?” I asked, hoping that he wouldn’t shut me out completely.

He turned back to me, his face contorted and his eyes shining. “She could give me an answer about what Tim has that I don’t. Why that fucking clown is fit to be a father and I wasn’t.”

Seeing my brother in that kind of pain was a dagger in my heart, especially knowing there was nothing I could do to fix it.

“Is it me?” he asked, a desperate tone in his voice. “You can tell me, James. Is there something...*off* about me?”

The way he asked the question gutted me.

“No, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with you. You’re amazing.”

“And that’s why I need to talk to her,” Christopher yelled, caught in a loop of anger and pain. “If she would just talk to me, I could figure it out. Fix it, you know? One conversation, that’s all I need. It would be so good for us.”

I was exhausted from the past twenty-four hours and sick of his obsession with his ex. I needed to put a stop to his delusions. “Christopher, Tim said that if you ever reach out to them again, they’re filing a restraining order, okay? Do you get it now? They’ve moved on, and you should too. Your behavior is getting weird.”

The second the words were out of my mouth I regretted them. Christopher withered as if I’d punched him.

“She said that?”

I backtracked quickly. “Tim did, not her. But you shouldn’t test them, okay? Let’s focus on getting you out of here, and then we can work on a new strategy to keep you in a healthy place. Maybe we need to get you more involved at work? That could help, right? Staying busy is always a good idea.”

“Natalie said the same thing,” he murmured, staring at the wall beyond me.

She was the last person I wanted to think about in this moment.

“She’d almost convinced me to start coming back to the office one day a week.” He finally looked at me. “You two are good together; I envy your relationship. Maybe someday that’ll happen for me too.”

A painful sensation radiated in my chest. I wasn’t about to tell him what had gone down with her, not now while he was so vulnerable.

“The only person I’m thinking about right now is you,” I said, reaching out to grab my brother’s hand. “Got it?”

What I didn’t tell him was that my heart couldn’t handle any thoughts of the woman I was leaving behind.

NATALIE

“Is this how you celebrate a triumphant debut?” Steph demanded, frowning at me with one hand on her hip. “Your name is basically up in lights, right under Branson. You’re a friggin’ superstar now. So why the hell are you moping around on the couch?”

I flopped onto my back and stared at the ceiling. “Have you not been paying attention to everything I’ve told you over the past forty-eight hours?”

She walked into the room still holding the spoon from her oatmeal and plopped down next to me. “Duh, of course I’ve heard you. I’ve heard every word, and I get that James acted like a total dick. But I think we both sort of knew that your relationship was more of a fling. I know I’ve never met him, but he doesn’t seem like the type of guy who’s looking for long term, you know? I thought you were okay with that. Why is it coming as a surprise to you?”

I shrugged and bit down on my lip to keep from crying. “Because it really seemed like he *wasn’t* a total dick, Steph. He was...special. And sweet. And romantic.”

“Yeah, and he kissed his supermodel ex on the world’s stage, so there ya go: total dick.”

I punched her leg and frowned.

“What? You know I’m not wrong.”

I didn’t answer, because deep down it *did* feel like she was wrong about James. And that’s what I couldn’t figure out. How could I have been so wrong about someone who I thought could be a part of my forever?

Not that it mattered, because he’d screwed me over, royally. And my phone had been silent since, which told me everything I needed to know about James. I’d hoped that maybe he’d call me, or better yet, show up on my doorstep to tell me that he’d made a huge mistake, and that he only cared about me.

I snorted softly. *Yeah, right.*

“What are you laughing about?” Steph asked.

“If I don’t laugh I’ll cry,” I said simply.

She leaned over to give me a kiss on the cheek and walked back to the kitchen. “You know what’ll make you feel better?”

“A dozen cupcakes? A month-long nap?”

“No, a nice, big —”

“Don’t you dare say workout,” I cautioned.

“*Workout!*” she exclaimed triumphantly, flexing one muscular arm. “C’mon, it’ll be fun! I’m going to go change.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming text, and I jumped to grab it, still hopeful that maybe James had come to his senses.

It was Rhea, asking if she could call me.

I placed the phone on my chest and sighed. Work. I’d called in sick but that clearly wasn’t enough to stop dear old Rhea from crossing the line. A part of me wished I was with my colleagues to celebrate the success of the show, but every time I thought about going to the office, I could envision James hovering in the background.

I wanted to quit. No, I *needed* to quit.

I closed my eyes and imagined marching into HR to hand in my notice, only to feel tears spring to my eyes. I absolutely loved my work, and my salary was at an all-time high. I just wished I didn't have to associate the best job of my life with my biggest heartbreak. How could I get past all of my mixed-up, lovesick feelings and act like James was just my boss again? My body would probably always have an involuntary reaction to seeing him. Would it be possible for me to sit in a status meeting without focusing on the lips that had explored every inch of my body? And what about if our hands touched accidentally? Could I keep the goose bumps from spreading along my arms?

My phone rang and once again my heart fell out of rhythm until I saw who it was. Dammit, Rhea was persistent.

"Hey there," I answered. "Everything okay?"

"Why aren't you here with us today?" she pouted. "The woman of the hour, the brains and the beauty behind our latest success!"

"Yo, where *are* you?" a voice in the background called out that I recognized as Lavonte's.

I frowned. I wanted to be there, but I also couldn't bear the thought of it.

"Sorry, I just wasn't feeling great today," I answered.

"I bet. You really busted your ass right up until the last minute. You must be exhausted."

"Yeah, I've been better," I admitted.

"I understand. And you're not the only one," she said and tutted. "Such tough timing for a family emergency."

I sat up straight. "Family emergency? What's going on?"

A beat of silence. "Oh. I thought *you* would know better than me. The company-wide message just mentioned a family emergency. No details, and I swore to James that I wouldn't talk about it."

I realized that this was more than just a welfare check. Rhea was trying to pump me for details about something, assuming that James and I were still together.

“Talk about what?” I asked as I considered the many things that could’ve gone wrong since James and I last spoke. “Rhea, tell me what you know.”

She sighed. “I said I wouldn’t tell anyone...”

“Fine, I’ll call you back later when I know more. Talk soon.” I quickly hit the disconnect button.

My heart thumped wildly. Could it be Bernie? Another heart attack? I dialed her number before I could think twice.

“Natalie, honey.” She answered the phone on the first ring, and I slumped with relief that her voice sounded as strong as ever. “Are you coming to the hospital?”

My pulse ratcheted up again. “Hospital? What happened, Bernie? Are you okay?”

“Oh, sweetheart...no one told you?”

“Told me what? I know nothing, *who* is in the hospital, and why?”

“I’m so sorry you didn’t hear. Everyone has been so consumed by this that we must’ve forgotten to reach out to you. James has been beside himself, as you can probably imagine. But I’m surprised that he didn’t even text you.”

I gritted my teeth waiting for her to finally connect the dots for me. “Can you please tell me who is in the hospital, Bern?”

“It’s Christopher. He, um...he had an episode and misjudged the number of pills he took.”

A *suicide* attempt? What had triggered it? Christopher had seemed like he was beginning a new chapter, so why would he resort to hurting himself?

“Is he okay?” I asked tentatively. “Is he awake?”

“Yes, sweetheart, he’s stable now. They need him to stay a little longer, though, because they’re running some test to check his liver enzymes, or something like that. Maybe his kidney, I can’t remember.”

“Do you know why he, uh, *misjudged* the pills?”

“Amanda is engaged. And pregnant.”

I breathed out my shock. “Oh no. That must’ve been so hard for him to hear.”

The one-two punch of his ex’s life changes probably toppled Christopher’s shaky emotional foundation. He always found reasons to mention her when we worked together, whether it was recalling a party she’d thrown or mentioning how amazing she looked in one of the designs. It didn’t seem like he was still in love with her, since there was always a hint of anger in his memories. But he seemed stuck in the past, tied to the woman in a way that made it impossible for him to move forward—despite how promising the future looked. It wasn’t lost on me that he always brightened when Julia came up, and I’d hoped that she could be a way forward for him.

“I think he just wanted a good night’s sleep, you know?” Bernie said. “We’ve all been so busy. It’s normal to want a little help. Right?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I’d never been so desperate for sleep that I’d overdosed on pills.

“He’s getting the care he needs now, that’s all that matters,” I said.

“I think he’d love to see you,” Bernie replied softly. “Connecting with the people he cares about is good therapy. And of course, I know it would make all the difference in the world to James to have you by his side.”

My heart clenched when I realized that Bernie didn’t know how much had changed. She probably saw the Heidi mess through a different lens, like Heidi’s appearance at the show was a choreographed stunt. It wasn’t like James would have had the time to explain it to her.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea?” I asked softly.

“I do,” she said quickly. “In fact, I *demand* that you come. You always make Christopher smile, Natalie. You remind him how important he was to our company. You gave him a reason to get out of bed and focus. I’ve seen a new spark in him since the two of you have been brainstorming.”

I’d seen it as well. Not that I knew Christopher before, but I’d definitely seen him shift from a casual observer of my work in the beginning to an eager participant. Maybe she was right? Maybe if I showed up at the hospital I

could take his mind off his troubles for a bit? I wasn't sure how I felt about seeing James...but if he'd been up with Christopher all night, as I was sure he had, then maybe he'd be heading home to get some sleep around now.

"Okay, I'll come. How long will you be there today?"

"I'm actually leaving shortly," she said. "I have a doctor's appointment that I can't miss, but I'll be back right after it. James has been in and out, but you can probably sync up your visits."

"I'm going to head over now," I said quickly. "I hope to see you, Bernie."

"Me too, sweetheart." She sighed. "Oh, what a rollercoaster life has been lately. Here's to brighter days ahead."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that "brighter days" didn't sound even remotely possible for me.

We hung up and I dragged myself from the couch.

"Good, you're up," Steph said as I passed her in the hallway. I wasn't surprised to see that she was already in her workout clothing. "I've got a great new ab routine you're going to hate. Go get changed."

"Can't. I need to get to the hospital. Christopher, uh, took too many sleeping pills when he found out his ex was engaged and pregnant."

Her mouth dropped open. "Oh, wow. That's awful. But Nat...do you really want to get mixed up in their personal lives given everything that happened with the asshole? Maybe some distance is a good thing right now."

I shook my head and my half-up bun flopped around, reminding me that I probably looked like I'd slept under a bush. "This is different. Christopher and I had a friendship that's bigger than Branson. I need to at least show up and tell him I'm pulling for him, you know?"

Steph half-smiled at me. "You're a good person. A pain in the ass, but a good person."

"Thanks. You might be the only person who feels that way. James sure as hell doesn't."

The wave of unexpected grief made me nauseous. I loved that I could always count on Steph's support, but it was a stark reminder that she was the one and *only* person I'd gotten truly close to who hadn't let me down. My whole life had been a series of starting over, and here I was again, pretending that I was fine despite my fractured heart.

"Hey," Steph said as she gently grasped my shoulder. "I know this is tough."

She pulled me into a hug, and I finally let the tears flow. Better now in the privacy of my own home than at the hospital. I needed to be strong for Christopher, and also for myself if James happened to be there. I didn't want him to know how badly he'd hurt me. Hiding my pain had always been a part of my coping mechanism when I was rejected. Chin up, shoulders back, and ready to move on as if I didn't have a care in the world.

"I'm going to bake up the most sinful chocolate chip cookies you've ever tasted," Steph said when she finally pulled back. "We'll eat half raw, and the rest cooked. We can drain a bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream, too. Sound good?"

I sniffled. "You mean you're not going to force me to work out?"

She placed her hand on my cheek and smiled at me. "My sister by another mister needs a break, and I'm going to make sure she gets it. Now, go get ready to show the Bransons that you're unbroken. Go be there for Christopher, and when you get home, I'll be there for you."

My bottom lip trembled, and Steph wagged a finger at me.

"No more tears until you come home, got it? Dig up some of that strength I know you have, do what you gotta do at the hospital, then come home and break down with me."

I nodded. "I can do it."

"I know you can," Steph said. "And that's just one of the many things I love about you."

She gave me another squeeze and I headed for my room, trying to figure out how to fake that I was okay yet again.

JAMES

“I need to talk to him.”

Amanda was the absolute last person I expected to see at the hospital, but there she was, standing in the hallway outside Christopher’s door. As always she was impeccably turned out, her blonde hair pressed into a gleaming waterfall, wearing a dress that I recognized as Armani, paired with red-bottom stilettos. I glanced at her still flat midsection, guessing that she had a few months left in heels that high.

I managed to camouflage my shock. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. He’s still recovering, and seeing you might set him back.” I moved between her and his hospital room door, a not-subtle reminder that I would always be my brother’s guardian.

I felt a pinch between my temples as I acknowledged that lately I’d fallen down on the job, and his hospital stay was the result.

“Don’t make this difficult, James.” Amanda scowled at me. “It’s Christopher’s decision, not yours. If he wants to kick me out, then I’ll leave, but you can’t make the choice for him.”

“What about the restraining order you threatened? That could go both ways, you know.”

“Restraining order?” Amanda’s face twisted up in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Your *fiancé* told me about it,” I sneered.

“Oh, ignore him. He has a flair for the dramatic,” she said brusquely. “What’s happening now is between me and Christopher. Not Tim, and especially not you.”

I was gritting my teeth, probably to keep from hurling a string of insults at her. Damn it, she was right. And I realized that despite everything he’d been through, Christopher probably did want to see her.

I wordlessly stepped to the side so she could pass.

Amanda paused as she put her hand on the doorknob. “I know you think that what happened is my fault, but I’m allowed to move on with my life. And he should too.”

I crossed my arms, unwilling to admit aloud that I knew she was right. My allegiance to my brother was too strong for me to make nice with the woman who’d broken him.

“Don’t talk about the baby,” I warned her. “Because you know he wanted that more than anything, Amanda. He begged you to start a family, and you said you never wanted to have children, ever. And now you’ve decided to do just that with someone else.”

The comment hit my mark. Amanda winced for a moment before she could get her expression under control. Then she stepped into Christopher’s room.

Part of me wanted to press my ear to the door and listen to what was going on inside the room. I couldn’t imagine what Amanda might want to say to him, or how he’d react. I felt relieved that he was in a safe place, and that the various alarms attached to him would alert the nurses if something went south.

I cursed the fact that I even had the thought.

Waiting outside the door made me feel like a bouncer, so I decided to head down to the coffee stand in the lobby. My phone never stopped buzzing with

work-related alerts and messages but, I was in no mind to try to put out fires at Branson. My sole focus right now *had* to be on my family. I pulled the cursed thing from my pocket to turn it off and fumbled with it, realizing that I had no clue how to do so. My phone was never off. I was so focused on clearing the notifications off my screen that I didn't realize that I was taking up half the hallway.

"Excuse me," a brusque voice rang out.

I looked up with an apology on my lips only to discover the last person I expected to see staring at me.

"Natalie..."

"Bernie told me to come," she explained, her face stony. "I didn't think you'd be here."

My heart reacted viscerally, beating wildly at the sight of her. She looked beautiful and sad and angry, and all I wanted to do was wrap her in my arms. My body ached to connect with her, to find comfort in her touch, because absolutely everything in my world felt broken. But then I remembered that I couldn't give her what she needed. And that meant that keeping my distance was better for both of us.

"Christopher will appreciate it, I'm sure," I finally managed.

Her eyes looked red ringed, and her skin was pale and blotchy. She was still unbelievably beautiful, but broken in her own way.

We stared at one another in silence for too long.

"His room is that way?" she finally asked, pointing beyond me.

I felt like I was underwater, with all of my reactions slowed. "Yes, but you can't go in."

She frowned at me. "*Excuse me? Why not?*"

I recognized the edge in her voice, and it immediately brought me back to our first meeting. Firey, headstrong Natalie, the woman who never backed down from me was always ready for war.

Just this once, I was too weary to engage.

I sighed. “Amanda is with him. She showed up and demanded to see him.”

Natalie’s expression shifted to concern. “Is that...is that a good idea? Isn’t she at least half the reason why he’s here?”

I nodded. “Yes, but maybe this will bring him some closure.”

“I’d like a few minutes alone with her. I’ll give her closure she won’t soon forget,” Natalie muttered.

We both went quiet again, until Natalie started to move past me. I realized that I couldn’t lose this moment, that we needed to talk through our own messy past in order to navigate any sort of cordial future, especially since she still worked for me.

“Natalie...we should talk.”

She turned to me, and I swear I saw a glimmer of hope in her eyes. It absolutely crushed me.

“Fine. Say what you have to say,” she said, crossing her arms and glaring at me.

I glanced around as a pair of nurses bustled by us. “Not here. There’s a room just down the hall where we’ll have privacy.”

She sighed but followed behind me.

As we walked into the room I tried to compose my racing thoughts. For the briefest moment I considered throwing caution to the wind and confessing that I was miserable without her. But I quickly realized that *she’d* wind up miserable if she stayed with me.

I wasn’t able to commit to her—or anyone. Not when I had to put my family and the business first and second. I had no right to ask her to come in third, just so she could be with a guy who might never be willing to let his guard down all the way and love her properly. She deserved so much better than that.

Natalie perched on the edge of the chair in the corner of the room, watching

me warily with her purse clutched on her lap. Part of me wished she'd come out swinging like she always did, but this Natalie was different. Reserved. Silent.

Sad.

I cleared my throat, not sure where to begin. "First, thank you for coming to see Christopher. And for all you've done for him. He doesn't let people in, so it means a lot that you two became close."

She gave me a terse nod in reply. We both knew there were bigger issues to address.

"I also owe you an apology for what happened with Heidi."

"What she did was shitty but it isn't the issue, it's how you responded to it," Natalie said quickly, the fury returning to her eyes.

"You're right. But you have to see where I was coming from —"

"No, actually, I don't," she fired back. "Not at all. You're basically saying that you value your business above everything else, including me."

"Natalie..." I sighed. "At this moment, the business has to come first. And I apologize if I didn't make that clear to you all along."

She let out a harsh laugh. "Yeah, stupid me for believing that I actually mattered to you."

I wanted to tell her that my feelings for her had been real, but it was no use. What purpose would it serve to let her know that she'd become a part of my DNA? Whatever we'd shared was over. It had to be.

"You're better off without me," I said softly.

"You know what? I agree."

When I looked at her I realized that tears were streaming down her face. My chest constricted with my own pain, but I fought against it. This was for the best. Not having Natalie in my life would allow me to focus on the things I could control. And it would free her to find the relationship she deserved, with someone who could give her all the things I just didn't have to give.

“But I have to know,” she asked in a broken voice. “Was *any* of it real?”

Why was she doing this to me? Forcing me to face the feelings I needed to cauterize if I expected to move forward with my life? Being honest with Natalie in this moment would serve no purpose. It would be better for both of us if I made a clean break.

“No,” I finally managed.

The anguished sob that came out of her echoed around the small room.

“So what you said in the limo was a lie? That I was...special?”

“Of course I meant that, Natalie. You’re an incredible asset to Branson. You’re the reason why the show was such a success.”

She stood up, looking both crushed and defiant. “You know that’s not what I meant. Not at all.” Her voice was jagged.

I felt like I was breaking apart. I forced myself to ignore my instincts, to fight off the urge to take the teary-eyed woman into my arms and comfort her. It would do no good for either of us.

“I don’t think I can continue working with you, James,” Natalie finally said. “I’m going to quit.”

I’d been wrestling with something, not sure if it was the right move, but I realized that I needed to speak the words now. “Natalie, no. You can’t leave Branson. I’m...I’m taking a leave of absence. You should stay, at least for a while, until you figure out what you want to do next. I won’t be around to bother you.”

Hope flashed in her expression, and I realized how much she valued her position at Branson. I was glad I could at least offer her that lifeline.

“Fine. I’ll stay as long as you’re not there. But the minute you come back, I’m leaving.”

She raised her chin at me, and I tried not to see her as a little girl, clutching a trash bag filled with clothing.

“We need to discuss workflow, and how you’ll need to manage everything

with me gone,” I said. “Keep vetting the resumes for Clint’s replacement, but put the interviews on hold for now. I’m fine with giving you free rein on interviewing candidates for Lorraine’s job yourself. I’m not going to be checking in, which means that —”

“James, seriously? *Now?*” her voice broke. “You’re trying to talk shop with my heart crushed under your shoe?”

I felt my mouth go tight. Focusing on work was my move. Branson had always been my buffer, my excuse to keep people at an arm’s length. I hated that Natalie could see through my bullshit.

“You’re right. We can figure that out later.”

“Your brother is fighting for his life right down the hallway and you’re over here talking hiring plans.” Natalie scoffed. “You’re a fucking mess, James. Do you know that?”

“Stop,” I said, the single syllable a terse demand.

She jabbed her finger at me. “*You* don’t get to tell me what to do. You might be my boss on paper, but our working relationship is over. And our personal relationship...well, that was never real at all, right? So shut the hell up, James Branson.”

There was no arguing with her. I could tell by her expression that she was now ready to fight to the death, and I was of no mind to meet her in that dark place.

“Fine,” I sighed.

“Are we done here?” she asked, already walking towards the door. “Because I have nothing else to say to you.”

My body had a primal reaction as her hand reached for the doorknob.

Stop her. Don’t let her go. She’s yours.

“We’re done,” I said simply. I didn’t trust myself to say anything else.

She slipped through the door without a backwards glance, and it hit me that Natalie was used to this. Leaving someone she thought cared about her. My

heart splintered knowing that I'd been the one to do it to her this time.

But it was for the best, because I knew that I could never be the man that Natalie needed.

NATALIE

My tension headache kicked up the minute I got to the front doors.

I'd always loved the feeling I got when I walked into Branson, but ever since things went to hell with James, it felt like I was walking into a bad dream every damn day. I still loved the work and my colleagues, but his ghost lingering everywhere made it impossible to move past my broken heart.

There were too many good memories. The sidewalk out front where he'd made me the offer that changed my life. The copy room where he'd stolen kisses. And of course his office, where we'd swept everything off of his desk and made love on top of it.

No, correction. We'd been *fucking*, not making love. James had made that fact abundantly clear.

My phone was buzzing even though it was barely past seven. I'd started showing up earlier and earlier since my work had tripled, and it felt like the whole world knew it. I scanned it and saw two confirmations for initial interviews for Lorraine's position, as well as four messages from Lavonte. I wasn't his boss but ever since James left, he sure treated me as if I was.

Everyone in the department did. There'd been no official announcement, but since my triumph with the couture show, the creative team considered me a leader. We still had the Pantone project in the works, as well as our regular

seasonal schedule. Ever since the show, people had been clamoring for the ready-to-wear versions of what we'd shown on the runway, which added an extra layer of work.

And stress.

I wished I had time to slow down and figure out what the hell my life had become, but the pace at Branson was relentless, especially with the way sales had shot up since the show. As much as I hated the man behind the name, I was proud of what Branson Designs produced. I loved being a part of it.

"You're here!" a voice rang out as I walked into the room.

Lavonte, also in early and raring to go. He rushed over to me, clutching his tablet.

"Good morning," I said warily, because Lavonte liked to talk and while I loved that about him, I currently had way too much to do.

"My dear, all I need is a tiny little baby signature on this here design," he said, handing me his tablet. "Once you approve it we're off to patterning."

"I've told you, my signature doesn't matter." I sighed. "I haven't been promoted, I'm just a designer, like you."

He was shaking his head before I finished. "Nope, you're so much more than that and you know it. James believes in you, and we all do too. And someone has to sign off on our stuff, or nothing will get made. It's not like Herb in billing can do it, am I right? So, you're the chosen one, baby!" He tapped the screen. "Signature, please."

It wasn't the first time I'd been asked to sign off on a new design. I felt like a fraud every time. But the more people came to me the clearer it became that I was the one shaping the vision for Branson's next launch, by proxy. I'd almost thrown up when I realized the power I'd accidentally been given. My decisions were going to end up on hangers across the country.

It was a responsibility I had never wanted. And what was worse, it was pulling me away from the stuff I *really* loved: designing. I felt like I hadn't picked up my pencils in weeks. My fingers ached to sketch, not just because design was everything to me, but also because it kept my mind from

wandering. When I was getting lost in a design, I didn't have the bandwidth to think about my fractured heart.

"You don't like it?" Lavonte pouted, glancing from his tablet to my face.

"I'm sorry, it's great," I said quickly and scrawled my name on the bottom of the screen. "You never miss."

I could feel someone watching us, so I glanced up.

"Gotcha," Calliope said, staring at her phone. "This photo is going to be part of a Reel that teases what's coming up." She frowned, still staring at her phone. "Natalie, it might help if you smiled. Can we take it again?"

Smiling for real required too much work, but I managed to plaster on a fake one for her until she got the spontaneous-but-posed shot she needed. My face had been showing up on the Branson social media feeds more and more, but there was no need to keep trying to connect me to the brand.

I was leaving as soon as I found a place to land. Calliope needed to stop featuring me, because I was getting the hell out as fast as I could.

Not that I'd told anyone yet. But I'd started assembling my new and improved resume and doing research on other design houses that might be a fit for me. I needed to be long gone by the time James came back. I'd tried envisioning how things would go once his leave of absence ended, and being civil to him didn't feel possible.

For now, I had to focus on the present. My day kicked into overdrive, and I felt pulled in a million different directions. The sad fact was none of them fulfilled me the way designing always had.

"Look at that frown! Is something wrong? What can I help you with?"

Rhea had shown up by my desk and was staring at me with a worried expression.

"Hey there. Thanks, but there's nothing I can delegate right now." I rolled my neck in a circle and stretched my arms out in front of me. "How is it already lunchtime?"

"You've had your head down for hours." Rhea moved closer. "I hate seeing

you so tense.”

“The work needs to get done, and we’re down three people, so…” I gestured to the piles on my desk.

“Not having James around is tough.” Rhea gave me a pointed look, but I refused to take the bait.

People probably had a million theories about what had gone on between me and James, but no one dared to ask about it directly, which I appreciated. We were there to do a job, not speculate on my love life.

Not that it was ever really love.

“Oh my,” Rhea muttered, staring past me. “What is she doing here?”

I looked over my shoulder and spotted none other than Bernie gliding through the room towards us, hair in a perfect updo and wearing one of our not-yet-released deconstructed designs. A few people clapped as she walked by.

“Rhea, darling,” Bernie said, wrapping her in a quick hug. “The rock of Branson.”

“If you’re suggesting that I’ve been around since the Stone Age, you’re right.” She laughed as they pulled apart.

“And Natalie.” Bernie reached out to squeeze my hand, giving me a warm smile. “Just the person I need to see.”

A worried feeling rolled around my stomach. *Why* had Bernie come to the office to see me? She never came to the office. What had blown up now?

“I hope you don’t have plans for lunch…” she said, eyeing me carefully.

“Me?” I pointed at myself and looked around feeling even more confused.

She laughed. “Yes, you, silly!”

Was I allowed to tell the founder of the company that I couldn’t join her for lunch because I was too busy?

“I, uh, I’m… I think…” I watched as Bernie’s expression turned confused. I

know I looked like an absolute mess with my hair shoved in a ponytail, and I'd probably stick out at whichever fancy restaurant she picked. "Sure," I finally said. "I can grab a quick lunch with you. That would be wonderful."

"Fabulous! Meet me downstairs in five. The driver is waiting for us."

"You're in for a treat," Rhea said as we watched Bernie float away. "Every meal is a celebration in Bernie's world."

If only I felt like celebrating.

A short time later we pulled up to a nondescript brick building, and I noticed that there were no restaurants for blocks.

"Here we are," Bernie sang out. "This way."

I followed her into the building and tried to hide my shock at the tiny anteroom. The place was ancient, with no signs of life. She slid open the door to a closet-sized elevator that looked downright dangerous.

"It won't fall, I promise." She paused. "At least I don't think so."

I got on and crossed my fingers.

"Where *are* we?" I asked as the rickety thing climbed slowly.

"Just one more minute and you'll see."

The elevator door finally opened to a massive white expanse, packed with rolling clothing racks. It had the vibe of a spotless medical facility.

"Hold on..." I glanced at one of the racks and saw the Branson logo beneath a number on a garment bag.

"Welcome to the original home of Branson Designs, which now serves as our vault!"

Bernie strode ahead of me with her arms outstretched like a spokesmodel.

"You mean...they're all here?" I looked around with my mouth hanging open. I spotted some of the more elaborate designs encased in glass, like they were part of a museum display. "This is where you started the business?"

“James mentioned that you wanted to see the collection I have at my Hamptons home, but we ran out of time. And I figured this one was better, anyway. Ninety percent of our work lives here.”

I tried not to frown at the mention of his name.

“I’ve heard through the grapevine that you wanted to get your paws on the actual work, and not just the sketches, so we’re going to do just that. *After* we eat. Now come this way.”

Bernie beckoned me to follow her, and we rounded the corner to a table set with a creamy white tablecloth and fine china.

“My friends at Le Bernadin whipped up lunch for us, so please sit.”

I plopped down on the chair still overwhelmed by what was happening. Was it all for me?

“Is someone joining us?” I asked, feeling butterflies starting a riot in my chest when I noticed the third place setting.

Not James. Please no. I couldn’t handle seeing him right now, especially with Bernie there to witness how bad things would undoubtedly get. Bernie had only seen my sweet side; I wasn’t about to let James bring out the beast in front of her.

“Yes, we have one more coming.” Bernie studied my face. “Kathleen will be here shortly.”

I tried not to show my shock. The elusive Kathleen Branson was coming to a lunch with little old me? What the hell was going on?

“We wanted to chat with you about...well, about everything. So much has happened, and we need to make sure that we’re all on the same page,” Bernie said as she rearranged the flatware by her plate. “And I figured we could have some fun with the clothing once we’ve finished. I’m sure your creative mind will be spinning once we start diving into the garment bags!”

“Hello, hello!” a voice echoed from behind us. “Are we cheers-ing yet?”

Kathleen appeared, looking tan and pretty in wide-legged jeans and a simple back top.

“You’re late but also just in time,” Bernie scolded. “Sit.”

Kathleen leaned down to kiss both of Bernie’s cheeks, then strode over to me to do the same.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere and poured three glasses of red wine.

“Oh, I shouldn’t drink,” I demurred. “I still have so much to do this afternoon.”

“Nonsense. A few sips won’t put you under the table, will it?”

I shook my head.

“Then enjoy!”

Bernie raised her glass to toast. “This is to you, my dear. For so many reasons.”

We touched glasses, but it still didn’t feel like a celebration.

“First,” Bernie continued, “Kathleen and I both want to thank you for being a part of Christopher’s life. You thought you were asking *him* for help, but the fact that he felt needed ended up helping him enormously. I don’t think you even realize all you did to help him come out of his shell and live again. Now, obviously things took a turn, but he’s in a much better state of mind now. Have you spoken with him lately?”

I shook my head again and fiddled with the wineglass. “I figured it was better to, uh, give him some time.”

I didn’t want to mention that I’d cut off all contact with any Bransons outside of work.

“Well, he’s doing wonderfully. He’s making all sorts of positive changes and we’re so proud of him,” Kathleen added. “Now, his brother, on the other hand...”

My stomach seized up at the mention of James. How did I know we were going to get to him eventually?

Bernie drained her glass. “I’m terribly disappointed in him. The way he acted with Heidi at the show.” She shuddered. “I know he says it’s all for publicity,

but where do we draw the line? At a certain point he needs to stop living for Branson Designs and start living for James Branson.”

I raised an eyebrow in response. I wasn't sure how candid I could be with her.

“Now, I'm aware things ended badly between you,” she continued. “I don't know the details, but he did tell me that you're no longer together. And that breaks my heart.”

Bernie wasn't the only one left with a fractured heart.

She frowned at me and reached across the table to give my hand a squeeze. The simple gesture made my eyes fill with tears.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said, frowning harder. “I'm so sorry.”

I sniffled and nodded, afraid to open my mouth until the shaky feelings passed.

“I'm okay,” I finally said in a strong voice. “I'm too busy to even think about it.”

I laughed but it sounded hollow. Both Bernie and Kathleen scrutinized me like they could tell I was lying.

“Speaking of being busy, that's the other thing we wanted to discuss with you.”

The waiter came back out pushing a cart with three dome-covered plates on it. I was dreading the reveal of some sort of tiny, fancy haute cuisine beneath them. I was starving—I needed *real* food.

“Dig in, ladies,” Bernie said as she lifted the dome.

The unmistakable aroma of garlic wafted towards me. I removed the dome and was relieved to find the world's biggest mound of pasta on my plate.

“I love their vodka penne,” Kathleen exclaimed. “And garlic bread! Perfect.”

Sharing a delicious lunch with them was indeed perfect, if I let myself forget for a minute about all of the ancillary bullshit in my life.

“As I was saying.” Bernie gestured to me with a piece of garlic bread. “We’re aware that your working conditions might be...*challenging*, given what happened with James.” She cleared her throat. “But you need to know that you have a home at Branson for as long as you like. James might run the show, but I’m the ultimate authority, whether he wants to admit it or not. And I want you to stay with us.”

I smiled. It was no secret that Bernie pulled strings whenever she could.

“Branson needs you,” she continued. “Your vision, your passion, and your drive.”

“You’re special, Natalie,” Kathleen added. “Christopher can’t stop raving about you. But it’s more than your talent. We appreciate *you*, as a person. You’re kind, and based on the way you helped Christopher, you have incredible empathy.”

My eyes filled with tears again. This type of pep talk was completely foreign to me. What I wouldn’t have done to hear these sorts of things when I was younger!

“Don’t cry, sweetheart,” Bernie said in a soft voice. “Everything will be okay. It might not feel that way now, but you’re going to pull through stronger than ever.”

I sniffled and rubbed my eyes, not caring that I was smearing my makeup. These two women clearly got me; there was no need for me to worry about appearances with them.

“I’m not sure what’s next for me, to be honest,” I said once I felt more even-keeled. “But I appreciate your kindness today. I hope you know how much I love Branson Design.” The knot in my throat cut off my words. “Thank you,” I finally said.

Bernie and Kathleen exchanged a glance, and Kathleen leaned over to clasp my arm.

“Once we finish our food we’ll dive into the archives,” Bernie said. “Where would you like to begin?”

And with that we shifted to topics that didn’t make me want to cry. My future

was a mystery, but in this moment, flanked by two women who seemed to really care about me, I allowed myself to feel safe.

JAMES

“**B**aby, what’s wrong?”

I couldn’t tell Heidi that absolutely everything was wrong with what we were doing together. We were in the VIP section of a packed nightclub at midnight, celebrating the product launch of some random twentysomething influencer named Brayleigh because Heidi thought being connected with the up-and-comer would look good on her social media accounts. She’d dragged me along because I was now her miserable plus-one.

I was well aware of how many people were watching us, despite being in the “exclusive” section of the club, where everyone was usually too snobby to care about anyone else. There were cameras everywhere, and beautiful people pretending that they didn’t notice us even though they were avidly listening in on everything we said. And everyone on the dance floor below us was watching. So that meant I couldn’t tell her what I was *really* thinking. I needed to fake it.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

I managed a weak smile and managed to keep from grimacing as she leaned closer to kiss me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw phones swing in our direction to capture the moment.

Heidi had been drinking all night thanks to the event sponsor, the influencer’s

new prosecco called “Bubbles and Baubles.” I’d tried a sip and nearly spat it out, but Heidi couldn’t seem to get enough of it.

The DJ shifted from techno music and Heidi perked up when she heard the drums.

“Oooh, this is my song!” she yelled over the noise. “Let’s go, Queen B! *Who run the world?*”

My heart seized when I heard the unmistakable voice cranking over the sound system. It was the song Natalie had been singing the first night we met. I’d put it on my gym playlist, and I now knew every note of it.

I caught myself smiling at the memory of Natalie attempting to sing it, until Heidi stood up on the banquette and started dancing. It was supposed to be cute and sexy, but to me she looked desperate, like she could feel that Brayleigh was getting more attention than she was. Her wild gyrations also showed that Heidi was tipping over from buzzed to full-on wasted. Not a good look for either of us. I tried grabbing her hand and pulling her down, but she shook me off.

People started cheering, which made Heidi gyrate harder, even though the woman didn’t have an ounce of rhythm.

Brayleigh appeared out of nowhere, probably attracted to the noise of the crowd. She was in a tiny cut-off white shirt and a complicated looking leather skirt that showed off lots of leg, which Heidi had deemed “tacky as fuck.” I knew she was jealous of the much younger woman. It was no secret that Heidi hated *anyone* she saw as a threat.

Brayleigh jumped up on the banquette next to Heidi and started dancing with her, and I saw the flash of anger in Heidi’s eyes despite her wide smile. Brayleigh was everything Heidi wanted to be: young, adored by Gen Z, and an incredible dancer.

Heidi tried to shimmy away, but Brayleigh didn’t seem to get the hint. She shook her shoulders and flirted with the crowd, then pretended to grind up against Heidi. I could see Heidi getting more and more frustrated, because the younger woman didn’t understand that she was stealing Heidi’s moment in the spotlight—and worse, making her look like a trying-too-hard older sister.

Every eye in the club was on the pair, and I knew Heidi was struggling to keep it cute despite her rage at Brayleigh. The song seemed to be an extended cut, so the dance drama kept cranking up like something out of a teen movie.

Heidi raised her arms over her head and closed her eyes, which Brayleigh seemed to take as an invitation to get even closer. She stepped in front of Heidi and started twerking, and the crowd went wild. Heidi opened her eyes, and her expression went hard when she realized what was happening.

At first, her reaction seemed like a joke. She pushed Brayleigh, causing her to stumble a half step. Brayleigh laughed and bent over again, this time pushing up against Heidi.

“I said *knock it off!*” Heidi screamed, her face twisted with rage. She pushed Brayleigh again, harder—and this time the girl tumbled to her knees.

The young woman tried to play it off, still smiling as she stood up. I had to commend her savvy, since she knew that the interaction was being broadcast live to her millions of followers. This wasn’t the moment to lose her temper, not with everyone watching. If only Heidi had gotten that memo...

“Get the fuck away from me!” Heidi screamed. “You stupid little cunt, you’re nothing! Do you know that? *I’m* the star here! No one will remember you next year, but I’ll be on the cover of *Vogue* for my fifth time!”

Oh fuck.

This was bad. Very bad. Suddenly, my connection to Heidi felt like a disaster. She was lining herself up for an extended, humiliating apology tour, and I didn’t want a whiff of that anywhere *near* Branson Designs.

The cameras around us seemed to multiply, and the crowd let out a collective “*oooooh*” as the standoff continued.

Brayleigh walked over to Heidi wearing a giant smile, placed her hand up to Heidi’s face, then drew it away quickly, like she was a witch pulling Heidi’s soul from her mouth. The crowd erupted into cheers and laughter as she walked away.

Heidi finally collapsed next to me, still fuming. She didn’t seem to realize just how badly she’d come off in the brief interaction.

“Who the fuck does she think she is?” she asked as she reached for the prosecco bottle and took a swig from it. “*She needs me. I’m the name, not her.*”

People were still watching, and worse, recording us. My reaction in this moment mattered. I only had seconds to control how I’d be viewed from now on.

I stood up. “It’s time to go.”

Heidi ignored me, so I leaned over and plucked the bottle from her hand.

“It’s late,” I said, hoping my tone would convey how absolutely urgent it was for us to leave.

She gave me the finger.

How could a woman, who’d been in the public eye for over ten years, be so absolutely idiotic? Did she not realize that she was *incinerating* her reputation, and probably mine too?

Then it hit me. This was my out. My exit from a fake relationship that would be believable and wouldn’t make me look like an asshole this time around.

An “anonymous source” could put out a statement that Heidi Jones (the last name she refused to use because it made her sound common) had an alcohol problem, and she needed time to heal without the distraction of a relationship. Of course, I wouldn’t come out and say anything on the record, but there were ways of getting my point across. The public would learn that I was concerned for her health, and that I’d pledged to always be there for her.

As a friend.

I leaned close to her and whispered in her ear. “I’m leaving, and I suggest you do, too.”

Heidi placed her hands around her mouth. “*Fuck off, James Branson.*”

She screamed it loudly enough to be heard over the music.

And that was that; she’d just given me the perfect exit line. I kept my expression neutral as I stalked out of the club, fully aware of the people

capturing my every move.

As I walked out to the street I felt relieved that it was over, but also pissed as hell that I'd needed an excuse to end it. Every second with Heidi had been torture, and in the end, I didn't care what it did for Branson.

All I could think about every time we were photographed together was how badly it was probably hurting Natalie.



Natalie

Steph had actually managed to get me out of our apartment and into her gym for a workout so challenging that it was making me question why we were friends. I was there on a guest pass, because there was no way I had the time or bandwidth to commit to working out anywhere but our family room. But today, on a dreary Saturday, it felt right to sweat out my troubles on complicated-looking machines.

“This is making me feel like I’m at the gynecologist,” I said as I finished a set on a contraption that required lots of wide thigh opening and closing.

“That’s why I’m body-blocking you,” Steph said. “No one can see your crotch with me standing here.”

“Is this seatbelt really required?” I asked, plucking at the thing she’d insisted I clip on.

“You’re a newbie, so yes.”

Her face looked odd, like she was keeping a secret.

“What are you up to?” I looked around the gym. “You’re acting weird.”

“Moreso than usual?” She laughed. “Okay, yeah, I’ve got news for you. And

I think you're going to like it." She pulled her phone from inside of her sports bra and wiped down the screen. "Did you know that not locking your phone can lead to all sorts of mischief?"

"My phone? What do you mean? What did you do, Steph?" Ice water shot through my veins, because I knew my friend was capable of anything.

Including reaching out to James. My heartbeat picked up at the thought of it.

"You know that group chat you have with your classmates?"

I ignored the wave of sadness when I realized that she wasn't working behind the scenes to try to repair things with James.

"Yeah, of course. For projects."

She nodded. "Yup, for projects, and for starting a tsunami." Her mischievous grin widened. "A #MeToo tsunami."

"Oh my god." My mouth dropped open. "Did you..."

Her face lit up as she smiled triumphantly at me as she showed me a text thread she forwarded to her phone. "I did! I sent the group screenshots from some of the creepy messages MG sent you. Not the one where you talked about James, but some of the other gross passes that he made to you. Don't worry, I didn't impersonate you or anything. I said it was me and I was stepping up because I thought everyone had the right to know—and the chance to share their own experiences, too."

"What...how did they respond? Did they think I was exaggerating?"

Everyone seemed to love the man, so me calling him on his bullshit could go either way.

"They lost their damn minds because you're not the only one, Nat! Six women had similar stories, and a few of the men said he'd texted creepy shit about the women in the class to them."

"No way!"

Steph nodded vigorously. "We talked about reporting him to the school, but we worried that they might look the other way because he's a star. So one of

the guys, I think his name is Ted, compiled the screenshots and sent them to BuzzFeed. And they're publishing the story *today!*"

I went cold despite feeling sweaty. "Hold on... I don't want that sort of attention, Steph. I can't afford to like, do court cases or anything. And if Branson was mentioned..."

I couldn't help caring about the damn company, despite everything I'd been through there.

"They didn't include any names, I swear. And I think the court of public opinion will do *plenty*. No one has plans to sue or anything, it's more of a "Hey folks, FYI, this dude is a creeper" type of scenario. No matter what he does he's going to look bad."

I managed to untangle myself from the machine and stood up to give Steph a hug. "You're amazing. Thank you."

She patted me on the back, then pushed me away. "Oh, it gets better! Do you know Carly?"

I nodded. "Yeah, she's super talented. I like her."

"Well, we got to talking and Miss Carly just got a gig designing for Athleta, and she asked me to be her fit model!"

"*What?* How did this happen? And when?"

She squeezed my shoulder. "You've been a little, uh, distracted over the past few weeks. Carly and I met for coffee a few times. It's been in the works for a bit, but I didn't want to say anything until it was official. Carly said there's a chance they'll use me on the website and in their catalogs. Imagine it; me, a model!"

"I don't have to imagine it; I've seen you in action. Steph, it's perfect. I'm so happy for you."

She puffed up with pride. "I'm psyched. But you know what it means, right?"

"Fame and fortune?"

She laughed. "No, it means a complete moratorium on sugar and alcohol at

our place. My abs are going to be on display every damn day!”

I smacked her tight belly. “Doesn’t look like a problem to me.”

“Says you. Anyway, it’s time for some stress-release,” she said, beckoning me to follow her. “We’re going to box.” She put her hands up in fighter position.

We walked through the gym laughing about the different poses she was going to do in her first shoot, passing by the treadmills and bikes on the way to the boxing room. The bank of TVs were all tuned to the same channel, some inane entertainment program.

Steph’s happy expression dimmed when she glanced up at the screens. “Uh-oh…”

I looked up and saw grainy footage that showed two women dancing in the darkness of a nightclub.

“Wait, that’s *Heidi*,” I said. My heart fractured when I spotted James in the shadows behind her.

“And Brayleigh D’Amato, the TikTok star.”

We watched as the dancing turned to shoving.

“Yikes.” Steph sucked in a breath. “Heidi looks *really* drunk.”

The footage cut to a close-up of Heidi that looked like it came from someone’s live feed. She seemed unhinged, yelling at Brayleigh. The subtitles censored what she was saying, but the meaning behind it was still unmistakable.

“Heidi called Brayleigh the c-word!” Steph slapped her hand over her mouth in shock.

I didn’t notice what was going on between the two women because I was too busy watching James, as much as it hurt me to do it. There he was, looking weary and disgusted, with his arms crossed as he watched the drama unfolding. The footage cut to James leaning over to whisper in Heidi’s ear, and her screaming at him. The next stitched together scene was of him outside the club, getting into his Maybach alone.

“Wow,” I said softly. I didn’t even realize that I was rubbing my hand against my chest, over my heart, as if trying to soothe an ache.

“You okay?” Steph asked, studying my face.

I shrugged. “Whatever. It’s not my business. This is what he wanted.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t seem happy at all, even before the slapfight. He looked like he’d been taken hostage or something. He doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who appreciates that sort of attention.”

“That’s because he doesn’t,” I said.

A part of me wanted to grab my phone and dive into the rabbit hole of Reddit gossip about what had gone down. I was sure there was more footage to watch and eyewitness accounts of the whole thing. But what good would it do me? James wasn’t a part of my life now. He’d made his choice, which clearly included late nights at clubs and an unhinged girlfriend who threw the c-word around.

I didn’t recognize this version of James. I thought I knew who he was, that I’d met the real James. The man who had so much more to him than the asshole persona he showed the world.

I was wrong.

“Let’s glove up,” Steph said, sliding her arm around my shoulder. “I have a feeling that you have some pent-up rage that’s ready to come out.”

I didn’t answer her, because my rage was long gone, and all that was left was sadness.

JAMES

Tension spread across my chest as I jogged up the steps to the Museum of Natural History for a bunch of different reasons. The primary one was trying to figure out why were we meeting *here*?

When Christopher had suggested the two of us getting out in the world instead of hanging in his apartment like usual, I'd been shocked. But then again, in the weeks since his "slip up" (as Bernie called it), he'd been making all sorts of changes. It was almost like going through the trauma had shifted the way he saw the world. Well, that and the new therapist he'd hired.

I strode into the great room prepared to find a bench so I could wait for my perpetually late brother, but he was already there looking healthier and happier than I'd seen in ages.

"Hey," I said, pulling him into a quick hug. I didn't care about my stone-cold reputation or any potential stalk-arazzi around, after everything we'd been through, when I saw my brother, I was going to hug him. Hard.

"Hey yourself, right on time." He slapped me on the back a few times.

"Yeah, you need to tell me what we're doing here." I gestured to the swarms of school kids shrieking around us. "This feels really odd."

"Walk with me," he said cryptically, gesturing me to follow him.

We wound up in a quieter exhibit hall, filled with gems and minerals.

“You looking to pick up a new hobby or something?” I asked, pointing to the display with rocks cracked open to reveal sparkly interiors. “What’s up?”

He ignored my weak attempt at an icebreaker. “Lots, actually. First, I wanted to talk to you about Amanda.”

My stomach bottomed out. Fuck. After everything he was *still* hung up on her? The day she’d visited him in the hospital she’d stormed out of his room after about ten minutes, and he’d been stony and silent when I went in to check on him. He hadn’t said anything about what went on between the two of them, and it didn’t feel like it was my place to ask.

“Okay...” I said slowly. “I’m listening.”

I pretended to be interested in the various sparkly things around us, but there was no way I could focus on anything but Christopher. I tried to be subtle as I studied him. Was I missing signs of distress again? Was he manic and hiding it?

“I said some really shitty things to her when she came to visit me,” he began. “I just wanted to hurt her the way she’d hurt me, you know?”

I nodded, secretly pleased that he’d stood up for himself and put her in her place for a change.

“I was going to leave it at that. Just close that chapter of my life, move on and be done with her. It wasn’t true closure, but I felt like I’d made my point, you know? Then she reached out to me a week later and asked to meet for coffee.”

I could feel the frown taking over my face, so I struggled to remain neutral. “Yeah but...what about the restraining order Tim threatened?”

He waved his hand and made a disgusted noise. “That was all bullshit. Tim was being an insecure dick. She was never on board with that.”

Given that he’d sounded like a puffed-up, insecure bully on the phone, I wasn’t shocked.

“At first I was stressed out about meeting her,” Christopher said, cracking his

knuckles as we walked through the exhibit. “Was she going to scream at me and cause a scene? I was prepared for anything. But guess what she did?”

I snorted angrily. “The sky is the limit with that woman.”

“Right? Well, the very first thing she did when we sat down was apologize to me. I nearly passed out, because I didn’t think the word ‘sorry’ was part of her vocabulary.”

“Amanda *apologized* to you? For what?”

Christopher ducked his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. “A lot of stuff. Some of it was pretty deep. The headline of all of it? This baby was unplanned. She flat-out told me that it wasn’t a case of not wanting a baby with me and wanting one with Tim. When she said that I felt like a weight had been lifted off my heart. I kept beating myself up, you know? Why *him*? What did Tim have that I didn’t? But in the end it wasn’t about that.”

“Well shit, so she still doesn’t want a baby and she’s having one?” I asked. “That poor kid.”

Christopher shrugged. “I didn’t want to get into that. It’s not my business now. And to acknowledge that fact—that what she does has nothing to do with me—and be *okay* with it? It’s incredible. I feel like I have...well, I have *peace*. That anger I used to feel is gone. I’m not obsessed with punishing her for hurting me. Honestly, I walked away from that meeting and felt like a new man. My life is about moving forward, and she’s not a part of it. I’m not stuck in the past now.”

A wave of envy rolled through me. What I wouldn’t give to feel that way. Of course, I didn’t envy everything my brother had been through to get to this point, but I sure as hell wished I could be positive about my own future—that I could see new things on the horizon that had me hopeful or optimistic. All I had were questions, sadness, and so much left unsaid.

“You should try having an actual conversation when you’re going through tough shit, you know? Talking things out does wonders.” Christopher gave me a pointed look that I ignored.

“Well, good for you.” I slapped his back. “I’m proud of you.”

He snorted. “As your older brother I should be saying that to you. Speaking of, how’s your leave going? Are you getting things sorted?”

I shook my head. “We’re not here to talk about me. And there’s nothing new to report. Now are you going to fill me in why we’re here?” I gestured around us.

“No, I’m going to show you.”

He picked up his pace and I followed along, still mystified, out of the gem exhibit and up a flight of stairs. We wound up at the entrance to the butterfly vivarium.

“She wanted to see this.”

She?

For the briefest moment I felt hope surge inside of me. Maybe Christopher had reached out to Natalie and arranged a neutral meeting place for us to talk? Anticipation shot through me as I craned my neck to see if I could spot her in the crowd.

“There she is,” he exclaimed.

I looked towards where he was pointing, feeling stupidly nervous, only to spot a pretty petite blonde breaking into a jog towards us.

“Julia?”

She bounced to a stop in front of Christopher, and they grinned at each other like teenagers.

“Hi!” she said with a little wave.

“Hey.” Christopher beamed back at her.

I tried not to let on how disappointed I was to see her and not Natalie, or the fact that I was going to be a third wheel for a museum date.

“Julia loves butterflies,” Christopher explained as we headed for the entrance. “I wanted to get out and see them with her, and I figured since you now have all the time in the world, you’d enjoy it too. I don’t want you to wind up like I was, cooped up in my apartment.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Julia laughed. “I felt like I was delivering stuff to you every other day.”

He bumped against her shoulder. “Did you ever consider that I had ulterior motives for all those orders?”

I hoped they didn’t see me rolling my eyes.

One of the museum staff led us through the double set of entrances they used to make sure none of the butterflies got loose—and then we stepped into the room, full of plants and flowers and about a thousand percent humidity. Julia’s eyes lit up with wonder, and my heart gave a little tug at the look Christopher was giving her, how happy he was just watching her.

“James, how’s Natalie?” Julia asked. “Is she meeting us?”

“Yes, how *is* Natalie?” Christopher locked onto me with his big brother stare.

“Uh, not sure.”

“What do you mean?” Julia glanced between us. “Are the two of you not together anymore?”

“I’m not sure we ever were,” I said simply, moving ahead of them to pretend to examine a monarch on a leaf.

“My dumb little brother made some mistakes,” Christopher called out from behind me. “A bunch, actually. And he lost the best thing that ever happened to him.”

Julia held her finger in the air and a white butterfly with long tails landed on it like she was a goddamn Disney princess. “Is it *over over*, or is there still a chance for you to make things right?” Her eyes flicked between me and the passenger on her finger.

Why was she so sure that I was to blame?

“Natalie wants nothing to do with me, trust me,” I replied, trying not to swat at the butterfly that landed on my forehead.

“And why is that? You both seemed so adorable and flirty at Christopher’s birthday party.”

“I might’ve made some poor choices,” I said through gritted teeth, hating her good-natured candor because deep down I knew that she was right.

Christopher stopped walking and doubled over with laughter. “*Poor choices?* Bro, you shit the bed.”

I kept walking and noticed that they didn’t hurry to catch up with me.

The butterfly room felt like an oasis in the city, and I tried to follow the advice I’d read in my new mindfulness book, which was part of my journey to try to figure out my fucked-up life.

Be here now. Don’t run away from discomfort. Tune into your thoughts.

I chuckled. I lived my entire life so that I could *avoid* listening to my thoughts. I liked action, not introspection.

And worse, every time I turned inward, all I could find was a Natalie-sized hole.

I could see Christopher and Julia through the foliage. They were giggling and acting stupid, pretending to use the oversized leaves as hats as if there was no one around. I couldn’t recall the last time I’d seen my brother behaving this way, and it struck me that despite everything stacked against him, he’d managed to scale it all and fight his way to happiness.

I started to feel claustrophobic in the overly warm room. I tried to distract myself by reading the placards about the butterflies, but the words swam together.

“Hey,” Christopher said after we’d navigated the entirety of the vivarium. “Let’s grab coffee.”

Instead of ducking out, which was what I wanted to do, I agreed. Maybe the pair’s happy vibe would eventually rub off on me? I realized that I’d made a mistake the moment we sat down at the table in the museum coffee shop with our drinks.

“So, we both decided that you need some advice,” Christopher said, glancing at Julia. She nodded.

“Okay, now just hold on.” I groaned. “I’m not asking for advice. I’m —”

Christopher held up his hand to stop me. “As your older brother I’m commanding you to listen to me.”

Julia giggled.

“Hear me out, okay?” He cleared his throat. “I just want you to know that I saw a totally different side of you when you and Natalie were hanging out. Yeah, you were still my dorky little brother,” he shot me a grin because we both knew how far that was from the truth, “but you had an...an *ease* about you that I’d never seen before. You weren’t the usual grumpy, totally anal-retentive James Branson.”

I bristled at his description. “I prefer organized.”

He waved his hand at me. “Whatever. The point I’m trying to make is that Natalie brought out the best in you. I mean, James Branson *dancing*? I never thought I’d see the day.”

I sighed. “You can’t base a relationship on that sort of thing. We were just having fun.”

“But there was more to it, and you know it,” he scoffed. “The two of you were kicking ass at work. She told me about how you got to the point where you could almost read each other’s thoughts when you were on a project.”

“We did work well together,” I agreed reluctantly.

“You were *happy* with Natalie, bro,” Christopher said, giving me a gentle kick to my calf beneath the table. “Admit it.”

I cleared my throat and took a long draw of coffee to buy myself time.

“It’s probably not my place to say anything, but I can’t help it,” Julia’s voice was soft as she leaned forward to put her elbows on the table and stare at me. “I’m an observer. It’s my nature. I like watching people. And James, I saw the way Natalie looked at you on Christopher’s birthday. She sparkled.”

Christopher chuckled. “Yeah, I’m surprised you didn’t notice since you barely stopped staring at her the whole night.”

I shifted uncomfortably. I didn’t like thinking about the night, especially what happened in my car afterwards. The intimacy of our conversation, and then

the kiss that changed everything.

“Tell us about the Heidi debacle,” Christopher said. “With all of my drama, we haven’t really had a chance to talk about it. Was any of that for real, or was it all just a publicity stunt? Was it even your idea?”

“It wasn’t real at all.” I shook my head, feeling more weary by the minute. “And no, it wasn’t my idea. When she showed up she caught all of us off guard, and pretending it was planned was the only way I could do damage control. If I caused a scene the show would’ve gotten lost in the shuffle of the scandal. So I just...pretended. And when I realized how well it was being received by the press and public, I decided that it was best for the company to *keep* pretending.”

“And obviously Natalie had a problem with that,” Julia said with a nod. “Oof, not good.”

“Like I said, he shit the bed. Now he needs to figure out a way to fix it.”

It felt like the two of them were doing an intervention for me, and I understood why Christopher had reacted so badly to this three years ago. When someone you love tells you, point blank, that you’re fucking up your life, it’s painful. It forces you to see all of the things you’ve done wrong in the harshest light, and reckon with your shortcomings.

“Honestly, I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“And why not?” Christopher asked.

I glanced between my brother and Julia, feeling prickly. I could barely be honest with myself about my feelings, how could I possibly tell *them*? But I was trapped. I wasn’t going to just walk away from my brother, no matter how awkward the conversation got.

“Relationships...” I paused. “Someone always winds up hurt. I mean, look what Amanda put you through.”

He nodded. “Yeah, but she wasn’t to blame for everything. I wasn’t a perfect partner. And get this...humans are resilient. Look at me now.” He shot Julia a shy glance and she blushed.

“Yeah, but being with Natalie made me take my eyes off the prize. I lost my focus at work.”

“Did you *really*?” Christopher asked pointedly. “Because what I saw happening were the highest sales numbers the company has seen in more than a decade, along with new creative directions.”

I frowned. He was right: Natalie brought out the best of me at work.

“Well, the family stuff. I...I missed important signs...with *you*.”

“You absolutely did not,” he said quickly. “I will *not* let you take the blame for something I went through. You’ve always been there for me, so stop saying ridiculous shit like that. And I don’t know what warning signs you think you should have seen. It wasn’t like there was some big buildup. I just heard the news about the baby, and I snapped.” He furrowed at me. “You want to know what I think? I think you’re afraid. Afraid of being vulnerable. Of relinquishing control. I think you’re petrified of love, James.”

Anger coursed through me. How *dare* he? I wasn’t afraid of a goddamned thing!

“It’s okay to be scared,” Julia said in a quiet voice. “You just can’t let it stop you from finding happiness.”

I gripped my empty mug so tightly I worried it might shatter.

Damn it.

I’d worked hard to bury any lingering feelings for Natalie, but all it took was a brief conversation to dredge them up. But then again, no one knew me like my brother. It wasn’t a surprise that he could find my hidden pressure points.

“I know this feels like an ambush, but I know what’s best for you,” Christopher continued.

It took me a second to catch onto his dumb joke. I gave him a half-smile. “Knock it off.”

“Never.” He leaned over and punched my arm. “Not until you figure out how to win her back.”

I let out a long sigh, staring at the table because I couldn't bear to meet his eyes. "Even if I wanted to, I don't think it's possible. I really hurt her. She wants nothing to do with me."

"Unsolicited woman's perspective?" Julia offered cautiously. "You have to at least try. Come up with a heartfelt apology and give it one last shot. I think you owe it to yourself to go for it. You owe it to *both* of you. Otherwise, you might wake up ten years from now and realize that you gave up on the best thing that ever happened to you."

Ten years from now? In a flash I saw a different version of my future, one that included waking up next to Natalie every day. Kissing her whenever I wanted to. Loving her, now and always. My heart constricted, and a painful feeling of loss coursed through my veins.

"Dude." I could feel Christopher staring at me. "You really look like shit. Let's walk. You could use some vitamin D."

We headed out onto the sidewalk, squinting in the bright sunshine. Christopher and Julia strolled a few steps ahead of me, giving me time to process my thoughts. I watched the way they settled into step with each other, arms around one another's waists, their strides perfectly in synch. I felt a knot in my stomach as I watched them.

I needed to stop lying to myself, because I wanted that.

I'd *had* that.

And I'd fucked it up.

But what if Julia was right? Maybe I could convince Natalie that I was so incredibly sorry for what I'd done to her.

Maybe I could help Natalie see that we belonged together.

The weight on my shoulders seemed to lift a little as I ran through the possible outcomes. I was so deep in my thoughts that I kept almost running into people around me. Every time I glanced at Christopher and Julia, my resolve strengthened. He'd worked through his mistakes and fuck-ups to find happiness.

I could do the same.

“Hey, guys?” I called out to them.

They turned in unison.

“I need to go.”

Christopher studied me for a second. “Oh? Any special reason why?”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and held it up. “There’s someone very important that I need to talk to.”

A smile split his face, and Julia cheered for me.

“There’s the James I know and love.” Christopher fist pumped at me. “Go get your girl.”

NATALIE

I glanced at my phone. Three texts from James in as many days, and I still couldn't find the right words to respond to him. He said he wanted to talk.

I wasn't ready, and I wasn't sure I ever would be. There was no point, really. He'd made his choice, and it wasn't me. What else was there to be said?

I could blame my workload for ignoring him, because the Pantone launch was keeping us stupid busy, but the truth was the texts felt...insincere. Almost like he was just checking in on me to make sure I wasn't going to burn down the Branson building or go on the record with horrifying behind-the-scenes gossip. Not that he needed my help making headlines. He and Heidi were all over the tabloids with stories about her latest struggles. I'd watched it unfold knowing that it was probably killing James to be associated with the train wreck. They were officially broken up now.

Not that it mattered to me in the slightest.

"Listen up, it's the end of day social media recap on the Pantone launch," Calliope yelled as she walked into the creative room holding her phone over her head. "Gather round, people."

We surged towards her as a group, nervous and hopeful. It was our first time launching something under our own leadership and we had our pride on the line, as well as the numbers. Of course, I wanted James to see what we were

capable of without him.

What *I* was capable of.

I'd been running our department since he'd left, still juggling it with being his assistant and farming out the CEO responsibilities as well. I was exhausted, grumpy, and for the first time ever, doubting if Branson was right for me after all. I'd been hired for my creative vision, my hands-on design work, yet here I was overseeing everyone else doing the job I loved. Not that I could let on that I was unhappy. I didn't want my mood impacting everyone else, so I faked it.

Rhea bustled in beside me. "This is still so strange for me, getting instant results. Back in my day we published in print magazines and had to hold our breath for months to see what the world thought. Now, we just push a button, and bim-bam-boom, it's all out there!"

"I think I would've liked the old way," I replied. "Everything moves so fast these days. I can barely keep up."

She turned to scan me, frowning. "You look so tired. Are you okay?"

The way she asked the question made it clear it wasn't just about work. "I'm fine. Just worried about the response to the launch, you know?"

Rhea stared at me a beat longer, skeptical but silent for a change.

Lavonte joined us. "I already have intel, ladies," he whispered.

We turned to stare at him. "Well? Is it good?" I asked.

He shook his head, frowning. "I wouldn't say that."

"No!" Rhea exclaimed. "How is that possible? This is some of our best work!"

Lavonte's grim expression slowly shifted to a wide smile. "It's not good, it's *amazing*! Everyone is going bonkers for it."

"Hey, eyes on me folks," Calliope said, clapping her hands. "I have metrics on our posts as well as a bunch of our influencers' posts, plus I've been tracking our day-of sales... People, I'm thrilled to tell you that we're setting

new records!”

We all broke into applause. Pride swelled inside of me, for what I’d contributed as well as how the team came together.

“Natalie’s idea to send the steamer trunks filled with samples to our influencer partners and celebrities who wear us means we’re dominating every FYP at the moment. The unboxing footage is unreal. Mona Miller did a try-on series and every single piece she featured is now backordered.”

I blushed. I’d stolen the idea from Beyonce, but no one seemed to care. All that mattered was that it had worked.

“Greta’s year 2000 vest has been a surprise standout,” Calliope continued. “And the number one seller? Any guesses?”

Everyone spoke at the same time.

“It’s Lavonte’s year 2012 reimaged velour track suit in Tangerine Tango! It’s *everywhere!*”

He jumped up and down and plucked at the orange sweatsuit he was wearing. “I knew it!”

I grabbed Lavonte’s arm and gave him a squeeze. “That’s so cool!”

He leaned closer to me. “Hey, we both know that the sweatsuit was *your* idea, you just didn’t have the time to execute it. Thanks for trusting me with it.”

It was kind of him to acknowledge that I’d been the one to do a quick sketch of the iconic staple. I would’ve loved to take on the full project, from concept to completion, but there were too many other responsibilities for me to worry about, so I let Lavonte run with it.

“Let’s have a big round of applause for our leader, Natalie,” Calliope said, gesturing to me. “She’s juggling, like, seven jobs at the same time—and smashing every single one of them.”

I ducked my head and waved both hands, embarrassed by the attention.

“We need to celebrate, so I’ve got a giant table reserved at Bread and Butter, starting now,” Calliope said. “Dinner and drinks are on Branson, so pack up

your stuff and meet me there!”

The room filled with whoops, and everyone dispersed to shut down their laptops. I trudged back to my desk and plopped down.

“Hey,” Rhea said. “Let’s go.”

I shook my head. “Can’t, at least not for a while. I still need to get the paperwork going for Lorraine’s replacement, and then I have to go through some new resumes for Clint’s position.”

“Still no one yet, huh?” she asked. “Why don’t you step into his role for real? You’ve been doing an incredible job so far.”

I shook my head vigorously. “Oh, no way. This is *not* what I signed on for.”

“You miss it, huh? The hands-on design stuff.”

“So much.” I sighed. “But I’m doing what needs to be done so…” I shrugged.

“Well, you’ll be back to designing soon enough, don’t worry.”

I gave her a wan smile but didn’t answer. I still wasn’t sure what my future looked like, but I was positive that it didn’t involve managing other people doing my dream job.

The room cleared out in a flash, and I felt like I could finally exhale. I grabbed my phone and scrolled to my music. Definitely no Beyonce. I selected a low-key ambient music station that would be soft enough to help me focus. I propped my head on my hand and closed my eyes, letting the relaxing tones wash over me.

My arm slipped off my desk and I jerked awake. It was dark outside. How long had I been asleep? Fuck, I had so much to do, and I was starving.

The music cut off abruptly, and I wondered if my phone went dead. I grabbed it and realized that it was plugged in. Was it Wi-Fi problems? I pushed back from my drafting table as a loud buzz sounded from the speakers.

“*The Rogue’s Rebuttal, by Erin Woodley,*” a loud voice echoed around the room.

I frowned. How was my audiobook collection being broadcast? It wasn’t like

I had the time to enjoy them, so I hadn't touched my audiobook app in ages. And when had I purchased a new Woodley book? I'd never even heard of this one. I looked at my phone again and saw that it was still paused on the ambient station.

"Prologue," the familiar narrator's voice rang out. "A true rogue never apologizes for his sins. It was a lesson that I needn't have been taught, as the heir to a vast shipping fortune. Plunder and pillage had been the way of life for my ancestors, until we finally stepped into a supposedly more genteel way of living. Still, though, the lessons of my pirate forefathers lived on within me, the first being, *your reasoning is never wrong.*"

I snorted. Billionaires were all the same, even the old-timey ones. I decided to let the audiobook keep playing.

"It was a woman who finally showed me the error of my ways. A woman unlike any I'd known before. A woman of grace and beauty, but more vexingly, a woman who didn't bow to me."

I smiled as I attached the start documents to an email. I liked this fictional badass heroine already.

"As I speak her name, the weight of it upon my tongue tastes bitter. For all of the ways I've failed her, and due to my desire to disobey my forefathers. I *have* to find the right words to apologize to the most beguiling woman I've ever encountered. To win back the incomparable Miss Natalie Reynolds."

I froze. *What?*

Maybe I was still asleep. How was this real? Because the narrator reading the book was the same one who'd read all of Erin Woodley's books. And the writing style was undoubtedly Erin's. Was it just an insane coincidence? But Natalie wasn't a period-appropriate name for a book about a nineteenth century rogue!

"The truth was," the narrator continued, "I was bewitched by her. But I hurt her terribly, and have been cast out because of it. My dearest Natalie has ignored my every attempt to reach her. Now, I need to be extraordinarily clever to show her I've learned the error of my ways. Because I would do nearly anything just to make her mine again."

My eyes inexplicably filled with tears. Romance novels used to make me feel hopeful. I believed that true love was possible, but now I knew better.

“Natalie...”

The voice behind me made me jump, and I spun around in my chair to find James staring at me. I should’ve been used to him sneaking up on me by now, but once again he’d managed to scare the hell out of me. I was too confused to be angry.

“What are you doing here?” I sniffled and hoped that he couldn’t see my watery eyes from across the room. “You’re not supposed to come back for months. Are you unhappy with my work or something? Is that why you’re here? Because I’ll have you know that since I’ve been in charge of creative —”

He frowned at me. “Natalie, *no*.” He sounded injured. “Were you not listening?” He pointed up towards the speakers.

I smacked my desk in frustration. “Is this about the sound system again? What the hell, James?”

He walked closer to me, and I ignored my body’s visceral reaction to being near him. At first, I thought he looked better than ever, like not seeing him in real life for so long had intensified all of the things I loved about his body. He seemed more muscular, as if he’d been spending all of his free time working out. But as he drew closer, I studied his face and realized that he was pale, with shadows beneath his eyes.

“Natalie, look,” he said, holding his phone out to me as he walked to my desk.

I refused to glance at his face, focusing my attention on his phone.

“Look closely at the cover of this book.”

I snatched it out of his hands and saw a typical-looking clinch-cover of a Regency romance. The woman was in a swirling purple gown with her head tipped back at an almost impossible angle and her eyes closed while the rake bent over her to plant a kiss on the side of her neck. Erin Woodley’s name in the typical scrolling font dominated the top quarter of the cover, as usual.

“Okay? And?”

James sighed with obvious frustration. “Look at the models, for god’s sake.”

I held his phone closer to my eyes, then gasped. “That’s *me!*” My mouth dropped open as I studied the rake. “And you!”

He nodded.

“Wait...does that mean my name... That wasn’t a coincidence? James, what the hell did you do?”

His lips turned up in the world’s smallest grin. “I called in a favor. The CEO of the media company that owns her publishing house is a friend of mine from the Glenhaven Club, and he owed me a favor. He introduced me to Ms. Woodley, and I asked her to help me out, in exchange for a donation to her favorite charity, since you’re such a fan of hers. Plus, you’re the reason I was introduced to her work. She’s very good. I’ve been reading all of her old books during my sabbatical.”

I could barely form a sentence. I realized that I probably looked like an idiot standing there with my mouth hanging open.

“She wrote the first chapter of *The Rogue’s Rebuttal*,” James continued. He paused to stare at me. “She said the happily ever after is up to us.”

How was it possible that the mighty James Branson looked like a little boy in this moment?

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally managed.

James started to reach for me but stopped himself. “Say we can talk things through. That you’re open to hearing me out. I have a lot to tell you, Natalie.”

My heart swelled at the naked emotion in his voice. I wanted to believe what he’d said through the audiobook. It was a beautiful gesture.

But then I realized that that was *all* the thing was. A gesture. He’d used his money and connections very effectively to manufacture a situation that would appeal to me, but that just meant that *I* was an emotional mess while he was cool as a cucumber. It might work for some of the women he dated, but I wanted something real, not just a fancy gift with an astronomical price tag.

And speaking of the women he dated, he'd literally just ended things with Heidi. Did he really think I'd welcome him back while his sheets probably still smelled like her perfume?

If I listened to what James had to say I had no doubt I'd fall for it. The man was smart, and he knew me very well, knew how to get the response he wanted out of me. It didn't help that I was so hungry to touch him that I had to keep backing away from him, to keep my hand from accidentally connecting with him and short-circuiting my logic.

"Can we get out of here and talk?" James asked. "Please?"

There was an edge in his voice that almost sounded like begging.

Didn't matter. My guard was way up.

"No." I shook my head. "I'm sorry, there's nothing you can say that will change things, James."

Now it was his turn for his mouth to drop open. "What? *Seriously*, Natalie?"

I crossed my arms and hoped that my resolve would last. "It doesn't matter what you want to tell me, my mind is made up."

His face turned stormy. "So nothing I say to you will matter. Is that what you're telling me?"

"I don't see how any words can undo what you did."

The air between us sparked with static. I could almost feel the heat wafting from his body. As much as I wanted to put distance between us, I held my ground.

His beautiful face looked tormented, with his brows drawn down and his mouth twisted into a frown.

"Do you want to know the truth?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "Go ahead, if you want." *You always do what you want anyway.*

His expression softened a little, and his eyes searched my face. I refused to give him any indication of what was going on inside of me. That the tiniest flicker of hope had ignited deep within me.

“I fell in love with you, Natalie,” he whispered. “*That’s* what I need you to know.”

My eyes filled with tears at his confession.

It was exactly what I wanted to hear...and it didn’t change a thing between us.

I cleared my throat and swallowed the lump in my throat. “You know what? It doesn’t matter that you think you love me. You’ll always love Branson Designs more. We both know it’s true. And I’m sorry, but when it comes to love, I will *always* put the person I love first—and I won’t accept him doing anything less for me.”

I clenched my teeth together and stared back at him as his face fell. How I wanted to break down and cry, but I wasn’t about to show him that kind of vulnerability. I didn’t trust him with it anymore.

His entire body sagged as he seemed to process what I’d told him.

“But I...” He gestured between us wordlessly. “You mean you don’t...”

I straightened my back, summoning the last bits of my reserve. “I’m sorry, James. You made your choice, and there’s no room for me in your life. Not in the way I deserve. Trust me, us saying goodbye now is for the best.”

I moved to my desk to collect my things, because I was seconds from an ugly crying breakdown. I wasn’t going to let him see just how badly I was hurting.

“Goodbye, James,” I said over my shoulder.

He stood behind me silently, as if he still couldn’t understand what was happening, then I heard his footsteps retreating from the room.

The moment the door shut behind him I dropped my head and let the tears flow.

JAMES

I'd fucked up. *Nothing* had gone according to plan.

It was a first for me, in the worst possible scenario.

I stared out the window of my apartment, trying to make sense of what had gone wrong with Natalie, grappling with the unfamiliar sensation of failing. Even worse, there was a dull ache in my chest that flared every time her beautiful face drifted into my mind.

Yes, I was heartbroken.

In my mind, negotiating the deal with Erin Woodley was a next-level gesture, to prove to Natalie just how serious I was about making things right between us. Hell, it had taken a dozen phone calls and triple what I'd planned to pay to convince the reclusive writer to do me the honor of crafting three thousand words. Not that the time or effort to make it happen mattered to me. I just assumed that I'd come up with the perfect way to prove to Natalie that I was consumed by her, and I hadn't even *considered* she'd refuse me.

I'd walked out of the office that night utterly shaken. Where had I gone wrong? Why couldn't she see how sorry I was, and how much I missed her?

Did the words "I fell in love with you" mean nothing to her?

Ice shot through my veins as I considered the worst possible explanation for

why she'd turned me away. Was it possible that Natalie didn't feel the same about me?

I dropped into a chair next to the window as I tried to come to terms with the idea that I might have lost her for good.

No. Impossible. I felt it in my bones that the woman still cared for me. I'd seen the way she looked at me, felt the way she touched me. Natalie loved me, but what I'd done to her had slammed every defensive measure she had into place, and it was going to take a lot to get those walls to come back down. So what could I do? Natalie wasn't the type who needed something big and showy to prove a point. More than anything, I knew that Natalie wanted to feel wanted. Cherished.

Seen.

I jumped out of the chair and started pacing the floor. I felt like I knew Natalie better than anyone I'd ever been with, which is why I'd assumed that hiring her favorite writer was the perfect move to win her back. But to her, it probably felt hollow, another example of me flashing my money to get my way. It didn't do anything to assuage her fears that I prioritized Branson Designs over her.

But *did* the company have to come first?

The idea started to take root before I could fight it off. My immediate reaction was to shut the thought down, even though I knew at a cellular level that it was what I needed to do.

I considered our conversation after Christopher's birthday, when she'd revealed herself to me during the drive to her apartment. At her core, no matter how tough she came across, Natalie was still a lost little girl. She worried that she was replaceable, that the people who loved her would eventually move on.

The realization was a knife to my chest. It was exactly what I'd done to her. It didn't matter that my relationship with Heidi was totally manufactured, in Natalie's eyes I'd found someone else and left her in the dust.

How could I have been so blind? So *stupid*?

I started to conjure up dozens of ways to prove to her that my love for her was real. Could I hire Beyonce to write a song for her? I scoffed. No, Natalie didn't want the showy stuff.

If my hunch was correct, all she wanted was *me*. My commitment. My heart.

I needed to prove to her that I saw her, I understood her, and she would always be my priority.

I strode to my home office and dug through the drawers to try to find paper. When was the last time I picked up a pen and written anything down? I finally found my stash of creamy, monogrammed letterhead Bernie had gifted me years before and sat down in the leather chair.

The pen hovered above the page, until finally, the right words started to flow from me.



Natalie

“That was the worst taco I’ve ever eaten,” I said as I crumpled the tin foil and tossed it on the coffee table in front of me. “Are there any more left?”

Steph laughed as she dug through the brown paper bag. “Desperate times, huh?”

“You know it. I forget to eat all day at work because I’m so freaking busy, and by the time I get home, I’m ready to eat cardboard.”

“Mamacita Tacos has got you covered, then. Soggy shells and grizzle-meat. Yum!”

It was after nine and I was drained, as usual. I felt like I was barely keeping up at work, but I wasn't about to let on that I was struggling. In a way I was happy to be occupied, because it didn't allow me any time to think about

James. I could focus on all the good stuff that was happening in the office and shove down any stray emotions about the boss-hole.

Because “stray emotions” were all they could be. I mean, sure, he’d done something beautiful to try to convince me that he had real feelings for me. And a tiny part of me believed that he truly did love me...but that just wasn’t enough for me. Not when I knew that, no matter what he told me, he’d *always* go back to his one true love: Branson Designs.

“How was your day?” I asked Steph as she tossed another horrible taco my way.

Her shoulders hunched and she gave me a tight grin. “Um, perfect? Sorry, because I know things are tough for you right now, but I’m sort of loving this fit model stuff.”

“I’m glad!” I said. “You deserve it.”

“There’s this guy...” she began sheepishly.

I bit off a hunk of taco and talked with my mouth full. “Tell me everything.”

“He’s a photographer. I’ve only seen him around the offices, but there is some *serious* eye-fucking going on.”

“Are you going to shoot with him?”

She shrugged. “Still not sure if they want me for ads or anything, so I don’t know if I’ll be modeling for him. But fingers crossed.”

“What does he look like?” I wanted to live vicariously through Steph, because there was going to be zero romance in my life for a *long* time.

The door buzzer sounded as she started to answer me, and we looked at one another blankly.

“Did you order more food?” I asked her.

Steph shook her head. “Nope, shitty tacos is it. Could it be Amazon?”

I frowned at her. “I’m not expecting anything—are you?”

“Not that I can remember.” She jumped up and ran over to hit the answer

button. “Yes?”

“Package for Miss Natalie Reynolds,” came the scratchy reply.

“Okay, you can leave it in the lobby and she’ll be down to get it,” Steph shouted into the intercom as she glanced over her shoulder at me.

“I’m sorry, my instructions were to deliver it to your door. It’s a bit cumbersome.”

Steph took her finger off the call button and turned to me with wide eyes. “British accent! Whatever it is, it sounds fancy.”

My heartbeat sped up. What now?

“Tell him to come up.”

A few minutes later we heard a soft rap on the door, and Steph threw it open dramatically. On the other side was a tidy-looking gray-haired man dressed in all black, with a tweed newsboy cap on his head. He was holding a large box, perfectly wrapped in brown paper and finished with a thick black ribbon.

“Miss Reynolds?”

Steph shook her head and pointed at me. “Nope, you’re looking for the woman shoving a taco in her mouth.”

I waved at him wordlessly while I finished chewing.

“May I?” he asked, nodding to the package in his arms. “I just need a signature.”

I hopped off the couch and ran over to him as he placed the box on the ground and dug out a small clipboard. “Here you are.”

The form didn’t have any identifying information. I signed it quickly.

“Thank you,” I said, staring at the box and still trying to figure out what was going on. Then I realized my bad etiquette. “Ooh, a tip! One second please.”

He gave me a little bow and backed towards the door. “Unnecessary. That’s been taken care of. Have a lovely evening.”

The man was gone before I could reply.

“Do you think it’s from…” Steph trailed off.

I shrugged. I didn’t dare hope that James was trying again. Besides, it was no use trying to buy his way back into my life, no matter what extravagant trinket might be in the box.

“I think we need scissors,” I said, staring at it.

Steph jogged to the kitchen and back, holding them out to me. “This is one instance where it’s okay to run with scissors. Now get to it.”

I sliced through the packaging carefully to reveal a pristine white box.

“I bet it’s a gown. Or a Picasso, or gold ingots,” Steph said, bouncing on her toes. “C’mon, move faster.”

But I didn’t want to. I placed the box flat on the ground and slowly lifted the top off. Steph clapped her hands like a dork as she peered over my shoulder.

“No card?” she asked.

I shook my head.

Beneath the white tissue paper was a stretch of black leather, embellished with silver nail heads in the corners. I pulled it out slowly.

“Is that a *trunk*?” Steph asked, sounding indignant.

“No…it’s a suitcase,” I murmured.

But not just any suitcase. It was a work of art, with grommets that made it look a little rock and roll, two black straps banding across it, a telescoping handle and wheels that turned on a dime.

Steph frowned as I admired the thing. “Well, that’s kind of weird. Why would he buy you a *suitcase*? I’m sorry, but that’s not romantic at all.”

Tears flooded my eyes, because it actually was.

James was one of the few people who knew my sad history, that I’d never had a suitcase of my own during my many childhood upheavals. And he

understood the trauma that I still felt about being forced to pack my life into a garbage bag. Sure, it was just a suitcase, but we both knew that it symbolized so much more.

That he'd heard me as I spilled my secrets. He understood how something so seemingly insignificant could mean so much. It wasn't the gift that mattered, it was the sentiment behind it.

I glanced at her, blinking back my tears.

"Ohhh, of course. The garbage bags," Steph said softly. "Now I get it."

I stared at the ridiculous, beautiful thing.

"Let's see what the inside looks like," she said.

I unbuckled the straps and popped the silver locks open to find a white envelope attached to the lining.

Steph started backing away from me. "I'm gonna, uh, go wash my face while you read that, okay? Holler if you need me."

I nodded wordlessly as I walked back to the couch to open the envelope. My eyes filled with tears the moment I saw the scrawl of black ink covering the page.

Natalie,

Before I say anything else I first want you to know how sorry I am for hurting you. I'm heartbroken that I brought you back to those painful feelings from your past. And what's worse, through it all I made you doubt the depth of my emotions. I made you feel like you weren't my priority. That all changes now.

Because I love you.

Of course, I've already told you that, but I want you to understand I'm putting those words into action. I've always believed that nothing mattered more than my legacy with Branson, but being with you has made me realize that a legacy built on bricks alone doesn't mean a thing. I want to create a future with you, Natalie. To show you, every day, that my love for you will never waver. And there's only one way to prove it to you.

I'm leaving Branson Designs.

I plan to step down as CEO and devote myself to living a life of balance. I want to focus on what truly matters, like the beauty of a sunset over the ocean. An unexpected trip. Laughing more. Sleeping late.

Loving you.

All I want to do from this day forward is make you happy. I want you to understand that you are irreplaceable to me. Please give me the chance to show you all the ways I love you.

I want to spend the rest of my life with you—but I need you to know that I'm not going to reach out to you again. The decision about how, and if, we move forward from here is entirely up to you. You've already pushed me away once, and I don't think my heart could take it if you decide to do it again. Please consider this my invitation to do as you wish. Just know that my door will always be open to you, and if you're looking for a place to call home, I'd like it to be right by my side.

Love always,

James

The letter dropped from my hand as I finally gave into my tears. It was more than I could've hoped for.

But...it wasn't what I asked for. James stepping down? No. He was the heart and soul of Branson Designs, as much a part of the legacy as Bernie herself. There had to be a way to balance the company he loved and his love for me.

Steph came back into the family room and stared at me.

“What are you still doing here? Go.” She pointed at the door.

She was right. I jumped off the couch and got ready to begin my next chapter.

JAMES

I tried not to stare at my phone as the night ticked by.

I knew the package had been delivered and that she'd signed for it. I assumed she'd read the letter by now.

Still no response.

Yeah, my gift to her was an odd one, but I knew Natalie well enough to understand that there was a chance it would help me reach her.

If it didn't? Well, I wasn't sure how I was going to move forward without her in my life, but I'd find a way. Whatever her choice was, I'd respect it—no matter how much it hurt.

I poured myself a drink but wound up swirling the ice in the glass instead of sipping it. Alcohol wasn't going to do me any favors, given my state of mind.

Then, *finally*, the sweetest sound. Banging on my front door, as loud as a SWAT team. My entire body shifted into readiness, tense with anticipation and ready to find out if Natalie was back for good. I flung open the door.

And there she was, looking like she'd thrown on sneakers and a coat without even bothering to brush her hair.

Flawless, as always.

“You...” she said in a strained voice, red-faced and splotchy but never more beautiful. “This.”

She held up the letter.

I nodded, my heart pounding. “Did you...did you like it? The suitcase?”

Natalie didn't answer. She launched herself into my arm and buried her face in my neck. “It was wonderful and terrible at the same time.”

I eased my grip around her waist. “Hold on. How was it terrible?”

She slid down my body and gazed up at me. “Can I at least come in to talk about it?”

I moved out of the way, feeling awkward and nervous as fuck. The letter was supposed to fix everything. What had I done wrong?

“Yes, yes, of course,” I said, hiding my concern.

Natalie moved past me, and it took all of my self-control to not pull her into my arms again. She was *here*. That was a start.

We sat down in chairs opposite one another and for the first time I cursed all the space in the room. But it was probably better that she wasn't near me. I didn't want to accidentally catch a hint of her scent. That would make it so much harder to keep my hands to myself.

“Thank you for the gift,” Natalie began. “It was unexpected.”

“An odd choice, I know.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I loved it. It was perfect.”

We shifted to silence as I waited for her to continue.

“But James...you can't leave Branson Designs,” she finally blurted out. “You can't. You might think you're just some obscure leadership...*concept*...that anyone can slot into, but that's not true. You *are* Branson. If you step down, well, who knows what's going to happen? But my gut tells me it would be a disaster, right when the company has started to get back on track again.”

I moved to the edge of my chair in an attempt to get closer to her. “But I want

you to know how serious I am about putting you first. And you don't think it's possible if I'm still the CEO."

Her expression turned stormy. "I *never* said that. Don't you dare pin that on me, James. I said that you've always put the company first."

"And by stepping down that'll no longer happen," I offered, feeling confused.

She heaved a sigh. "Haven't you ever heard of moderation? You can lead the company but find ways to divide your time so that work doesn't fill up ninety percent of it. You can start by hiring a replacement for Clint that you actually trust."

"Well, from what I've heard, you're doing an incredible job."

She shook her head again. "No. It's been a struggle for me, because it's not what makes me happy. And I know that you stepping down wouldn't make you happy either, despite what you're saying."

I scrubbed my hands over my face, because she was right. As much as I wanted Natalie, I still felt an almost gravitational pull leading the company that was a part of my bloodline. I hadn't really let myself consider what it would feel like to leave and watch someone else run our family business.

"James, what I'm saying is...you can have both."

I felt a flicker of hope. "But..."

She held her hand up to silence me, a move I wouldn't tolerate from anyone else. "Things would have to change. Not just with Clint's position. You'd need to be better about delegating. Stop taking work home with you and answering emails at two in the morning."

I bit back a grin. "Only if you give me something better to do in the middle of the night."

"Stop," she commanded, scowling at me. "I'm being serious."

"Sorry, I'm sorry," I responded quickly, amazed at how this spitfire of a woman could shut me down. "You're right. Please continue."

"All I'm saying is I think it's possible to find a balance, but only if you really

want it. And well, if you want...*me*.”

She said it quietly, like she didn't fully believe that it was even an option, despite the many ways I'd already told her.

I couldn't resist it any longer, so I reached over to take her hand in mine. “Natalie, I want you more than anything. If scaling back at Branson is the way to get you back, then I'll do it. All I need is a second chance. Let me show you how much you mean to me.”

Her serious expression crumbled and her pretty mouth trembled. “Do you mean it?”

I finally pulled her to me and into my lap, and she snuggled against me. “I do. More than you know. I've missed you so much.” I smoothed her hair back and kissed her forehead gently.

Natalie sniffled against my chest. “I've missed you too. I didn't even dream that we'd make it here.”

“I had to find a way to get through to you, to show you that you're my everything.”

She leaned back and looked up at me, her eyes shining with tears. “I love you, James. So much.”

I'd always known in my heart that she felt it too, but to hear her finally say it sparked my entire body back to life. Relief, warm and sweet, spread through me.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” I murmured as I dropped my mouth to hers.

How was it possible that each kiss with her was better than the last? It had been way too long since I kissed my beautiful girl, and the twin urges to consume her and savor her started warring inside of me.

“I want you,” she whispered as our lips connected.

“Say no more.” I smiled as I stood up.

I gathered her in my arms and carried her to my room, never once breaking

apart from her. Her hand snaked up the back of my neck to play with my hair, and I felt myself growing even harder. I placed her on the bed, and she looked up at me, her eyes wide.

“Can we just...kiss for a little bit?” she breathed. “I want to enjoy every second of being with you again.”

I chuckled. “We have all night.”

She frowned for an instant.

“I mean...we have *forever*.”

With that she placed her hand on the back of my neck and pulled me down to her, kissing me hungrily. I climbed onto the bed and straddled her, gently so I didn't crush her with my weight.

“I've missed this,” she moaned, arching against me as we kissed. “I've missed you.”

Our lips and tongues played gently, then with more insistence as the pressure between my legs started to build. I couldn't help grinding against her.

Natalie giggled and bucked her hips against me. “I've missed that too.”

I pulled back slightly, cocking an eyebrow at her. “You said you wanted to kiss...”

“Why should I have to pick? What kind of multitasker are you?” she teased with a grin. She locked her legs behind my back. “It's time for you to fuck me, James Branson.”

“I'd prefer it if we made love.”

“Again, how about both?” she asked.

It was as if she'd fired a starter pistol. Every bit of calm I'd been pretending to have fell away as I curled her hair around my fist and tugged, then dropped my mouth to her neck.

“Hello, vampire,” she said and giggled.

“You don't even know how badly I want to devour you,” I growled, pulling

away so that my hands could trace over her curves.

Natalie fell back against the bed and gave me a come hither look that nearly drove me wild, biting her lip and watching me through lowered lids. “Strip for me. Make it sexy.”

“Absolutely not,” I shot back. “I’m getting you naked first, you saucy little minx.”

Her eyes went wide. “You *have* been reading Erin Woodley!”

I didn’t answer her. I knelt next to the bed and pulled off her sneakers and socks, then worked my way up to the waistband of her leggings.

“I’m not wearing underwear,” she squeaked as I peeled them off.

“I see that,” I said, using my foot to finish getting them off of her as I knelt on the ground and dove between her legs.

“James.” She sighed as my tongue explored her soft folds. “You don’t always have to...”

Her words faded to a whisper as I pushed my tongue against her clit.

“I love the way you taste,” I murmured, sliding a finger inside her. “I’ve missed this pussy.”

Natalie squirmed as I worshiped her with my mouth. I could tell that she was torn between trying to get me to stop and being unable to resist what I was doing to her. My tongue worked her sensitive nub as my finger slid in and out, and I knew by her breathing and fluttery contractions on my finger that she was getting close.

My cock was straining against my jeans as I tongued her. If I could live between her legs I would. Natalie was perfect, and more importantly, she was *mine*.

I increased the pressure of the little circles I was making against her. Then I heard it...the catch in her breathing that let me know she was at the edge of the precipice, about to give in to me. I flattened my tongue against her and lapped harder, and within seconds she unraveled, her cries filling the room. I kept at it as she rode wave after wave of pleasure, and didn’t stop until she

shifted slightly away.

I rested my head on her thigh as her panting evened out, my hand gently stroking her breast. “Are you ready for me?”

“Always,” she sighed. Natalie propped herself up on her elbow. “Fuck me. Now.”

I rarely took orders from anyone, but this was one I was more than willing to follow.

Natalie was still in her T-shirt and sports bra, so she pulled them off while I practically ripped my clothing off and slid on a condom. I crawled across the bed to her as she playfully backed away.

“Come and get me.” She smiled as she spread her legs wider apart.

I was damn close to *bursting*. The taste of her still on my tongue and the sight of her perfect pussy so close nearly sent me over the edge without even touching her. I grabbed her ankle, then found my position between her legs.

“Now?” I asked, lowering myself so that I could tease her with the tip of my cock.

“You’re killing me,” she moaned, arching her back and pushing against me to try to feel my full length. “*Please!*”

I moved a few inches away. “Oh, I *like* it when you beg. More of that, young lady.”

She gave me a wicked grin. “I’m dying for your cock, Mr. Branson, sir. *Please* give it to me, now.”

I touched my tip to her wet seam. “Like this?”

Natalie shook her head. “No, I need more.”

I frowned at her. “More *what?*”

“More...cock?”

I stifled a laugh. “I thought you were begging me,” I hinted.

“More *please*,” she said triumphantly. “Fuck me now. I’m officially begging you.”

I barely gave her a chance to finish what she was saying before thrusting deep inside of her. The mood in the room shifted from playful to intense as we both gave in to the sensations of being united again. The way her velvet gripped me nearly made me come instantly.

I moved closer to her ear. “I’ve...I’ve never felt this way with anyone before,” I said softly. “It’s never been like this.”

“I know,” she whispered. “We just *fit*.”

As much as I wanted to savor the way it felt being buried inside of her, I’d been waiting far too long. I started rolling my hips, pulling in and out of her slowly at first. Natalie’s hands gripped my ass, pulling me even closer with each thrust.

Her moans made me insane with hunger. There was something about the sound...a mix of pure ecstasy and helplessness, like she couldn’t control herself even though she was trying really fucking hard.

I felt the tension building inside of me with each thrust. As much as I wanted to make it last, I knew I was a goner. Her sweet pussy was a temptation I was powerless to resist, so I picked up the pace, ramming against her a little harder each time. I looked down at her beautiful face and saw that her eyes were shut tight, and she was biting her lip.

I managed to find my voice. “Are you okay?” I asked as I slowed my pace.

Her eyes flew open and she looked downright furious at me. “Don’t stop. Don’t you *dare* stop fucking me, James Branson. I’m so close...”

Again with the orders. I smiled and did exactly as she wanted, grabbing onto her hip with one hand so I could plunge even deeper inside of her. I touched my thumb to her nub, and it was like I hit a live wire.

“Oh my *god*,” she shrieked, arching her back as the orgasm ripped through her.

I’d never heard anything like it, which made it almost impossible for me to

hold off. I thrust into her a few more times and came hard, my own groan of pleasure louder than I expected. I leaned backwards, riding out the sensations, then collapsed onto her.

The only sound in the room for a good long time was our panting. Finally, I heard a soft giggle.

I propped myself up, still on top of her. “What?”

“I’m just so damn happy.”

Natalie’s face was glowing.

“You just had two orgasms, of course you are.”

She smacked me. “It’s more than that. I mean, yeah, the way you fuck me is incredible —”

I interrupted her. “I’ll have you know that was making love.”

Her expression shifted. “That’s exactly what I mean. I’m so happy that we’re here. I never thought I’d be this lucky, that you would love me too. It feels like a fairy tale, but it’s *real*.”

I cupped her cheek. “How could I not love you, Natalie?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I love you too.”

She circled her arms around me and pulled me down on top of her, as we both seemed to realize that this was the beginning of our forever.

NATALIE

I closed my eyes and leaned into the salty sea breeze, my face turned up towards the sun. I'd become a damn good first mate.

It was sort of crazy that I'd been afraid of going out on the boat, because now I absolutely loved it. It probably helped that James had hired a swim coach to help me get over my fear of the water. Now, instead of being petrified of the deep blue, it actually seemed peaceful and welcoming. I loved the feeling of weightlessness when I swam.

It was just one of my many walls that James had managed to crumble. Slowly, gently, and with so much love.

But I wasn't the only one who'd changed. I glanced back to where James was checking a sail rigging. The man looked...peaceful. Unbothered. It was still a shock to the system to see that sparkle in his eyes. The man who used to meet life wearing a perma-furrow frequently looked positively delighted these days.

Well, at least when he was with me. I knew the bosshole was still alive and well inside of him, lurking, ready to rage. But that side of him rarely came out of the cave anymore, thankfully.

So much had changed in the months since we'd reunited. I'd worried that things would slowly go back to the way they were in the before times, but

James had remained true to his word. The man could actually leave work at the end of the day and truly *leave work*. He didn't even check his emails! Once he got home it was all about the two of us. In a way it felt like I gave James an excuse to get out and actually enjoy his life. Those afternoon meetings that stretched into the evening hours were a thing of the past because the man had *plans*. But not the glitterati stuff that was typical for someone in his position, like restaurant openings and Broadway shows. Instead, our focus was living life to the fullest with the people we loved. That meant plenty of time cuddled up on the couch watching reality shows in his media room, but also getting out and connecting with family. Kathleen and Teddy had gotten into ballroom dancing, so we always made a point to go to their recitals. We had a standing monthly brunch date with Christopher and Julia. And Steph and her photographer boyfriend, Brendan, came over for game nights that made me laugh until my sides hurt. James had finally learned to prioritize what really mattered, like taking time off on a beautiful day to go sailing and make love, like today.

I was slowly getting used to our unexpected excursions. I think James enjoyed catching me off guard. Today we'd finished up second interviews with two candidates for Clint's position and the minute the last candidate had walked out of the room, James had turned to me with a devilish smile and said we were taking the afternoon off. Even though I had half a dozen designs to complete, I knew better than to argue with him.

I mean, I had to let the guy be the boss occasionally.

"What are you looking at?" James called to me.

I turned to him. "Miles and miles of absolutely nothing, and it's perfect."

He grinned as he made his way to where I was standing. "Isn't this the best?"

"It's everything."

I leaned back against his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me.

"I've got a question for you," James whispered in my ear. "But you have to promise not to get mad at me."

I craned my neck to look up at him, frowning. "Is this work related?"

“Uh, yes?”

I sighed and pulled my phone from my back pocket to glance at the time. We had a mutual agreement that we could only talk business between the hours of 8-5, whether we were in the office or not. “It’s four forty-five, so you’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“Come sit,” he said, taking my hand and pulling me to the bench. “It’s sort of a big deal.”

I settled in and crossed my legs, snapping my fingers at him, which I knew drove him crazy. “Let’s get this over with.”

He ignored my wise-assness. “I want *you* to pick Clint’s replacement.”

My mouth dropped open. “No way.”

“Way,” he replied. “I’ve picked a frontrunner between Erica and Todd, but I’m leaving the final decision up to you. No one knows the team better than you at this point, and hell, you’ve done the job, and you know what it takes. So...who’s your favorite?”

I had to literally bite my tongue to keep from blurting out the idea I’d been batting around in my head for ages.

“What?” James asked, because he could read in my expression that something was up. It drove me crazy that he knew me so well.

I cleared my throat. “I definitely have a favorite. The best person for the job is...” I paused before I said it, worried that he was going to shoot me down immediately.

He gave my knee a gentle push. “C’mon, this isn’t *The Bachelor*. Just say it.”

“Christopher,” I blurted out.

His mouth turned down immediately. “Oh, I don’t think —”

“I’m sorry.” I held up my hand and interrupted him. “But in this scenario it doesn’t matter what you think, because I *know*. He’s ready, James, but he’s too proud to ask to come back.”

Christopher and I had continued our offline work together, and he’d been

dropping hints about wanting to step back into his old role. Nothing overt, but now that he was emotionally steady again, I could tell he really missed being in the office. And I also knew that he would never make the move for fear of his little brother denying him the chance. But not because he didn't deserve it. James would be afraid that he couldn't handle the pressure. I knew better.

"Seriously?" James finally asked.

I was shocked that he didn't come back at me with a list of reasons why it was a bad idea. But maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. This was the new and improved James, willing to let me have a say.

"Seriously. He's ready. Better than ever, actually."

He exhaled slowly and stared out at the horizon. "You're sure about this?"

"James...come on. You know I wouldn't make this decision lightly. I'm one hundred percent sure."

I held my breath.

"Okay, then. Make the offer, whenever you're ready."

I shook my head. There was one last piece of the puzzle. "Nope. It has to come from you. He won't believe that it's a genuine offer unless you're the one to make it."

James nodded slowly. "You're right. Okay, tomorrow, then."

I beamed at him. The man had always been decisive, and I loved it when it worked in my favor.

"There's one last thing I want to talk about with you," he said. "How much time do I have?"

I glanced at my phone, feeling grumbly because I had no desire to work on projections or seasonal expansion lines with him as the sun was sinking. Plus, he was looking so damn good in the golden hour light, and I was feeling randy, as usual.

"Five minutes."

"Perfect." He rubbed his hands together. "I know it's sort of a touchy subject,

but I want to revisit the deconstruction show.”

I flinched at the memory of the night when everything had gone to hell between us. “Do we have to?”

“Stay with me, I have a feeling you’re going to like this. So, obviously you know that our finale gown was a hit, even if it didn’t get presented in the way we’d planned.”

I noticed that he didn’t mention the reason why, but he never uttered Heidi’s name in my presence.

“Yeah, and?” I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling preemptively defensive.

“Bernie has wanted to do a bridal line for ages, but I’ve been against it. I always thought that it would be too much, you know? Now that I’ve seen the reaction to the finale gown —”

“Which wasn’t even my best design,” I interrupted.

“Exactly,” he continued. “But people still went wild for it. So how would you feel about launching it? The Branson bridal line.”

I frowned. “*Me?*”

“Yup. I’d want you to head up the division,” he said with a grin.

“No way,” I shot back immediately. “I don’t want to be a boss. I’m done with that.”

James laughed at me. “Yeah, trust me, I know that. I’d want you to be the head of design, but in a one hundred percent creative capacity. I’m envisioning high end couture stuff. Just a couple dozen bespoke gowns per season.”

My heart swelled at the thought of it. I loved every bit of designing for Branson, but the chance to launch my own line, with *my* singular vision, was a dream come true. Instead of adhering to the corporate vibe, I could create my own vision from the ground up. I’d craft dresses for the traditional girlie-girl brides, as well as more cutting-edge stuff for women like me, who might like a touch of black or navy mixed in with their virginal white.

“What do you think?” James asked.

“I think it’s the best idea I’ve ever heard,” I exclaimed. “Yes, yes, yes!”

I jumped into his arms and covered his face with kisses. The offer meant that James truly understood what was important to me. Creativity, independence, and a chance to bring all of the dreams in my trusty old sketchbook to life.

I rested my head against his chest, and he circled his arms around me.

“One last thing,” he murmured as he planted a kiss on the top of my head.

“James, *no*,” I complained, pummeling him with soft punches. “It’s after five, we’re done, okay? No more work talk.”

“C’mon, give me one more minute!” He laughed, trying to hold me down. “Because I have the best idea to launch the new direction. A singular dress, the dress of your dreams, worn by the perfect spokesmodel.”

I paused and cocked my head. “Skyler?”

James shook his head, then slid me off his lap. I watched in shock as he went down on one knee in front of me.

“No. *You*.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the most beautiful ring I’d ever seen, then held it out to me. “Will you marry me, Natalie Reynolds?”

I stared at James in shock as tears flooded my eyes.

He smiled up at me. “I can wait down here as long as you need. Just say make sure to eventually say yes.”

It took me a few seconds to put together that this was my real life. I collapsed into his arms in a full-on weep, because never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that we’d find our way to this moment.

“Yes, James,” I sobbed. “Yes, forever.”

He stroked my hair as we embraced. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

James held me until I could finally collect myself enough to look at the ring. I

gave him my hand and he slipped it on. “Emerald-cut diamond with a diamond-encrusted platinum band, right? Isn’t that what you said you wanted?”

I sniffled as I examined the gorgeous thing. “But...this isn’t the one from Tiffany’s. It’s *huge*, James!”

He laughed. “You know I like things bigger and better. I called my friend at Veritique and told him what I needed, then coordinated with his designers to hash out the specifics. It’s one of a kind, just for you.”

We sat on the teak floorboards, holding one another as the light faded.

“I hope you know that you’re not just marrying me,” James finally said softly. “You’re marrying into a dynasty. Bernie, my mom, Christopher... they’re all part of the package. You sure you’re okay with that?”

Silent tears spilled down my cheeks at the thought of it. “Don’t you know that’s all I’ve ever wanted?” I whispered shakily. “To be a part of a family?”

He squeezed me closer to his chest. “Well, you’ve got one. And maybe one day...” He trailed off.

“What?” I asked. I wiped my tears away and leaned back to look into his eyes. “Say it.”

“Maybe,” he murmured, “if we’re extra lucky, we’ll be able to add our own branches to the old family tree.”

I didn’t answer him with words. I couldn’t, because I was about to burst from the strangest mixture of happiness, excitement, and yes, a tiny bit of fear of the unknown. Instead of trying to find the right thing to say, I kissed him, deep and full of promise. I wanted to show him with my body exactly how much I loved him. How much I loved *us*.

We both knew what was going to come next. We’d find the sweetest release in one another’s arms today, and thanks to the ring on my finger, forever.

JAMES

I wasn't usually a party kind of guy but even I had to admit that this one was next level.

Of course, it helped that the party in question was my wedding reception.

Bernie's Hamptons home and grounds had been transformed into a fairy tale, and the place was so satin-draped and flower-filled that I barely recognized it. She, my mom, and Natalie had worked with the event planners for almost a year to craft it. Natalie had tried to rope me into helping work on it during the early planning phases, but I left it all up to her. The day was about bringing to life her vision, her dreams, and I was just happy to let her run with it.

All I cared about was saying, "I do."

I glanced at the happy faces surrounding me in the tent from my position at our head table. It felt like it was the first time Natalie and I had been left alone all night. We were in the final hours of the reception, and everyone was feeling good thanks to the bottomless Veuve Clicquot and pumping music. As usual, Bernie had been the queen of the dance floor, closely followed by Christopher and Julia. I had a feeling that they'd been taking notes the whole day, because the way they slow danced together made it clear that there was another wedding on the horizon. Although after Christopher's big blowout wedding to Amanda, I guessed that the pair would opt for something a little

more intimate for their celebration.

Natalie reached over and threaded her fingers through mine, giving me a little smile. Holy *fuck*, my new wife was so beautiful.

When she'd appeared at the end of the aisle with her arm looped over Christopher's, I'd had to fight hard to keep the tears from flowing down my cheeks. Seeing them together wasn't a surprise—we'd discussed it at length—but their joyful expressions as he walked her down the aisle made me emotional in a way I hadn't anticipated. It reminded me that my family was now hers.

Then seeing her up close? Unreal. Her beautiful face shifted from teary-eyed to laughing to a combination of both expressions as she approached. It was almost impossible to keep from sweeping her in my arms and kissing her the minute we joined hands in front of the officiant. The top-secret gown she'd designed was more incredible than I'd imagined, and suited her perfectly. A strapless column of white with a black sash at the waist and the hint of dark beading glinting along the bottom. Branson wasn't going to recreate her dress, but it would serve as the calling card for the type of bride the line catered to.

I watched Natalie watching the fun on the dance floor. Steph forcing Brendan to help her lead a raucous Electric Slide with the entire design crew dancing along behind her.

"Rhea's got some moves." Natalie laughed.

"And Lavonte is basically a professional out there," I added. "Why don't you go join them?"

She shook her head. "I'm pretty tired. And it's nice just to just watch everyone coming together."

Our table attendant walked up with an oversized bottle of champagne. "May I top you off?"

"Oh, no more for me." I groaned, reaching out to place my hand over the top of my flute. "I can only imagine the hangover to come if I keep going. Nat? You've barely touched yours. Have some."

She smiled at me and then at the server. “Okay, sure. But let me dump what’s in the glass; it’s probably warm by now.” She spilled the contents in the ice bucket in front of her, then held out her glass to him.

“So, about our honeymoon,” Natalie said as she nestled in closer to me. “Are you finally going to tell me where we’re going? Because we’re leaving in...” she flipped her wrist to check the time on the delicate Patek Phillippe watch I’d given her as a wedding gift, “under twelve hours. Just spill it already, Branson.”

I laughed at her. “I’m really enjoying torturing you by keeping the secret, *Branson*. And by the way, I know you hacked into my email to try to figure it out.”

Her eyes went wide in mock horror. “I did *not*! How dare you accuse me of that!”

“I know everything. Haven’t you figured that out by now? I’m an observer. Nothing gets by me,” I gloated.

Natalie’s expression shifted to dubious. “Oh, is that a fact?”

“It is.”

She pursed her lips together and nodded, glancing back at the dance floor. “Huh. Well, I’ll have you know that you’re wrong. There’s something pretty major that you’ve missed today.”

“Please. If you’re talking about the Beyonce lyrics hidden in the frosting on the groom’s cake, uh, yeah, noted. And I’ll have you know that I now fully believe that girls *do* run the world.”

Natalie threw her head back, laughing. “Damn it, I wasn’t going to cop to that until we were on the beach in...well, wherever it is you’re taking me.”

I gave her a steely-eyed look. “Who said we’re going to a beach?”

“Crap.” She slapped the table in frustration. “I thought I’d trip you up.”

“See? I don’t miss a thing.”

“So you keep saying. But you’re wrong.”

I stared at her and realized that something was up. She was keeping a secret. “Hold on... Please don’t tell me there’s karaoke coming up...”

“How did you *know*, Mr. Branson?” she asked in a breathless voice, holding her hands to her heart like a Disney princess. “You figured it out! I’m about to give you that serenade you never paid me *not* to do.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. “Can I do a bank transfer now to avoid it? Please? I’ll triple what I offered you.”

“Stop.” She swatted me lightly as she settled in against my side again. “It’s not karaoke. Although that was a good idea and I’m pissed I didn’t think of it.”

We watched the dancing in silence for a few minutes.

“Are you going to tell me what I missed or not?” I finally demanded.

I hated secrets.

“Okay,” she said, pulling away. “But I’m going to be breaking a rule, because it has to do with work.”

I frowned at her. “Are you serious? You want to talk business *now*?”

Natalie nodded. “It’s a new direction for the company. An untapped market.”

My mind started spinning, because even though I’d sworn not to discuss Branson Designs during our off hours, I still fucking loved everything that had to do with our company. And I was in awe of Natalie’s creative force.

“It’s obviously not bridal, because that’s well under way,” I began slowly. “And Rhea is heading up the new swim division...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Is it accessories? Like, sunglasses and jewelry?”

Natalie shook her head. “Maybe someday, but I don’t think we have the staff for that yet.”

“Housewares?”

“Ooh, phenomenal idea,” she said. “But no. At least not in the near future.”

“What am I missing?” I muttered. “What else is there?”

“Think small.”

I stared out at the crowd and saw the pile of women’s heels lining the edge of the dance floor.

“Shoes!” I said triumphantly. “It’s shoes.”

“Another fabulous idea, but no.”

“It’s not accessories, housewares or shoes.” I ticked off the possibilities on my fingers. “What else is there? I’m stumped.”

The music downshifted from upbeat club hits to Frank Sinatra’s “It Had to be You.” The night was quickly coming to a close.

“Let’s dance,” Natalie said as she pulled me to my feet.

“I thought you said you were tired,” I grouched, even though I loved dancing with her.

It was just one of the many changes she’d brought out in me.

“I am, but for Frank, I’ll make an exception,” she said as she walked into my open arms.

The crowd noticed that we were on the dance floor and gave us a round of applause. We settled into our familiar grip, one palm warm against Natalie’s lower back, the other clasping her hand in mine, and her head against my chest.

“This is nice,” she murmured.

“This is *forever*.” I kissed the top of her head and went into a quick spin around the dance floor.

“Ooh, please stop,” Natalie said as she placed her hand against my chest, frowning. “Dizzy.”

“Too much champagne?” I chuckled.

“No, it’s not that.” Natalie cocked her head and looked up at me. “Which leads me back to our discussion. The new direction for Branson.”

I frowned at her. “I’m so confused. *Why* are we still discussing business in the final minutes of our wedding reception? Just tell me already.”

“Okay.” Natalie beamed up at me. “I was thinking we need to get into...”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Ugh, there’s that dramatic pause again.”

She went up on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. “Maternity.”

“Huh,” I replied, nodding thoughtfully. “That’s actually a really great idea. We could modify a bunch of our current designs to accommodate the physical changes women go through during pregnancy. I like it. Good thinking.”

Natalie furrowed up at me. “Wow, you are *really* off your game tonight, Mr. Observer.”

And then it hit me.

The fact that Natalie never needed a champagne refill the whole night, complaining about being tired for the past few weeks, her dizziness...

I stepped away from her as the realization came over me.

“Oh my god, Natalie...are you *pregnant?*”

I hadn’t meant to shout it, but based on the collective gasp that sounded off around us, I guess I’d accidentally announced it to everyone on the dance floor.

Tears filled her eyes as she nodded at me.

“I’m going to be a great-grandmother?” Bernie shrieked from behind me.

“I’m going to be a grandmother?” my mom squealed at almost the exact moment.

“Dibs on godmother!” I heard Steph shout out.

Natalie jumped into my arms, and I clung to her as we both let the tears flow.

“*Finally*,” she cry-laughed into my ear. “You might be the world’s worst clue guesser.”

Suddenly, we were surrounded by a crush of well-wishers, closing in around us with slaps on the back and hugs. I wasn’t ready to let go of my Natalie yet, so I clung to her, kissing her over and over. When I finally put her down, she turned to the crowd of people waiting to congratulate her.

I watched her as I shook hands and got my own hugs from everyone. Natalie was beautiful—happy, glowing, and embraced by her newfound family.

She’d never been more beautiful.

It took a while but she finally found her way back to me, looking deliriously happy. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

“Best new direction *ever*,” I whispered in her ear.

“I’m glad we agree.”

I placed my hand on her stomach. “I can’t wait to meet you, little one.”

When I finally glanced at Natalie, I saw the tears shining in her eyes. “Thank you for giving me everything I’ve ever wanted.”

I swept her into my arms and kissed her long and hard.

“Just you wait,” I said when I managed to draw back from her rosebud lips. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life making sure that the two of you get everything and more.”

“That’s it? Just one?” Natalie frowned at me. “What if we decide we want more?”

“Two, three, eight, a hundred...whatever you want, my love,” I said, pulling her to me. “I’m going to give you whatever you want, now and forever.”

END OF THE GRUMPY ONE

BOSSY GLENHAVEN BILLIONAIRES BOOK 2

The Bossy One, September 7, 2023

The Grumpy One, February 22, 2024

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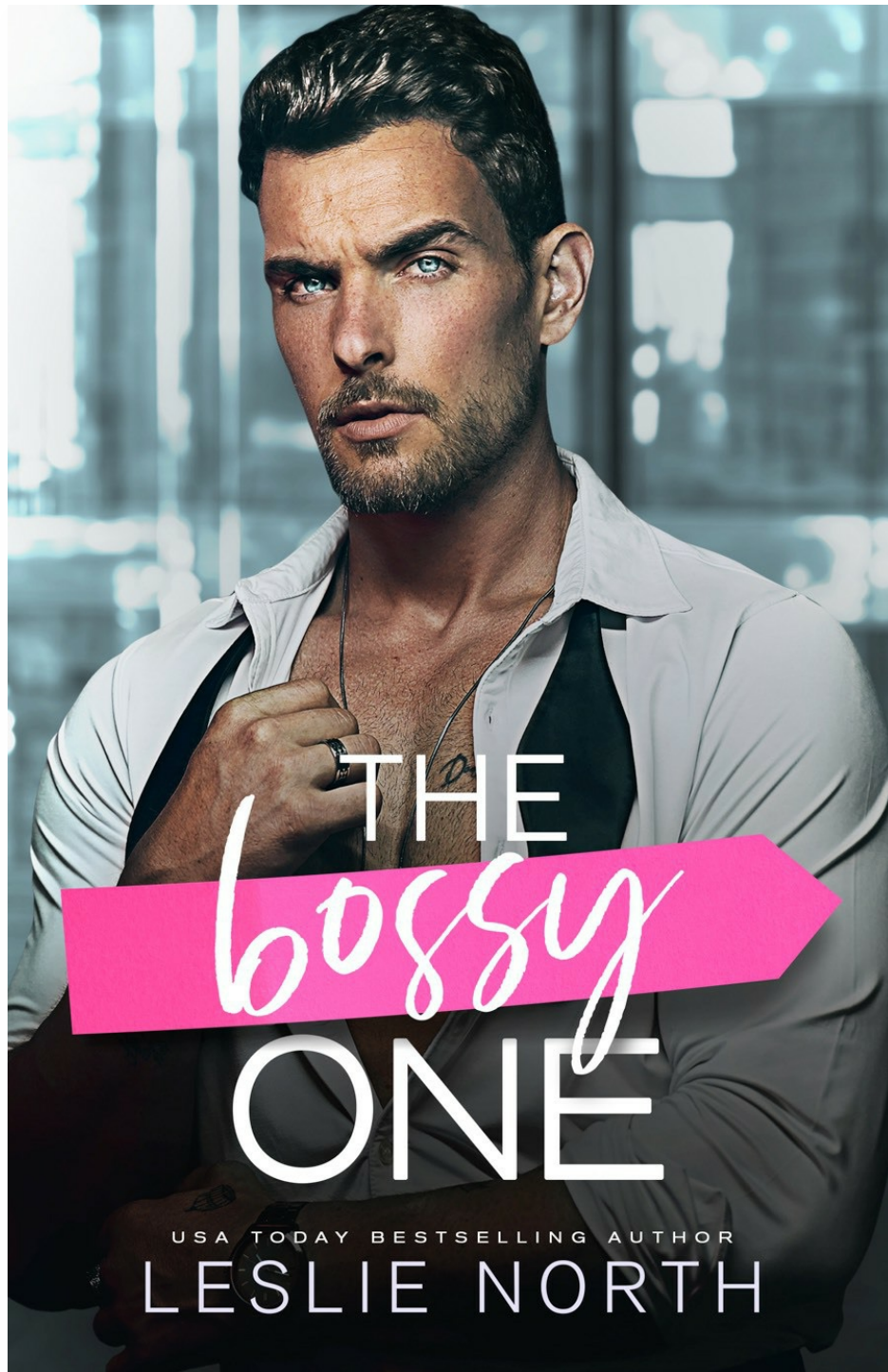
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BLURB

My new nanny posting with Irish billionaire Declan Byrne and his adorable niece, Catie, feels so right—at first.

But everything—and I mean *everything*—is wrong about Declan.
We first met on a flight where he basically told me that it'd be “grand” if I could stop talking.
I can't help it. I'm a nervous flyer.
He's a total grump.
He obviously doesn't like me.
Too distractingly gorgeous to be around for any length of time.
And he's made it clear that as soon as he can find another nanny, I'm gone.

This Minnesota girl is made of tough stuff though, so I know I can make it through one Irish summer with one sexy Irish curmudgeon.

At least I thought I could, until he became that much harder to resist.
Because the more I work with Declan, the more I realize there's something growing between us...an attraction that's impossible to resist.
Declan hides a kind heart behind his stormy, gruff demeanor.
And that *accent*.
That suave Irish brogue makes my insides melt.

The cardinal rule of being a nanny is to not get involved with the family.
To maintain a professional distance.
Sleeping with Declan would definitely cross that line.

Some rules are meant to be kept.
Others are meant to be shattered.

Great news! *The Bossy One* is even better than before, it was updated in October 2023!

**Grab your copy of *The Bossy One* from
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EXCERPT

Chapter One Declan

An Irishman walks into an airport.

And wishes it was a bar.

Not the best of setups, especially when I was the Irishman, but what can I say? I was overtired, stuck in a hellish airport...and I'd had *fucking* enough.

I wasn't usually like this, mind you—I might not be a saint, but I did know how to be a polite enough member of society. Of course, whether the Chicago airport was a part of society or the seventh circle of hell...well, the jury was still out on that one.

First, they'd kept my incoming flight on the tarmac for so long there was a chance I was going to miss my connecting flight. But I'd still thought I had just enough time to grab some damn food from an airport kiosk.

That was when the cashier confiscated my credit card and accused me of identity theft because, and I quote, "You can't possibly be Declan Byrne. As if he'd ever fly coach."

Because, obviously, Declan Byrne was so rich he must have wings made of money.

If only.

Now I was hungry *and* running late. Everywhere I turned, there was some meandering idiot with a suitcase blocking my way, acting like they'd never been in a damn airport before. The last twenty-four hours had been a nightmare, and all I wanted to do was get on the damn plane that would *finally* take me to the sister who needed me.

I was panting when I got to the gate and shoved my ticket at the airline staffer.

He squinted when he saw my name. "Ha. Declan Byrne. Just like the Irish guy who invented that pathetic social media platform. Everyone acts like Snug is so great, but in my opinion it's just for losers who hate humor. Did you know my account got flagged just for making a few harmless jokes about that bitch who won the Nobel Prize?"

I gritted my teeth.

For a split second, I considered buying the stupid airline and getting his contract flagged, same as his “harmless” comments had been. Lucky for him, I had bigger fish to fry.

He smiled conspiratorially. “Wonder what old Declan’s doing these days, eh?”

Seriously?

“I’ll tell you what he’s doing,” I replied. “He’s waiting for you to scan his fucking ticket.”

That did it.

His eyes widened, and he scanned the ticket so fast you could’ve mistaken him for a member of a Formula 1 pit crew. I ignored his mumbled apologies, rushed down the ramp, and onto the plane. I hadn’t flown economy in years, but this had been the fastest way to get to Faribault-Northfield, Minnesota. My business partner was already using our company’s private plane, and there had been some kind of paperwork hang up when I tried to charter a private one.

Contrary to popular belief, a gigantic pile of money isn’t the same as having a genie in a bottle. Then again, I think even a genie would have trouble finding Faribault-Northfield on a map. My sister wasn’t kidding when she said she wanted peace and quiet in the US.

If only she had found it.

When I got into my seat—if you could even call the scuffed-up chair a seat—I collapsed in relief.

“Passengers, please take your seats,” a flight attendant said. “We’ll be closing the cabin door soon to prepare for takeoff.”

At least there was no one sitting next to me. Maybe I could finally relax enough to get some damn sleep. With some luck, by the time I opened my eyes again, I’d already be at —

“Sorry, sorry! I got here as fast as I—oh, sorry!”

I heard a commotion up toward the front of the plane, and then a pretty

redhead appeared, apologizing profusely as she hauled an over-packed duffel bag up the aisle. “I’m so sorry! Ooops, didn’t mean to... Shoot, was that your head, sir?”

I massaged my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. I just wanted to get to my sister Sinead and her daughter Catie. But no, I was on a damn plane, waiting for Miss Over-Packed Duffel Bag to find the right angle to squeeze her bulging bag in the overhead compartment across the aisle from me.

“It’s fine,” she said valiantly, smiling at no one in particular. “I’ve almost got it.”

She hopped in place, trying to shove her bag into the compartment with her shoulder. It was useless. If this was a cage match, that bag of hers would’ve been the clear favorite.

“Jesus,” I swore under my breath. I stood up, trying to grab the bag from her hands. “I’ve got it.”

Apparently, I’d picked the one woman who was allergic to accepting help.

“Thanks, but I’ve got it,” she said, her voice coming from somewhere on the other side of the giant duffel bag. All I could see were her fingers, buried so deep in the canvas you’d think she was hauling a concrete slab.

“Clearly you don’t,” I grunted. “And you’re holding up the rest of the plane.” I wrested the duffel from her—and the concrete slab she’d hidden inside it—and shoved it into the overhead compartment.

“I said I was fine.” She looked up at me, disheveled locks of fiery red hair falling across her face. “I get that you’re trying to be helpful, and flying is probably stressful for you. But —”

I slammed the overhead compartment closed and sat back down in my row.

“Seriously?” she continued. “I appreciate the help, but —”

“You’re welcome,” I cut her short, praying to God this put an end to whatever conversation this woman wanted to have. Unless she was carrying a dead body inside that duffel bag—you never know with people—there was nothing more interesting right now than falling asleep.

“If everyone could please take their seat,” the flight attendant said again, sounding a little desperate.

But the woman didn’t move along and take her seat. Instead, she started fishing for something in her purse. Her wide hazel eyes took up her whole face, which was delicate and sprinkled with freckles. Her bright red hair spiraled in messy curls around her flushed cheeks.

If I wasn’t in such a rush, and she wasn’t such a walking disaster...

No. She wasn’t my type. Too clumsy, too talkative, too...*much*.

She fished her phone out of her purse and frowned at the screen. Then she looked up at me with narrow eyes.

“What?” I demanded.

If she recognized me and decided now was the time to lodge a customer complaint...

Instead, she held up her phone, showing her ticket info. “I think you might be in my seat.”

Fuck me, I thought, as I reluctantly surrendered the aisle seat.

Of course I had a seatmate...and of course it’d be this woman.

I grunted and moved over to the window seat, which had significantly less leg room. With my knees pressed tight against the front seat, I felt like a coiled spring someone had tried to squeeze into a sardine can. Just what I needed.

Her shoulder bumped mine as she took her place. She smelled like lavender.

“Wow. Good thing I’m short.” She looked at me, her right eyebrow lifting into an arch. A thin, amused smile dawned on her lips. “These seats must be really uncomfortable for tall people like you.”

I didn’t say anything. *Please God, let her not be one of those women who says every single thought that comes into her mind.*

“Not that I’m short-short. Actually, I’m average. The average American woman got shorter this year.”

Apparently, God didn't like me very much.

She took a deep breath. With a quick gesture, she finger-combed her disheveled hair. "Look, if we're stuck together, we might as well get along. Let's start over. I'm Olivia." She held out her hand to me and smiled, rueful.

As if I'd ever need to know this woman's name.

I didn't say anything, but my glower must have been eloquent, because her wide, genuine smile faltered a bit. Just enough to make me feel like an arse. Reluctantly, I took her hand. "Declan."

"Declan. *Lovely* name. I don't think I've ever met a Declan." Her smile returned to full bloom. "Don't you think traveling's better when you get to know the people around you?"

I snorted. I needed to make a new friend on this trip like I needed a hole in the head.

"No," I said shortly, and took my hand back.

This was going to be a long flight.



A half hour later she was still talking. I couldn't tell if it was her personality, or her own perky way of punishing me for my earlier rudeness.

Maybe both.

Her voice had a soft, pleasant warmth to it, but dear God, did there have to be so *much* of it? So far she'd opined on which airlines had the best miles plans, the institutional discrimination against left-handed people, why outside concerts were more fun, the relative shortage of pop songs about women named Olivia, and the year her favorite shade of purple was invented.

"Oh, excuse me, can I have a glass of white wine?" Olivia asked the passing flight attendant. "It's been a rough day."

"We're not doing full beverage service on this flight," the flight attendant said. "It's only an hour and forty minutes. Also, it's eleven in the morning."

There was more than a hint of judgment in the flight attendant's voice.

"Oh." Olivia deflated. "Sure. That makes sense."

The flight attendant walked away. Olivia stayed silent.

"Finally," I muttered, slouching deeper into my seat.

"Oh, *now* he talks," Olivia huffed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

"Nothing. None of my business." She mimed zipping her lips.

Right.

I waited, counting in my head. 1, 2, 3, 4...

"It's just that I've met your type before," Olivia burst out. "You're the type of guy who's only interested in talking if you get to judge and mock people. Because God forbid you get over yourself and just be *friendly*."

"I am friendly."

If this sounds like I was caving, that's because I was. Then and there, I would've confessed to murder if that made her shut up for more than five consecutive minutes.

"You've barely said a word to me," she retorted. "And you only answer in grunts. That's not what I'd call friendly."

"I—"

"Am I annoying you? Because if I am, I won't say a word more." God himself was laughing. "I just thought this flight would go by faster with some conversation, that's all. Besides, and I'm not proud to admit it, I'm a nervous flyer. Being God knows how many miles up in the air, it makes me nervous. And after the day I just had...I needed the distraction. But, fine, message received. Loud and clear. I won't say a word more."

I held my breath.

"Not even if you ask me to," she continued. "Okay, maybe if you ask me

nicely. But otherwise —”

“Seriously?” I looked up at the ceiling and rolled my eyes. “I get the nervous flyer thing, but you really need to take a deep breath here. I mean...bloody hell.”

“That was uncalled for.” She sounded genuinely hurt. Then her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know who you are but —”

“I’m just a guy with a growing headache,” I volleyed back, my annoyance getting the best of me. “And your endless talking isn’t helping matters.”

“You know what... No, no, I’m not sinking to your level.” She crossed her arms and looked away from me. She was probably going for calm superiority, but she just looked annoyed.

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