



the
price

of
Scandal

A
Bluewater
BILLIONAIRES NOVEL

LUCY SCORE

THE PRICE OF SCANDAL

LUCY SCORE

That's What She Said Publishing, Inc.



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To Claire, Kathryn, and Pippa. Authors who build worlds and lift women up. All the heart eyes, ladies.

EMILY

The south Florida humidity hit me like a hot, sweaty fist the second my heels touched the sidewalk in front of my office building. It was a little early for swelter, even by Miami's standards.

Between the mosquitos, the lizards, the worst drivers to ever get behind the wheel of a vehicle, and the oppressive heat, Miami had a natural defense system built in against people who didn't belong here.

I, however, belonged.

My mother had lobbied for a more respectable address, and my father, a Miami native, had eventually compromised with the family penthouse in Manhattan for the summer months. But my heart remained firmly attached to the neon lights and swaying palms.

"Thanks, Jane. I should be ready to head to lunch by one," I told my assistant slash driver slash occasional security detail. Jane was shorter than my five feet seven by enough inches that I towered over her in heels. Free from the demands of permanent public scrutiny, she consistently opted for sensible sneakers or boots and wore her dark hair in a tight bun. A nod to her time in the Marines.

She dated like it was a competitive sport and dabbled in adventure sports on her days off.

Sometimes I wished I'd been born a Jane instead of an Emily.

“Need me to text you fifty-six times to remind you, boss?” she quipped, closing the door of the Range Rover behind me.

I tapped my coffee to hers. “I think I can manage,” I said dryly. “Now, go do whatever it is a Jane of all trades does when she’s not babysitting me.”

Her brown eyes lit up. “I could squeeze in a breakfast hookup. Or a workout. Or maybe I’ll just drive around and yell at people out the window,” she mused.

I grimaced behind my sunglasses. Jane had a freedom that I never would. And I wouldn’t know what to do with it even if I had it.

The air conditioning in the marble lobby fought a never-ending battle against the heat outside. Nodding to the security desk, I went directly to the elevator.

I checked my emails again on my way to the sixty-second floor. My day had started hours before my arrival at work. I’d already taken care of the “urgents” and “priorities” that cropped up during my five hours of sleep.

But there were always more.

The glass doors with ‘*Flawless by Emily Stanton*’ etched in gold script slid open to greet me.

“Good morning, Ms. Stanton. Divine dress,” the receptionist said. At twenty-four, she was a breathtaking beauty who wanted a foot in the door at Flawless more than she wanted attention for her looks. I liked that about her, and once her eighteen months on the front desk were up, I’d be happy to move her into marketing or research or wherever her summa cum laude University of Miami heart desired.

“Morning, Rosario,” I said with a wave as I continued past the desk.

The Flawless offices were sophisticated and feminine. Photos of women with unlined, dewy faces decorated the ivory walls in heavy silver and gold frames. The sofas were sleek, creamy linen. Vases of fresh white and pearly pink flowers were delivered twice a week. The carpet, a luxurious cream cloud of it, cushioned busy feet in stilettos.

There were mirrors everywhere for discreet lipstick and teeth checks. And a reminder of why we were occupying the top floor of one of the most exclusive buildings in the Miami skyline. We trended female on our staff and not just because we sold the world's most effective wrinkle reducer.

Flawless was my baby. My legacy. My reputation. To others, my company was a billion-dollar game-changer. To me, it was my life. And I hired people who would be invested in the jobs I paid them handsomely to perform.

I passed two conference rooms full of people I employed who were working on ways to make more money on the products we developed. At this level, I knew all of their names. But there were hundreds more in distribution, sales, and, of course, research and development.

It didn't keep me up at night as much as it had. The ever-present responsibility of employees. People and families who depended on me to make the right choices in every area of my life. This work, this company, paid peoples' mortgages and sent kids to college. It bought homes and built retirement savings.

The ten-chair on-site salon was almost empty. Employees had the option of starting their day with a professional makeup application and blowout, a perk many enjoyed.

I preferred to do my own hair and makeup in the mornings after my workout. It wasn't so much a point of pride as it was the fact that, once I walked through these doors, every minute of my time was already spoken for. There were decisions and meetings and endless conference calls. Everyone needed a piece of me, and it was my job to give them undivided attention. That didn't leave time for mascara applications or straight irons.

"Good morning, Ms. Stanton," my assistants chorused.

Easton had been with me for close to five years. He was well-versed in my specific requirements of an assistant. Namely, he didn't hover, and he guarded the doors to my office and my calendar as fiercely as a disdainful dragon. We understood each other and worked well together. He dressed

impeccably—better than I did—gossiped only when necessary, and had to be strong-armed into taking his vacation time every year. He terrified almost as many people as I did.

However, with my workload steadily increasing, a second assistant was an unfortunate necessity. Finding a carbon copy of Easton was proving to be difficult. We were on our sixth second assistant. Or seventh?

Number Two, whose name escaped me at the moment, stood next to her desk, hands folded in front of her as if for inspection. She'd started last week, and I'd yet to determine whether or not she had potential.

It wasn't that I was an exceedingly difficult boss. Really, it wasn't. I was particular and dedicated to my vision. So far, my candidates did not fit my requirements. They either lurked too much or didn't make themselves available enough. They were too chipper in the morning or showed up late too often.

“Good morning,” I returned, pausing to scoop up the messages and meeting reminders from Easton's desk. Number Two produced the daily hot sheet that documented the top priorities of each department with a professional smile.

“You have the product development team in Ocean Conference Room at nine. Online sales at eleven-thirty. Lunch with your mother at one-thirty at the Palm. Then back here for a briefing with legal at three.” Easton rattled off the highlights.

“You also might want to take a moment to look at the new mock-ups for the marketing campaign,” Number Two chimed in. “Water cooler rumor has it they're considering going in a different direction.”

Of course they were. I hid my reflexive annoyance. If everyone would just do the damn job I tasked them with, I wouldn't need to micromanage every damn thing that happened on the sixty-second floor.

“Also, I love your dress,” she added.

A show of loyalty and a compliment. Smart girl.

“Thank you.” My smile was a touch more genuine. After all, it *was* a lovely dress. Soft spun vanilla wool in a sleek

silhouette. I chose it knowing my mother would approve.

I stepped through the frosted glass doors and into my sanctuary. It was a comfortable, cozy space. Smaller than the average CEO's—no airy corner office for me—but it was decorated to within an inch of perfection to make up for the lack of square footage. There were more ivories and creams in here warmed by grey and beige tones. The color came from the windows that captured Biscayne Bay in panoramic glory.

Blues and greens that sparkled so brightly I had to squint if I wanted to stare off into the horizon. I rarely made time for squinting and staring.

It was miles away from the fluorescent-lit, basement lab where it had all started.

I ditched my bag on the console table inside the door and headed to my desk, a custom design with a frosted glass top and shiny metal legs. I had fifteen minutes to check in with Lita before the day spun out into a chaotic hurricane of details, questions, and requirements.

I picked up my phone and dialed.

“Hey,” I said when she answered.

“Agh! You're early,” she groaned.

“I can come to you,” I volunteered. Lita had mentioned on more than one occasion that she didn't like being “summoned” to my office like an underling, and I'd taken the criticism to heart.

After all, there wouldn't be a Flawless without her.

“You could, but you'd have to come to the coffee shop two blocks down,” she said. “I thought I had more time.”

“No problem,” I said, already mentally rearranging the next thirty minutes. Lita was historically and consistently late. She'd given up apologizing just as I'd given up on expecting her to value punctuality. “Pop in when you get here.”

“I'll bring you a latte,” she promised.

~

THE LATTE and Lita arrived twenty minutes later.

Both were lukewarm.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as she collapsed her curvy frame onto the low-backed linen couch.

“Just the teensiest bit hungover,” she rasped, guzzling her own coffee.

“It’s Tuesday,” I said, more amused than appalled.

Lita snorted inelegantly. “We’re not in college anymore, Lady Stanton. Drinking isn’t just for the weekends. You’re missing out.”

The nickname, born freshman year when I’d arrived on campus with a driver and matching Louis Vuitton luggage, used to irk me. It reminded me that I didn’t quite fit in. But I wasn’t concerned with fitting in anymore.

I winced at her bloodshot eyes. “I can see that.”

“Forget about me and my insatiable need for grease right now,” Lita insisted. “As chief marketing officer, I’ve got an urgent request for you.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, scrolling through my inbox again. I was waiting on news. Big news.

Lita and I had started the company together. However, it had been my trust fund that founded Flawless. Lita came from a working-class family in Virginia. When she wasn’t late or hungover, she brought ingenuity and creativity to the table. I brought the science and the money. On paper, the business was mine. But I couldn’t have done it without her. And she knew it.

“Hey, there, Madam CEO,” she said, snapping her fingers. “I need your focus for ten whole seconds.”

Reluctantly, I shifted away from my monitor and all the red flags that were currently demanding my attention. “What’s your urgent request?”

“The IPO is in fifty-nine days,” she began.

“I’m aware of this,” I said, tapping my nails—a classic French manicure—on my desk. The initial public offering was only the culmination of fifteen years of blood, sweat, and science.

“This is a huge deal, Emily,” she reminded me.

“We’re already a huge deal,” I pointed out. We’d built a billion-dollar company together. I felt like that monumental achievement was being overshadowed by the potential influx of even more cash. It felt... desperate? No. Perhaps just a little unseemly to be salivating over what some would see as “free money.” But it was the next logical step.

“We need to keep the press positive,” she said, unfazed.

“Of course.”

“And as the face of the company, you’re going to need to step up your public appearances. Keep reminding the world of how beautiful and talented and genius-y you are.”

I bit back a sigh. “What do you want me to do?”

Lita sat up straighter. “It’s just dinner with the bachelor son of a hotelier.”

I let my impeccable composure slip just a little bit and dropped my head back against the white leather of my desk chair. “You want me to go on a date to make the company more attractive to the public?”

My stomach gave a warning gurgle. I’d never admitted it to anyone, but certain situations threw me into anxiety-induced diarrhea with alacrity.

I always carried an emergency stash of Imodium with me.

“There’s my grumpy, geeky friend,” Lita crooned. “It’s a tough job going out to dinner on the arm of a handsome, single entrepreneur.”

“Entrepreneur’s son,” I corrected.

“Whatever. Dinner. A nice dress. A few pictures. You’ll be home in bunny slippers by nine. We need every ounce of positive attention we can get between now and the IPO.”

At least it wasn't a gala or a charity golf tournament.

“What’s in it for him?”

“This guy is launching a luxury underwear line,” Lita said straight-faced.

“You’re kidding, right?”

She grinned. “You wish. Publicity for him, pretty pictures of you. It’s a win-win.”

I sighed, and Lita knew she’d won.

“I’ll text you the details,” she said triumphantly.

“Can’t wait,” I lied.

EMILY

“Darling, that dress,” my mother said approvingly as we air kissed and pretended not to notice the interest from neighboring tables. The Palm was Mom’s favorite place to be seen lunching. And by “lunching” it was understood that she would push her kale salad around on her plate while enjoying her vodka tonic and pressuring her daughter into whatever scheme would most effectively raise the Stanton family profile.

“You look lovely,” I said, taking in her glowing cheeks and freshly styled hair.

We were both blonde. Both tall. But my mother made it her life’s work to cling to every shred of youth or, as she saw it, value. In some ways, I imagined my mother had subliminally planted the idea for Flawless in me at a young age. It certainly hadn’t been my childhood dream to develop a wrinkle reducer—at five, I’d spent an entire weekend trying to develop robot bandages. Yet here I was, the queen of high-end skincare. Wrinkle reducers had led to wrinkle prevention products, skin tone correctors, and moisturizers.

Women now had an entire line of weaponry in their fight against the aging process, most likely thanks to my mother’s early influence.

I never put quite as much effort into my appearance as Mom would have liked, and she never put quite as much effort into pretending to be interested in my work as I would have liked. It was the perfect balance of vague disappointments.

Mom patted her hair in satisfaction. “Oh, I’m just my usual mess. The salon had their work cut out for them this morning,” she said breezily.

Venice “We Have a Responsibility” Markham-Stanton had never been a mess in her life.

“I’ve been thinking about doing something different with my hair,” I mused, skimming the menu and regretting it instantly.

“Emily! Don’t you *dare* do something vulgar like cutting it all off. Or, God forbid, getting those trashy extensions like that Daisy friend of yours. She looks like an exotic dancer.”

Daisy, the compulsive rebel, would appreciate my mother’s horror.

We ordered our usual. Kale salads with broiled chicken breasts. Had I been here with friends, I’d have gone for the fish or perhaps even a small filet. But this way, I didn’t have to endure Mom’s pointed comments about diet and waist size. We Stanton women had to maintain our appearances.

That tenet did not extend to the male members of the family. My father’s waist had been expanding steadily in recent years into a comfortable, rotund gut. And my brother’s playboy tan was reaching George Hamilton shades. But male Stanton value was calculated by bank balances, not waist size or skin tone.

It was easy to forget that my mother had grown up without money. She wore wealth so well. Her father, my grandfather, had abandoned his wife and two children to marry a tire heiress. When they’d died in a car accident, my twenty-two-year-old mother had inherited a respectable fortune and invested it in remaking herself. By twenty-four she’d straightened her teeth, lost the flat Midwestern accent, and caught the eye of a wealthy Chicago entrepreneur. She’d lived up to her end of the prenup and pocketed nearly two million dollars when they divorced civilly five years later. She married my father six days after her divorce was final.

“Tell me all about your life,” she insisted, pretty blue eyes sparkling as if we were girlfriends.

Knowing full well she meant who was I seeing and when would I be marrying them over a tasteful ten-karat diamond ring, I answered passive-aggressively. “Work is ramping up. We have a new product line launching in the third quarter, and the predictions for the IPO are robust. It’s shaping up to be a banner year.”

“Ugh,” she said with an elegant eye roll. “I mean, who are you seeing? I haven’t heard a thing about you in the gossip columns in weeks.”

It didn’t matter to my mother that I had more money than the entire rest of the family combined. In her eyes, a woman wasn’t secure until she’d scrawled her signature on a favorable prenup.

I glanced around the restaurant, sedate by Miami standards. White linens and potted palms. Forty-dollar hamburgers. This could have been any over-priced bistro in New York or Chicago, which was probably why my mother liked it.

There were a few subtle glances in our direction. I wasn’t famous by Hollywood standards—thank God. But I was one of the city’s resident female billionaires. It came with an elevated level of attention.

“You could text me instead of stalking me through the columns,” I reminded her.

“I need to stay on top of the family’s image.”

“Speaking of image, how is Trey?” I asked, pushing another one of my mother’s buttons.

“Oh! Your brother won’t be satisfied until he’s ruined this family,” Mom scoffed dramatically. To underline her point, she waved the waiter over and ordered her second vodka tonic. Always two and only two. Enough to take the edge off but not quite enough to get sloppy.

Stantons didn’t tolerate sloppiness.

Unless it was generated by my brother.

“Did you see his last post on Instagram?” she said, lowering her voice as if divulging state secrets.

“I did not,” I said, spearing a piece of flavorless chicken. *Twenty more minutes and I could head back to the office. I still might have time to check in with Esther at the lab.*

“Six topless women,” she hissed.

Byron Stanton III, or Trey as he was known by his fifteen million Instagram followers, was a charming, shiftless, trust fund baby content to do nothing but soak up the sun on yachts and party his life away. He’d spent his trust fund distributions twice now and was living on my parents’ generosity... and occasionally mine.

I loved him. I did. In the way that all sisters loved brothers they didn’t understand.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“I’m talking to your father about cutting off his credit cards,” Mom said, neatly carving off a microscopic sliver of chicken.

It was an empty threat, and everyone but she knew it.

“I’m sure he’ll settle down someday,” I placated.

I was sure of no such thing.

My brother made bad choices like it was a compulsion. And my parents bailed him out, unable to stomach the idea of their baby boy suffering the consequences.

“Even worse,” Mom continued. “He said he isn’t coming home for the gala later this month. What could be so important in the Mediterranean that he can’t come home for one little appearance?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” I said, wishing I would have at least ordered a glass of wine.

“So you’ll need to take his tickets,” she continued.

I put my fork down. “Mom, I am booked solid for the next two months. This IPO is—”

“Darling, I know it’s not fair that you have to keep making up for Trey’s messes, but that’s just the way it is,” she said, steamrolling me with a flick of her Tiffany tennis braceleted wrist. “We have a—”

“Responsibility,” I said for her. The word tasted more bitter on my tongue than the kale. “I don’t have the time in my calendar for more responsibilities.”

“Emily, I don’t ask for much from you,” she said.

Except to pick up Trey’s slack for his entire life. To never do anything fun or interesting that could cause you untoward attention at the club. To focus my entire life on finding the proper husband so you can play hostess at a multi-million-dollar wedding.

“We need to put on a united front. Your father’s ex-wife will be there,” she said as if that explained it all.

“Which one?” I asked, tossing my napkin on my plate. I’d find a protein bar at the office.

It had nothing to do with the cause. Rainforests or homelessness. There was nothing more important to my mother than showing up at Dad’s ex-wives’ functions and rubbing his checkbook in their faces.

I had nothing against the two women who’d tried to get the great Byron Stanton II to settle down before Venice. In fact, I was a fan of the second one. Unlike my mother, I didn’t have the luxury of time that a good vendetta required.

“So you’ll come? It’s only one night of your life. What could be more important?”

I gritted my teeth, mentally juggling my events, appearances, and meetings. If I said no, it would only lead to two straight weeks of guilt trip phone calls culminating in my father showing up in my office and demanding that I make an appearance to save my parents’ marriage. It was just easier to say yes. “Of course.”

Someday, I vowed, I would take a week off on a private island with no internet access, no cell service, and only a very attractive man to entertain me.

“Wonderful. I’ll have Esme send you a picture of my gown. We want to complement each other but not match. Oh, and you’ll need to bring a date. I’m happy to find one for you,” she offered innocently.

Glancing at my blank smart watch, I feigned a wince. “Uh-oh. There’s a crisis at the office,” I lied.

Mom was nonplussed. “There’s always a crisis,” she complained. “I never get any time with you.”

We had lunch every week. A shopping excursion once a month. And dinner every other Sunday at her house.

“I need to head back. I have a date tonight,” I said, pulling my phone out of my tote and texting Jane.

“A date?” Mom perked up. I could almost see the visions of golden-haired babies in Givenchy onesies that danced in her head.

“A first date,” I said. I felt the usual low-level guilt of cutting our lunch short—again—and wanted to leave her with something that would cheer her up.

“Text me his particulars,” Mom insisted as I signaled for the check. “Do I know him? I’m sure I know him.”

“It’s Merritt Van Winston,” I said, slipping my credit card in the leather book.

“Oh! He’s friends with your brother on Instagram,” she said brightly, scrolling through her phone.

Strike one for Merritt Van Winston.

“He’s quite handsome.” My mother’s approval was an automatic strike two against a man in my book. I wasn’t shopping for a life partner right now. But if I were, my requirements would be wildly different from my mother’s.

An interest in the sciences. A sincere respect for my intense work schedule. And the ability to provide toe-curling

orgasms.

I glanced at the photo she'd pulled up on her phone and kept my face neutral. *Another tanned, long-haired playboy.* But it was just dinner. I could survive that.

"Maybe you can bring Merritt to the gala!" She was already happily plotting an engagement party.

I kissed her goodbye and headed to the door. Jane pulled the Range Rover up at the curb just as I got there.

"How was lunch?" she asked cheekily when I slid into the passenger seat.

"Trey posted a picture with six topless women, and my mom needs me to bring a date to the gala that I don't have time to attend in two weeks."

Jane handed me a paper deli bag.

I peered inside.

"You are a goddess," I told her, pulling out the half turkey and avocado on whole grain.

"I am aware," she said, pulling into traffic.

EMILY

The legal briefing ran late. As I'd anticipated. Put seven attorneys and their paralegals in a room together, and they would debate everything from where to get the best coffee in town to what an obscure 1950s ruling in a Mississippi courtroom meant for a business conglomerate in Dover, Delaware.

Keeping them on task and speaking in layman's terms was an exercise in futility.

I headed briskly in the direction of the in-house graphics department on the other side of the floor with the intent to bribe a designer into showing me a preview of the "new direction" in product packaging.

This was the kind of thing Lita and I would have done over drinks at my house or hers just a few short years ago.

But circumstances changed. Schedules got busier. And friendships morphed. We found ourselves in an awkward dance with Lita insisting on veering from the Flawless vision. My vision. Just last week I'd had to put my foot down when she'd announced Flawless would be partnering with twenty-something YouTube makeup vloggers on sponsored posts featuring our wrinkle reducer. A twenty-two-year-old did not have wrinkles. Nor did she have a wrinkled audience.

My sigh was closer to a groan, and it made an assistant in a pink skirt shoot me a wide-eyed look.

It bothered me that Lita wasn't interested in adhering to my vision. But like everything else, I'd deal with it later. We

had bigger fish to fry, so to speak.

According to my legal team, the IPO was on track with the SEC. We'd been working toward this for the last two years, and the finish line was in sight. In less than eight weeks' time, we would be offering up \$1 billion in shares to the public. It was the culmination of years of effort and the beginning of a new phase of growth for Flawless.

My watch vibrated on my wrist.

Lita: Don't forget your hot date tonight!

Shit. I had forgotten. I changed directions and headed back to my office. I could remind Lita over email how the packaging needed to reflect our brand and vision while I changed for my "date."

This sort of thing was more common at a certain level of fame rather than plain old wealth. Unfortunately, it was a line my circumstances straddled. Being seen together was a discreet, mutually beneficial favor when attention was required. I'd taken dates I'd never met before to galas. I'd been a plus-one to strangers' weddings and had been photographed going to dinner with gal pals I'd only known to nod to across the room.

In general, I avoided those kinds of favors on principle. I didn't like lending myself out. My value—as I saw it—was in the office, not being seen on the arm of a man or in the company of starlets. However, Lita was right. We needed to keep the public interest up if we wanted the stock offering to meet expectations. And that meant I had to be seen... outside of the office or the lab.

Back in my office, I stripped out of my workwear and yanked the dress Jane brought for me over my head.

I'd have my picture taken. Grab a bite to eat. And put in another hour or two of work in my home office.

Glancing in the mirror, I frowned at the sedate updo I'd styled that morning.

“Dammit,” I breathed. Snatching my discarded dress from the floor, my bag from my table, I bolted from the office.

The salon lights were still on. Maxim, the head stylist, lifted his head from the beachy waves he was styling for a woman I recognized from our payroll department.

“Damn, girl,” Maxim said, giving me the once over. “You looking to make someone fall in love tonight?”

I glanced down.

Jane had gone overboard with the damn dress. It was short and black with very unsubtle sparkle. Speaking of lack of subtlety, the deep V between my breasts skirted the line of classy and “*hunting for a pre-nup.*” I should have a necklace. Give people something to look at besides my small but mighty cleavage.

It was a dress I’d bought years ago thinking about special occasions with a special someone. And here I was wasting it on a stranger’s publicity because there was no special someone in my life.

Sacrifices.

“Do you have ten minutes for face and hair?” I asked Maxim.

“For you?” He gave me a slow wink while still wielding the clampless curling iron and producing perfect waves. “I’ve got all the time you need. Sheila, my beauty, you’re done. Give it a good shake and then go make What’s His Name speechless.”

Payroll Sheila gave me a nervous wave and scurried out of the salon, beaming in the glory of new hair.

“Thank you,” I said, collapsing into a chair and relishing having ten whole minutes during which nothing was required of me. “I’ve been running late since I got here today.”

“You’re pushing too hard,” he said, his fingers already working their way into my shoulder-length blonde hair. “When are you going to do something fun with this?” he demanded.

I thought of my mother’s comment at lunch.

“Soon,” I promised. Maybe after the IPO. *Who knew what effect a haircut could have on an initial public offering?*

He sighed, his skinny mustache perched over the flat line of his lips, and went to work with hair clips.

I’d hired him out of a salon in South Beach, doubling his salary and giving him a voice in product development. Our professional relationship consisted of me popping in once every few weeks when I worked too late to properly prepare for my evening responsibilities and Maxim grumbling over my conservative style. To be honest, it wasn’t even *my* style. My closet was a replica of my mother’s.

It was just easier that way.

True to his word, ten minutes later, my hair was big and bouncy. And I had smokey taupe eyes and red lips. I looked nothing like the prim and proper Emily Stanton who kicked ass all day.

“You’re a miracle worker, Maxy.”

“My canvas was especially stunning. Now go have a little fun before you forget how,” he called after me as I hit the door at a jog.

Jane was waiting in the garage for me, the Range Rover’s air conditioning on full blast.

“Did you have to pick a dress that my boobs are going to fall out of?” I asked.

“Your fault for sending me on wardrobe errands,” she smirked. Jane’s fashion knowledge began and ended with whatever showed up in the LL Bean catalog. “If you don’t like it, you shouldn’t have it in your closet.”

“Fair point,” I nodded. “What’s the game plan?”

“We’re meeting Prince Charming two blocks from the restaurant. We transfer you to his car so you can be photographed driving up together. I’ll hang back and wait for you to call when you’re ready to go home.”

I nodded, scrolling through my phone. Still no word from Esther at the lab. I wondered if I could squeeze in an in-person

visit tomorrow. Checking my calendar, I winced. I'd be lucky to get a pee break tomorrow.

"I hope this guy drives a normal car," I sighed. My intestines did a slow kinking twist. I hated that my anxiety manifested itself in such an uncouth way. It wasn't irritable bowel, but it was in the neighborhood. I'd always been thankful that my career aspirations had earned me my own private washroom, especially before big meetings that determined the future of thousands of people.

Jane laughed. "I did some digging for funsies. Let's just say it's a safe bet he's got some \$500,000 spaceship with undercarriage neons."

"Lita so owes me," I groaned. *Someday, my debt to her would be paid.*

"I'm following you to the restaurant," Jane reminded me, consulting her mirrors as she veered around a huge Cadillac that was weaving across the lanes. "Text in case you need to make an emergency escape."

"You're a good friend," I told her.

"Yup."

~

MERRITT VAN WINSTON did not drive a normal vehicle.

I didn't know my luxury sports cars, but I was pretty sure this bumble bee yellow lump of aerodynamic metal and plastic was a Ferrari.

A stupidly expensive car for a man who didn't actually work for a living. Wonderful.

The Emily-Lita scales were definitely tipping in my favor.

The two blocks to the restaurant were the most interminable of my life. And that's saying something in Miami. The man dressed like a European playboy and spoke like a valley girl. His bootcut jeans were so tight I wondered if the blood supply to his legs was cut off. And then there was the glossy purple shirt worn so open we could be cleavage twins.

“You’re like super-hot,” he said, grinding the gears and flashing me a smile so white I had to avert my eyes.

A Bentley, tires squealing, pulled out in front of us from an alley.

Merritt slammed on the brakes and stalled the car.

“What are you doing in town?” I asked, craning my neck to peer out the window. The car sat so low I felt like I was laying on the street.

“I have a little business with my bros,” he said cagily. He turned the engine back on, and we lurched forward.

Porn probably, I guessed. No, wait. Maybe a yacht party with underage starlets? Bath salt abuse contest?

I was being uncharitable. And entertaining. It kept my digested food on the inside of my body.

“How do you know my brother?” I asked.

“Trey? Oh, man. Me and him go way back. Prep school. Tahoe. Greece.”

For one out-of-body moment, I wondered what it would be like if my own story hadn’t been limited to classroom, lab, and boardroom. I didn’t have any friends from Tahoe. Or stories from Greece.

Then again, I also didn’t have to pull up to a restaurant in a car that cost more than most people’s lifetime income to get my kicks.

“Here we are,” Merritt sang as he revved the engine up to the valet stand. The photographers stationed outside salivated on cue, and camera flashes blinded me.

“I’ll come around, pretty lady,” he said, wrestling the door up. He tossed the keys to the valet and shot his arms in the air in a V. Passersby stopped to stare.

Maybe I could just stay in the car? This kind of attention couldn’t really be valuable for either one of us. What did it matter who I went to dinner with? Or didn’t go to dinner with.

I thought longingly of my pajamas and leftovers in my fridge.

But my door was lifting like an eagle wing, and there was no longer a barrier between me and the hungry photographers. Someone—Merritt or a valet—reached in and offered me their hand. Thank God I'd worn sensible underwear today. Climbing out of this damn car was like requesting a public gynecological exam.

It was Merritt's hand, I realized when I gained my feet on the sidewalk.

He tossed his sugary hair out of his eyes and offered me his arm. "Smile big."

At least that's what I thought he said. I couldn't tell for sure over the sound of the sirens. The flashes weren't just from cameras now. Red and blue lights were painting the outside of the restaurant, bouncing off the glass facade.

"Someone's in trouble," Merritt yelled over the noise.

"Is this your car, sir?" a uniformed police officer, hand on her weapon, demanded.

I needed that voice for board meetings.

Merritt's yellow monstrosity was being swarmed by more police.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

Merritt shrugged but looked uneasy.

"Sir? Is this your car? Don't make me ask you again!"

"Yes, it's my car, and you don't have to have that attitude with me," he snapped back loud enough for every photographer on the entire block to hear him.

Oh, hell. He was going to say it. He was going to say it, and I was standing right next to him. Words like that splattered on anyone in the vicinity.

"Show me your hands, sir," the cop yelled. She flicked the snap that holstered her gun. I took a decisive step to the side and kept my hands in plain sight.

“Do you know who I am?” he bellowed.

What a fucking idiot.

“Found something,” one of the officers searching the car called. He held up a baggie of something white and powdery.

Oh, shit. My digestive system gave a warning rumble.

I moved to open my clutch, dial my lawyer.

“Ma’am! Put your hands behind your head,” the first cop yelled.

“That shit’s not mine,” Merritt howled. His tan face was red with entitled rage.

“Everything is fine,” I said calmly to the cop. “I’m just reaching for my phone.”

“Hands behind your head!”

I put my hands in my wasted hair and then schooled my features into a mask of impassiveness while a cop yanked my arms behind my back. As the cuffs snapped into place on my wrists, I spotted Jane jogging up the block, already on the phone. She nodded grimly at me.

At least my legal team was already informed of my very public humiliation.

DEREK

*M*y date was annoying me on several different fronts, and we hadn't even made it to the table yet. Over drinks on the restaurant's patio behind the wall of paparazzi capturing the comings and goings of the city's celebrities, I discovered she initiated each sentence with a distinct mouth click and ended with a question.

Click. "So I haven't been here since Hidalgo left to work for that restaurant in Rome? He made my favorite risotto?"

Everything was Alicia's favorite.

In the fifteen minutes I'd known the woman, she'd introduced me to her favorite lip stain, her favorite designer eyelash extensions, and her favorite member of One Direction.

I was rather embarrassed that I knew which one she was talking about.

Sometimes I wondered why I even bothered. Playing the field and dating in Miami had somehow lost its considerable luster.

Perhaps I was getting too old for the novelty.

Click. "Oh. Em. Gee," Alicia said. Her perfectly stenciled magenta lips moved hypnotically. "This grape and vodka diet is *amazing*? Wanna try?"

"Thank you, no."

I'd stick with my beer and to women a little closer to my own age from now on, I vowed.

I hated to call in the “text me with an emergency” favor from a brother or one of my staff. But I couldn’t imagine surviving an entire dinner with the woman.

She’d said she was thirty, as I recalled, when our eyes met over a cocktail napkin at a trendy bar in South Beach. But she was working hard to pass for an uncomplicated twenty-one. The dress was short. The tan was deep. The hair was not hers. All of that was fine. I loved a woman who dressed for her own pleasure. I was as equally attracted to long legs in short shorts as I was to sedate business suits. I had a thing for unbuttoning buttons and revealing what was underneath.

There were no buttons on Alicia’s gold lamé minidress. There was no mystery to unveil.

She’d caught me on a high after a successful cleanup for a client that had eaten up the better part of my April.

A lovely smile and big brown eyes were just what I thought I needed to shake off the shackles of a demanding crisis management firm. I hadn’t been out in over a month. It was getting easier and easier to focus on work. And now I was wishing I’d decided to focus a bit longer.

Click. “So you’re, like, British?”

“Half,” I said vaguely. I’d picked up a bit of my father’s accent before he’d run out on us. It was something of a parting gift, I supposed.

An engine revved, and a flashy yellow Ferrari lurched up to the curb, pulling me from my depressing revelations. *At least I wasn’t that asshole.*

He hopped out of the car like an MMA fighter with a new belt. Cocky and ready to party.

“Wow,” Alicia purred. “What kind of car do you drive?”

“An SUV,” I said vaguely. And a sporty BMW, but I didn’t feel the need to add any other tics in Alicia’s “Reasons to Land Derek Price” column.

Click. “That’s Merritt Van Winston?” she cooed. “He’s even prettier in person!”

I wondered if perhaps I should give Alicia a moment to introduce herself to the surfer-haired sports car enthusiast. The name registered for me. Miami’s elite citizens were small-town that way. Merritt was the very pretty ne’er-do-well son of a hotelier. If memory served, he was launching some kind of sock or t-shirt line.

Then the passenger door raised, distracting me and the rest of the crowd.

I was rewarded with a glimpse of long, long leg. I took my time admiring the view starting at the tip of the toes. The dress ended a few inches above the knee. Black and fitted. Where Alicia’s 24-karat disco ball dress was flashy, this was sophisticated yet edgy.

That face. I recognized it, not that we moved in the same circles. But everyone in the business world knew her.

What little I did know about her certainly didn’t add up to being Merritt Van Winston’s arm candy. I frowned, watching as the shaggy-haired dipshit swaggered toward the crowd towing billionaire Emily Stanton like an accessory.

There was a frown painted on her very lovely lips, and I saw why when two police cruisers squealed to a stop in front of the valet stand, boxing the Ferrari in.

Trouble.

“Oooh! Someone important must be coming?” Alicia said, clicking the tips of her pink fingernails together.

“Is this your car, sir?” demanded an officer. She had one hand on butt of her gun and didn’t look afraid to use it.

Surfer guy shrugged at something Emily said. She was trying to tug her hand free.

“Sir? Is this your car?” the cop said again.

I couldn’t hear the exchange because the photographers camped outside the restaurant’s doors exploded with questions

and flashes from their cameras, turning Ocean Drive into a red carpet war zone.

Whatever he'd said, he'd included an unfortunate amount of attitude. Emily took a very intelligent step to the side, keeping her hands visible.

Too smart for him.

The host appeared next to me with two menus just as Van Winston howled, "Do you know who I am?"

Oh, you stupid, entitled idiot.

The officer searching the vehicle called to his partner. "Found something." He held up a baggie of what was probably going to be cocaine.

I was already reaching for my phone when one of the officers caught Emily's move.

"Ma'am! Put your hands behind your head," the first cop yelled.

"That shit's not mine," the pissant howled. The photographers started shooting video.

I scrolled through my contacts at lightning speed.

"Everything is fine," I heard Emily say calmly. "I'm just reaching for my phone."

"Hands behind your head!"

"Imani," I said into the phone. "You've got about thirty seconds before you're made aware of a rather large problem. I think I can be of some help."

The cuffs snapped onto Emily's well-bred wrists like damnation as two dozen paparazzi recorded every second.

EMILY

Billionheiress's public humiliation! Drug arrest!
Daughter of Miami cruise line executive Byron Stanton
arrested for drugs!

Flawless CEO released without charges in drug bust

The secret drug-fueled life of party girl Emily Stanton

“*W*ake up, jailbird.” The chipper voice cheerfully intruded on the thirty minutes of sleep I’d managed to snag after the worst night of my life. And I’d once dropped a vial of leptospirosis on the lab floor.

I pried a crusty eye open and peered over the luxurious softness of my bed linens.

“What are you doing here?” I rasped at the three shadowy figures hovering over my bed.

I never should have given them my alarm codes.

“Emergency circle the wagons,” the tallest shadow said, arms crossed.

“Yeah. Now, get your adorable ass out of bed so we can make it all better,” the middle one chirped, slapping me on the butt. Luna was outrageously cheerful all hours of the day.

I groaned, sitting up, noting it was still dark outside.

“Get dressed, my little vagillionaire,” the third one said, throwing workout clothes at me.

“You want to work out *now*, Daisy? You’ve got to be kidding me.” Daisy didn’t willingly spend time in the gym unless it was to flirt with a hot personal trainer.

“Lights on.”

My bedroom lights came on dimly.

“Damn it, Cam,” I complained. “I deserve at least another hour of wallowing.”

My phone signaled from the lovely hammered copper nightstand. I didn’t have the energy to pick it up and immerse myself in the shitstorm that was most certainly brewing.

“Get up and meet us in the gym,” Luna said.

They left the room, a united front of badassery.

I stared at the clothes in my lap. I was exhausted, humiliated, and not just a little worried. I was a fucking basket case. One misstep. I’d just endangered the future of my company, the security of my employees, with one horrifically bad decision. And I wasn’t ready to see just how bad the fallout was.

“Move it, Ems!” Daisy called.

Leaving my phone where it was, I dressed quickly and dragged my hair into a limp ponytail as I trudged across the lawn to the gym. I was the kind of person who focused better and worked harder after a grueling workout. When we’d built the enclave, when we’d envisioned Bluewater, I’d taken great joy in designing a property that suited me and my needs down to the ground.

My friends had a looser, more interpretive relationship with exercise. But they supported me with weekly workouts slash bitch sessions.

And there they were. My people.

In the ocean-front, state-of-the-art gym that I started my day in every morning, a peppy pop song thumped through the sound system.

Cameron Whitbury—aerospace entrepreneur, luxury shoe whore, and long-legged auburn-haired beauty—was looking fierce and squatting with free weights. Her ass was official perfection, at least according to *Indulgence Magazine's* Best Butts in Business poll last year. The magazine had neglected to mention Cam's Fortune 500 rocket-building empire.

Luna da Rosa—the wildly popular Instagram brand, lifestyle guru, and makeup industry conqueror—was fresh and lovely as always in organic cotton yoga shorts and a knotted tank. She flowed through a sun salutation, stretchier than any human body had the right to be. With long sable hair, she was fairy princess beautiful and heartbreakingly sweet, which led most people to incorrectly assume she was an airhead.

Daisy Carter-Kincaid was the kind of socialite my mother had warned me about my entire life. When she wasn't experimenting with extensions or dying her hair silver to stir up the gossip rags, she was working her ass off to run her family's significant real estate holdings. The Carter-Kincaids owned a very large portion of Miami, Manhattan, and Atlanta. She was currently pedaling on the elliptical in last night's club VIP section dress and heels. There was a Bloody Mary in her water bottle holder.

Wordlessly, Cam pointed at the treadmill, and I obliged, stepping onto the deck and punching buttons until the belt whirred to life beneath my feet.

I cranked the speed and let myself go.

My privilege had kept my ass from touching the bench in a holding cell last night. My head in-house counsel, Jenny, was already at the station raising hell by the time I'd been hauled out of the back of the patrol car. Unfortunately, when I'd been released a scant forty-five minutes later, every man, woman, and child with a recording device had descended on the station to witness my walk of shame.

Shitstorm didn't even begin to apply to the magnitude of bad at this point. The scrutiny required for a company to be allowed to stage an IPO was brutally rigorous, and that was without the CEO embroiled in a drug arrest. Not that I'd been

arrested. I'd been questioned, in the presence of my terrifying attorney, and released without charges.

But that's not what the headlines would say.

My friends gave me an entire treadmill mile of silence to collect my thoughts before they started in on me.

"Okay. Tell us what happened last night," Cam said, racking her weights and lining up for walking lunges. She'd earned that ass the old-fashioned way.

I took a swig of water from the bottle Luna handed over and lowered the speed. I didn't trust many people. But these women had earned their way into that tight inner circle.

"It was a tit for tat," I began. "Merritt's father is some big deal hotelier in Vegas. His son is launching some underwear line. The Van Winston publicist reached out to Flawless. I need to stay in the public's eye leading up to the IPO."

"You're already running a national ad campaign, and Flawless is being featured in every business and economic publication known to humanity," Daisy pointed out.

"But I'm the face," I said, repeating Lita's words. "We're looking to move a billion dollars in stock. A couple of yawn-inducing corporate history profiles aren't going to do that. Anything I can do to stay at the forefront of the public's mind will benefit the IPO. Well, almost anything."

I punched Stop on the treadmill and put my head in my hands. "I don't even know how badly I've fucked up, guys. I haven't even been able to make myself look at my phone." It had signaled texts, calls, and emails until I'd put it on vibrate and hidden it under a pillow for most of the night.

"Okay, let's stop with the self-pity," Luna insisted briskly. "Focus on the positive. It wasn't *your* giant bag of coke—"

"And X," Daisy added helpfully.

"Seriously?" Merritt Van Winston was a dumbass of the highest honor.

"Just a little baggie," Daisy said as if that made it better. "At least it wasn't meth. There's no way to class that shit up."

Luna shot her a *will you shut up* look.

“Thanks, Pollyanna,” Cam snorted.

“*Anyway*,” Luna said pointedly. “The drugs weren’t yours. You kept it together for the cameras. Your attorney already put out a statement doing damage control about the ‘misunderstanding.’ Everyone is doing all the right things.”

“What are the blogs saying?” I asked, not really wanting to know.

“Let’s focus on what your next steps are,” Cam said evasively as she turned around to lunge back across the gym.

That meant it was bad. Really, really bad.

“Better or worse than Zoey Grace’s leaked three-way sex tape?”

My friends exchanged a glance.

The spark of hope that had been trying to ignite in my chest sputtered out. And my bowels went icy.

“Oh, God.” I buried my face in a sweat towel.

“Look,” Daisy said, wielding her Bloody Mary at me. “Here’s the thing. You’ve never fucked up before. You’ve been squeaky clean. The public hates that. They hate you for being rich and beautiful and smart. And they want you to have to pay the price for being perfect.”

Ouch.

“So because I’ve worked my ass off since college, because I built a company and literally changed the face of women’s skincare, I deserve this?” I was shouting.

Luna took a deep, cleansing breath for me. She was probably doing a mental meditation to change my vibe.

“You *should* be pissed,” Cam said. “But just because it’s unfair and horrible doesn’t mean it’s not happening. You have to deal with it.”

“And you’re overlooking the platinum lining here,” Daisy pointed out, shaking the ice in her now empty glass. “What’s

the one thing the world loves more than a downward spiral?”

I paused my internal rant for a beat. “A comeback,” I breathed.

Luna nodded. “A flawed, vulnerable, real, badass entrepreneur is way more interesting than a perfect rich girl.”

“I’m not supposed to be interesting,” I said, thinking of how many nerve pills my mother had probably downed since last night.

“There’s a lot of things we’re not supposed to be,” Cam said. “Doesn’t mean that we can’t.”

“This can all be salvaged,” Luna said soothingly. “We’re here for you. Whatever you need.”

“Hell yeah,” Cam said, holding up her water bottle in a mock toast.

“Let’s start now,” Daisy said, pulling her phone out of her considerable cleavage.

“We’re not selfie-ing this,” I argued.

“If your company was collapsing on itself and you had a serious drug problem, would you be up at sunrise working out with your beautiful, successful friends?” Daisy asked with a wicked grin.

“Point taken.”

“Okay, ladies. Comeback on three.”

“One. Two. Three.”

“Comeback!”

EMILY

“Disgraced socialite shares post-arrest workout pic”

“Emily Stanton sweaty and smiling after boyfriend arrested for drugs”

“Billionaire entrepreneur back to business as usual after near-arrest”

*A*fter a workout, a meditation led by Luna, and a protein shake, I worked up the nerve to turn my phone back on.

Thirteen messages from my publicist.

Two sobbing voicemails from my mother wondering where she went wrong as a parent. She also sent a text informing me she was visiting her favorite medium today to determine what past-life karma she was being punished for. I was invited to attend the session.

I had half a dozen missed calls from board members. Thank God, my father was in Greece. I didn't think I could face his disappointment or wrath, whichever weapon he decided to lead with. Byron Stanton II was a shrewd businessman who applied his boardroom tactics at the dining table.

There were several messages from some grumpy-sounding British man demanding that I call the innocuous-sounding Alpha Group. I would add *‘Find out who gave him my personal number and fire them’* to my to-do list once my life wasn't in shambles.

There was one voicemail from Lita.

“Oh my God. What happened? Are you okay? I can’t believe this happened. I’m going to kill whoever vetted this guy for you. Didn’t Jane run him? What am I saying? This is all my fault. Please don’t hate me! Call me if I can help!”

Speaking of Jane, she’d also texted.

Jane: Business as usual, or do you need me to bury a body or maybe have six martinis ready for you in the car?

I sighed. At least I could depend on Jane to treat me the same. Jane and my girls were rock solid no matter how epically I’d screwed up.

Me: I think I’m going to take the Porsche today.

If I was going to war, I would drive myself.

Jane: Use hairspray. Don’t eat bugs. Also, Van Winston posted bail. No word on whether he’ll face charges.

Great. Public speculation could last weeks.

I took my time with my hair and makeup. On a good day, they were weapons. But today they would also be a shield. I chose high-waisted navy slacks and a sleeveless funnel neck top in arctic white and strapped on buttery soft suede Jimmy Choo sandals in power red.

Professional, put-together, proud. Red lips, sleek chignon. I was going for modern day Grace Kelly. The exact opposite of a hot mess.

Nodding at my reflection in the gold gilt mirror, I headed off to war.

As the garage door whirred upward, my baby came into view. A 1956 Porsche 356 Speedster in aquamarine blue

metallic. It had been my insanely extravagant gift to myself when Flawless hit the billion-dollar valuation.

It, as well as this sprawling, airy house, was a reminder to me of what I'd built.

And there was no way in hell that I'd let one mistake—one big, stupid mistake—ruin it all. I had employees, directors, and consumers depending on me to fix this. I was Emily “Badass” Stanton, and I wouldn't let them down.

My stomach gave a plaintive gurgle as I slid behind the wheel.

“I do *not* have time for diarrhea,” I chanted to my digestive system.

I held on to that determination until I pulled up in front of my office building. The frenzy was instantaneous. Photographers and journalists jostled for position behind sawhorses building security was policing. Chaos. The protein shake demanded an immediate exit.

I got out and stalked toward the front door. A woman on a mission. A cool, calm CEO off to run her empire.

Flashes exploded. Questions volleyed.

“Do you have a drug problem, Emily?”

“What charges are you facing?”

“Have you ruined Flawless's chances of a successful IPO?”

My intestines cramped, and I pressed a hand to my stomach as security hustled me through the front doors, leaving the flashes and shouted accusations behind me. This was going to be worse than I thought.



“I UNDERSTAND, and I can assure you this was an unfortunate misunderstanding that will be rectified,” I said, aware that my tone was clipped. My patience had evaporated hours ago. For the first time in my life, I'd canceled every obligation on my calendar and spent my day apologizing. Well, dancing around

apologies, if I were being completely honest. I hadn't done anything wrong besides get in the wrong car with the wrong guy.

“A company is only as successful as its leadership, Emily. And you already know you're judged ten times harder because you're a woman.” Imani Stackhouse's frustration came through loud and clear. “I get that you're frustrated, but we don't have room for you to do anything but work your ass off to fix this.”

She was my favorite director on the board. That said a lot, seeing as how my father also sat on the board. An executive with a search engine, Imani was forward-thinking and flexible. She was also one of the few directors who didn't try to patronize me.

My board of directors was made up of men and women who were retired executives from varied backgrounds. Most of them distrusted me based on my age. Thirty-six to them was still practically junior high.

There was a smaller minority that judged me on the fact that I came from money. My father had a respectable family fortune. His great-uncle owned one of the world's most successful cruise lines, and my father was an executive in the company. But when I gave myself a free minute to enjoy absolute clarity, I knew that I had taken the Stanton family coffers and exploded them. My father was both aggressively proud of me and wounded by my success.

“Imani, I'm taking this seriously,” I assured her.

“I don't know that you are. This is Code Red. I know that you like to have a hand in everything that goes on at Flawless, but now is the time to focus on priorities. And undoing this mess is your only priority. Whatever it takes,” she insisted. “You've been working toward this since you started the company. Don't let one bad decision ruin it all.”

“I will fix this,” I promised.

“Good, because I know you won't like it if the board decides to step in.”

No, I would not.

I disconnected with Imani's uncertainty of my dedication ringing in my ears.

"Ms. Stanton, I have Alpha Group on the line again for you," Easton said, hustling in with my mid-morning hit of caffeine. "And your friend Luna sent this over."

"Not interested in calls from anyone other than board members," I reiterated.

He put the special delivery green juice down on my desk like it was plutonium and handed me the note that came with it. "It smells like dirt and lawn," he said, wrinkling his pert nose. "I'd drink the coffee first and hope it burns your taste buds so you can down the juice."

Ems,

Fuel up with good vibes! Daisy's Insta post is a hit!

Love and light,

Luna

I hadn't left my office since arriving that morning. Assistant Number Two—Valerie, I'd discovered after remembering to consult the HR records—kept me fueled with lunchtime sushi from the cafeteria and a steady flow of smart waters.

No one in the entire building had said a word to me about last night.

I wasn't sure if it was because they were terrified of me or worried I'd snap like the delicate crystal stem of a wineglass. And at this point, I wasn't sure either.

My apologies weren't reassuring anyone. Worse, they were pissing me off.

I had an emergency call with my publicity and legal teams in fifteen minutes. I hoped they had a miracle up their sleeves because I felt like I was making a bigger mess of things.

If I could close my eyes for five minutes—

My office door flew open, and Lita rushed in. “I am sick over this,” she said, rushing me. I rose and submitted to her hug. I wasn’t comfortable with affection, and Lita wasn’t the best hugger. She was too non-committal.

There was no solace to be found in the hug.

But there was no solace anywhere. I’d let her down. Everyone in this building. Everyone in warehouses and manufacturing labs and distribution centers around the country. I’d let every single one of them down, and I was only just realizing that I had no idea how to fix it. Just doing my job wasn’t going to repair anything.

“This is all my fault,” she said, releasing me.

She crossed to the sitting area and helped herself to an exquisitely wrapped chocolate truffle. I allowed myself one a day. Today’s had been ingested in desperation thirty seconds after walking in the door.

“It’s not your fault.” I sighed, taking a seat in the silk upholstered armchair next to her.

“I should have done more digging into him,” she said, shaking her head, popping the entire candy into her mouth.

“This was his first arrest,” I said flatly. There hadn’t been anything to dig up on Merritt. Jane had emailed me a creepily thorough dossier on the guy this morning. Sure, he was a shiftless, lazy playboy. A barnacle on his father’s fortune. But this was his first brush with the law. There wasn’t anything prior to last night that would have raised any red flags.

I’d spent thirty whole seconds wondering if someone had set him up or if he’d scorned someone close to him who’d decided to get a very public, very costly revenge. And then I’d had to get back to reassuring directors that I wasn’t spiraling out of control.

“I should have at least checked with your brother. I can’t help but feel like this is all my fault,” she said, reaching for another chocolate. They cost \$40 apiece.

“It’s not your fault,” I said again, watching her unwrap the chocolate. In the end, whatever happened within or to my company fell on my shoulders. I was responsible. And I needed to figure out how to best move forward.

“Well, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to help everyone forget about this and move on. I told Helen that this morning,” Lita said.

“You spoke to Helen?” I asked wearily. Helen Krueger was Flawless’s publicist, an artist at “reframing” and “staying on message.” She was also responsible for forty percent of her bicoastal firm’s billing.

“She mentioned that I might need to step up and take on some public events and outings. Do some interviews. Show that things are still running smoothly. That kind of thing,” Lita said, examining her nails.

“Okay. Makes sense,” I said. At least there was one female executive at Flawless that wasn’t mired in drama.

There was a headache brewing at the back of my neck that was threatening to get much worse.

My desk phone beeped. “Ms. Stanton? I have your brother on hold for you,” Valerie said.

I checked my watch. Four minutes until my next meeting. Not enough time to close my eyes anyway.

“Thanks, Valerie.”

“Say hey to Trey for me,” Lita said, patting my knee. “We’ll get through this. You can count on me.”

“Thanks, Lita.”

She took another chocolate out of the bowl and headed for the door. There went \$120.

I sank down behind the desk and hit the speaker button. “Hey, Trey. I’ve only got a minute.”

“How was the slammer?” My brother’s voice filled the room with mirth. Trey would be the only Stanton to find the scandal hilarious.

“Nice to see you so concerned for your sister and your friend,” I said dryly.

Trey never had to be concerned with things like responsibility and reputation. He’d unapologetically forged a path as the family screwup. Nothing was expected of him. And I hated him just a little bit for it in this moment.

“Please,” he scoffed. “This will slide off you like tanning oil on a Brazilian bikini model’s ass. You always come out fresh as a daisy.”

“Here’s hoping,” I said, taking a swig of water.

“Anyway, next time you try dating one of my frenemies, tell me, and I’ll spill the tea. Can’t have my big sister edging me out of the family fuckup role.”

“You’re not the family fuckup,” I lied.

“Sure I am. That’s why I need to stay with you when I get back.”

I did not need my brother as a roommate. The last time he stayed with me, I had to give the cleaning staff a bonus and make a generous donation to the HOA to make up for the noise complaints.

“Does this mean you can come back for the gala?” Surely my mother wouldn’t want me to show my disgraced face there now.

“Ha. Hilarious. That’s all you. I’m working on developing a music festival in Malta.”

“Since when are you into the music scene?”

“Don’t you follow me on the ’gram?” he scoffed “Catch up, sis. I’m a high-end event coordinator now. Me and my partners are signing the biggest names in rock, pop, and rap for this thing.”

“Good for you, Trey.” He’d been a DJ in Rio. A model in Italy. A club promoter in Vegas. Now a music festival organizer.

“Let me know if you want me to save you a luxury beach condo,” he said. “I’ll get you VIP tickets.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen, I could use some backing for this gig,” he began.

And there it was. The ask. There was always an ask.

“Listen, send me an email about it, okay?” I said.

“Yeah, sure. No prob. But you’ll look at it right away, right?”

Valerie knocked on my door and pointed to the phone.

“I gotta go, Trey. I have a call.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a big deal. I get it. Try not to get arrested two nights in a row.”

“It’s not funny, Trey.”

“You sound just like Dad,” my brother complained.

“You talked to him?” Obediently, a slick layer of anxiety coated my stomach.

“Yeah, he was getting on a plane. Heading your way,” Trey said. “And he was not happy.”

EMILY

*M*y sneakers squeaked on the Italian marble of the entryway. My home. My sanctuary. Everything in the enclave had been thoughtfully designed with privacy and personality in mind.

This house was no different. It was three separate white stone structures joined by thatched-roof walkways. The main living space was in the center. Kitchen, bedrooms, great room, all under one roof. My home office and gym were in separate, distinct “wings.” It was a necessity for someone like me who didn’t know how to separate work from home.

“I’m gonna do a quick sweep before I head out,” Jane said, closing the front door behind us.

I was too tired to argue. It had been a long-ass day that not even an hour of private kickboxing training was able to erase.

I needed a bath and a glass of wine. No, a scotch. A gigantic one. Perhaps I’d drink straight from the bottle.

“I’m gonna go take a bath,” I told her over my shoulder.

Groveling was exhausting. And the plan Flawless’s publicity firm had laid out involved a lot of it. While I was busy apologizing and laying low, they planned to raise Lita’s profile, painting her as the responsible leadership within Flawless. I understood the tactic. I just didn’t love it.

My position with the board was shaky, to say the least. One wrong move, and they could remove me from my own company thanks to that stupid ethics contract. When I’d signed

it years ago, the idea that I'd do something "unethical" had been laughable. Now, there wasn't a damn thing I could find funny about the situation.

I headed down the hallway, past the two-story living room and its spectacular ocean views, beyond the kitchen and its pristine-ness.

My bedroom was the only one on the main floor. I'd gone for clean neutrals in here because the color came from the water and sky through the long wall of accordion glass doors. Usually, it was like stepping into a high-end spa. Relaxation was instantaneous.

However, the high-alert adrenaline I'd been running on had rendered me one giant ball of pressure. If someone were to hug me too hard, I was fairly certain my head would pop off.

I made a beeline for the bar cart I kept inside the doorway to the master bath. There was nothing like a hot bath and a few fingers of scotch. I stripped my sweaty tank off and let it hit the floor.

Reaching for the decanter, the smell of smoke hit me. Too late, I realized that the terrace doors in my bedroom were open. I wasn't alone. I opened the vanity drawer and came up with a curling iron. Not ideal, but if an intruder picked today to tangle with me, they would live to regret that very unlucky choice.

The slosh of water had me whirling around.

Framed in a large bay window was the copper pedestal tub I'd had custom made. It was one of my very favorite spots in this entire house.

And it was currently occupied by a very naked man.

"Hello, Emily."

A very naked man with the slightest British accent. My brain was scrambling to keep up to assess and hypothesize. Was I about to be murdered by a nude serial killer?

A cigarette dangled indolently from his lips. His hair was thick and dark, curling carelessly on top. The eyes that studied

me were a glacier blue. His jaw was aristocratically carved, highlighted by delicate hollows just below breath-taking cheekbones. His lower half was covered under a frothy layer of my own damn Prosecco bubble bath.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” I demanded, holding the curling iron like a short baseball bat. I needed to call Jane and have her cuff this guy and march him naked out my front door.

My neighbors would love that.

There was a scar under his left eye that gave him a roguish look. Lazily, he pulled the cigarette from his mouth with long fingers. He exhaled a blue cloud and eyed my skimpy sports bra as if he had the right to.

“I’m here to help you,” he announced.

This is how it ended. Being murdered by a crazy naked man. Yesterday, I’d been more likely to die in a private plane crash. How far I’d fallen.

“You have five seconds to get out of my tub and another ten to get out of my home, or I’m calling the police and having my security team stun gun you to death in the tub,” I said.

He smiled, a knowing kind of grin, and the urge to slap it off his face was so overwhelming I nearly bit through my lip.

“Now what’s the fun in that?” he asked. His voice was smooth, amused.

“How the hell did you get in here?” I’d had to disarm the alarm when I came in with Jane.

Jane. More angry than scared, I stormed to the Hepplewhite side table next to the tub and picked up the phone. If this smug idiot and I didn’t kill each other in combat, I was going to have a long talk with Daisy about security in Bluewater.

Tilting his head, the naked stranger blew another cloud of smoke toward the Baccarat chandelier and ignored me.

“Jane? I need your stun gun in my bathroom.”

“Another spider?” she asked.

“No, it’s not another spider,” I hissed, eyeing the about-to-be dead man in my tub. “It’s worse.”

“Are you in danger?” she asked, her tone clipped.

“Probably only of committing murder.” I hung up.

The movement took me closer to my stalker. Reckless with anger, I snatched the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it in the bubbles that barely covered his lap.

“I don’t allow smoking in my home. Or naked strangers.”

“Pity,” he said, and a dimple flashed to life in his cheek. “But it does make my job easier, I suppose.” Bracing his hands on the sides of the tub, he rose, sending bubbles and water cascading down his body.

He stepped out and into my space.

I stood my ground but made no effort to tear my gaze away from the soapy cock between his muscled thighs.

If I had to be murdered in my own home by a naked crazy man, at least he was the embodiment of the perfect male form. It would have been more depressing had my murderer possessed a beer belly and hairy knuckles. Made-for-TV movies about my death would run for years with such a handsome, homicidal villain.

His lips curved on one side as he let water puddle all over *my* marble.

I was going to really enjoy watching Jane electrocute him. Then I’d have a scotch while I watched security drag him away, I decided. Perhaps I could instruct them to drag him through one of the thornier bushes?

He reached toward me with a muscled arm.

I flinched, wondering if I’d completely misjudged the danger factor.

It amused him. “Do I make you nervous, Emily?” he asked, pulling a monogrammed towel off the shelf behind me.

He began a slow, sensual show of toweling off. My eyes were glued to every place the towel dried.

I took a step closer to him and trod on his bare foot. He towered over my five feet and seven inches, but anger made me stupidly brave.

“I’m going to enjoy watching my security team crush you. And rest assured, I will press charges. Trespassing. Stalking. I’m in fear for my life right now.”

I wanted to fight, I realized. The choreographed kickboxing hadn’t quelled the bloodlust I’d kept locked down all day.

“Emily, Emily, Emily,” he tutted. “How will tasing an employee and parading them naked out of your house help your predicament?” He reached out and toyed with the strap of my bra. The brush of his finger against my still sweaty skin ignited something that felt hot like rage but meltier. Slicker.

“Employee?” I sounded like I was being choked.

“I’m Derek Price from Alpha Group. The man hired to help you keep your company.”

Fuck.

Jane ninja rolled into the bathroom from the terrace, landing in a crouch and pointing her stun gun at the naked man.

“Wow.” It was as effusive as Jane got.

“Focus more on the criminal aspect than the dick, Jane,” I reminded her when her brown eyes roamed south from his well-formed chest to what looked like several decadent inches of pure sin.

“I’m multi-tasking,” she insisted.

Derek grinned at her and stepped around me, irresponsibly disinterested in the weapon pointed at him and the curling iron I still wielded. At the bar cart, he poured two fingers of scotch into three glasses.

“Who the hell are you?” I demanded.

He pushed a glass into my hand.

“I believe I mentioned that I’m Derek Price,” he said again. “I’m the fixer your board hired to clean up your mess. Imani can verify.”

Double fuck.

“So you show up here, break into my house, and *take a bath?*”

“What’s for dinner?” Frank, the parrot that never shut up, squawked grumpily from the palm outside.

“Shut up, Frank,” Jane and I said together.

“You dodged my calls all day. And one thing you don’t have in this…” Those ocean blue eyes skimmed my body from head to toe and back again. “Situation,” he decided, “is time. Now that I have your attention, we can get started.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

Using two fingers, he nudged the glass in my hand to my mouth. I swallowed reflexively.

“Good girl. You have another billion dollars on the line and the reputation of a company you built with your own two lovely hands. My job is to make sure you get everything you’ve worked for. Your job is to listen to me and do everything I say.”

“Good luck with that,” Jane scoffed from her crouch.

Still naked, Derek picked up one of the remaining glasses from the cart and handed it to Jane. She accepted it with her stun gun-free hand.

“This isn’t happening,” I whispered.

“I’m pretty sure this is happening,” Jane insisted, looking at his cock again. She took a drink. “Yep. Definitely happening.”

Obligingly, Derek picked up the third glass and did a slow turn. God. His ass was the most perfect guy-butt I’d ever seen in my entire life. And I loathed him for it. What a waste of an ass like that on an asshole.

He held out his hand. “Phone.”

It was the cock. Or the ass. Or those blue, blue eyes. Whatever it was, I was hypnotized. I dropped the curling iron and handed over my cell phone.

His thumbs flew over the screen, and then he handed it back. “There. Now I’m in your phone. When I call, you answer.”

“When you call, I answer?” I repeated with disdain. I wanted to smash my phone into his perfect face.

None of this was happening. My carefully curated life was not suddenly spiraling out of control, dancing dangerously close to the drain. I’d just worked too hard, and now I was hallucinating.

He leaned in so close that I could feel the heat pumping off his damp skin. Oh, God. I didn’t have the imagination to hallucinate this well.

“If you don’t, you’ll lose everything,” he said.

“SO HE’S LEGIT?” Jane asked as I hung up the phone.

My father wasn’t responding to my calls. He was probably still in the air. But I did get another director on the phone, and she assured me icily that Derek Price was indeed my new guardian angel and babysitter.

“It would appear so.”

I sank down at the kitchen bar and watched listlessly as Jane poured two shots of something.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Fireball,” she said. “Borrowed it from Daisy. Kind of comforting to know that billions of dollars still can’t buy a sophisticated palate. That girl has the best worst taste in booze.”

She handed me a shot glass, and for the second time that night, I drank on command.

“So here’s the plan,” Jane said. “You and I are gonna do a couple of shots, and then I’m spending the night here in case the naked burglar comes back to try out your steam shower.”

“Good plan,” I wheezed and slid my empty glass back at her. “You’ll stun gun him next time, right?”

“Promise.”

DEREK

I pulled my car into Emily's crushed seashell driveway and hopped out whistling. It was a beautiful day. The humidity had broken a bit, leaving coastal Florida to enjoy the blue skies and ocean breezes. Best of all, I had a shiny new puzzle to solve.

And she was going to be very unhappy to see me.

Hands in pockets, I strolled up the winding walkway to her front door.

I could let myself in again, but I'd scandalized Emily enough yesterday. I stabbed the bell with a finger and turned my back on the door to admire the neighborhood. Bluewater was an exclusive gated enclave that, according to my research, my pretty new puzzle had developed with three of her friends. Six years ago, these 2,500 hundred acres had been little more than a swampy mess of overgrowth and trash.

Now, it was home to some of the wealthiest, most eclectic residents Miami had to offer.

They'd built something incredible here. Waterfront mansions tucked away behind lush landscaping. Meandering golf cart and bike paths. Luxurious condo buildings. A secluded marina and private airfield. Even a colorful village of exclusive boutiques and restaurants.

It was impressive. *She* was impressive.

The door opened, and the security woman from last night eyed me with suspicion. Jane Gonzalez. Only daughter of

Cuban parents. She'd been active duty Marines for several years before branching out into security consulting and personal assisting.

"You're back," she stated, gaze lowering to my crotch.

"I'm afraid I came fully clothed this time," I said, offering my most charming grin.

"She'll be disappointed," Jane predicted.

"That I'm back or that I'm wearing pants?" I quipped. Humor was one of my best weapons. I was quite charming and funny when circumstances required.

Serious Jane's lips quirked as if they were considering a smile.

"We're getting ready to leave for the office," she said.

I stepped around her, rubbing my palms together. "Perfect timing. I'm here to drive you."

"Oh, she's really not going to like that," Jane sang under her breath.

She followed me into the two-story foyer. Staircases on either side wound their way up to the second floor and a mezzanine that overlooked both the foyer and the living room or whatever the exorbitantly wealthy called it.

My bank accounts were by no means anemic. But this was another level... Yet I didn't find it cold or over-the-top luxurious. There was a pair of running shoes next to the door, papers and a candy wrapper on the entry table. They were next to an exquisite orchid arrangement. But the details suggested there was a human somewhere underneath Emily Stanton's layers of polish.

"Boss? Ride's here," she called.

"All I can say is if this day is as bad as yesterday was, I'm selling everything and buying a tiny house on an island." Emily jogged into view, stilettos clutched in one hand. She was dressed like she was headed to the club for a girlfriends' lunch. A pale pink linen skirt and jacket. A lady who lunched.

Her bare feet skidded to a stop on the cool marble. “No!” She pointed at me like one would a bad dog.

I grinned. “You need to change,” I insisted, giving her a once-over.

“Absolutely not,” she snapped. “I refuse to pretend to be someone else just to distract from one stupid misstep that should have no bearing on—”

“Your outfit, love. Change your outfit,” I clarified.

Emily sputtered and glanced down. “My outfit?”

“You do look a little ‘Easter church dinner,’” Jane observed.

I was really starting to like this woman who hadn’t stung me.

“I’m respectable.”

“What else is in your closet?” I asked, taking Emily’s hand and pulling her down the hallway toward the master suite I’d snooped through last night.

She tried to dig in, but her heels couldn’t find traction on the smooth marble.

“Let go of me!”

Releasing her, I pushed through the double doors of her closet.

“You need to be human,” I instructed, pawing through the meticulously organized racks. “Showing up as Boardroom Barbie isn’t helping your case. Here,” I tossed a pair of cropped jeans at her.

She caught them on reflex. “Jeans? Are you insane?”

Her horror was laughable. I turned to face her. “You’ve never worn jeans to the office?”

“On Sundays, when no one else is there. I have an image —”

“That’s precisely the problem. Your image is frosty corporate princess. Who wouldn’t love to see cracks in that

armor? We need to humanize you and take advantage of the attention.”

“Take advantage? I want it to go away,” she said, still clutching the jeans to her chest.

“What would you wear if you were going out with friends?” I asked.

“What?”

“Shirt. Fun. Casual.” I snapped my fingers.

Still smoldering with anger, she pointed to the far end of the closet. I rifled through a handful of t-shirts and neatly folded sweaters. “Here.” I tossed her a sleeveless peplum sweater in black.

“We’re going to be late,” she complained, glaring down the length of the dressing room at me.

Her anger was... entertaining. And a little arousing. I’d expected a prim and proper, polite hostess. Finding a temperamental woman instead was a bonus.

“I rescheduled your morning,” I told her, perusing her shoe selection.

“You did what?”

I looped my fingers through a pair of strappy magenta heels. “Emily, love, I understand your desire to remain in control. However, while revolutionizing skin care might be your area of expertise, polishing images and managing crises is mine. This would go more efficiently if you’d just trust me.”

“Trust you? You broke into my house and took a bath!”

“We can argue in the car. Go change.”

“I will never trust you of all people. Not if you were the last human being on the face of the planet.”

I would have bet money that she was going to stomp her bare foot, but she restrained herself. Another point in her favor. Restraint meant she was capable of being reasoned with.

She disappeared from the dressing room, muttering a string of four-letter words.

“Wear your hair down,” I called after her.

I heard a distinct “Kiss my ass” before she closed the bathroom door and locked it with a snick.

I took a quick look inside a few drawers in the large custom island and found many of them empty. I pulled out a belt, then chose a pair of aviator sunglasses from her rather paltry collection. Obviously, Emily Stanton had other interests in life besides clothes and accessories.

I sensed her in the doorway before she spoke.

“Well?” she said, annoyance dripping.

The jeans were fitted and ended a few inches shy of her ankles. The top accentuated her waistline, and the cut made it fun yet stylish.

“Exactly right,” I said, handing her the shoes.

She steadied herself on the granite of the island and slipped her feet into them. I guessed the designer would sell out by tomorrow.

“Very nice. You don’t look at all like a drug addict.”

“Your approval means the world to me,” she said dryly.

In response, I took the end of the belt and fed it through the first loop at her waist. Emily slapped my hands away and took over the task.

“I can’t believe I’m listening to you,” she muttered.

“Trust me, love. I won’t lead you astray.” I shoved my fingers into her hair and ruffled the honey blonde tresses.

She batted at my hands and nearly fell into her collection of trousers. “What *are you doing?*”

I flipped her hair over in a messy side part. “Perfect.”

“I thought that was the problem,” Emily said snidely, securing her belt with a violent tug.

“Come on. We’re late,” I said, brushing past her.

“You are infuriating! I am going to murder you and have Jane feed your body to Steve!”

I led the way out of her bedroom, noting the massive bed was precisely made.

“Steve?” I was intrigued.

“It’s better you don’t know,” Jane piped up from the kitchen where she was checking the locks on the terrace doors. The entire house offered a panoramic view of blue water.

“Let’s go, ladies. We have minds to change today.”

“I don’t see why you need to drive us to work,” Emily complained as I half shoved her into the passenger seat of the Escalade.

“You’re not very friendly in the mornings, are you?” I teased.

“She needs caffeine for polite. Sugar and carbs if you want friendly,” Jane piped up from the back seat.

“I can make that happen,” I promised. I might be charmingly underhanded when the occasion called for it, but I didn’t break my promises.

EMILY

Derek maneuvered through Bluewater like he was intimately familiar with my community. I didn't like it. He snuck down Tequila Lane and cut across Tiki Bar Drive like he'd been born avoiding the early morning tai chi golf cart and foot traffic jam.

"Nice cock," he noted when we passed the eight-foot-tall hand-carved rooster near the gate.

"Huh. I was just thinking the same thing," Jane mused from the back seat.

Ha ha. So funny. Hilarious. I crossed my arms over my chest and made a mental list of all the ways I could dispose of Derek's body.

A crisis management firm? I didn't like it. And I really didn't like anything about Derek Price. He was high-handed. Condescending. Take charge.

Sure. Some women liked that.

Some women would probably like the naked trespassing, too.

But I wasn't some women. I was Emily gosh darn Stanton, and I was hanging on by my fingernails.

Shit. I needed to schedule a manicure.

I keyed in the note to my phone as we cruised through Bluewater.

My home along with my cohorts' houses were tucked away on the very tip of the enclave accessed by a small bridge. A pretty lagoon divided our cul de sac from the rest of the community. It offered the seclusion I'd wanted, though Cam was our mini-neighborhood busybody. She kept tabs on all our comings and goings. An orphan herself, she'd adopted the rest of us as family and fussed over us like a mother hen.

On cue, my phone vibrated in my purse.

I fished it out.

Cam: Who's the GQ eye candy?

I did a mental eye roll.

Me: Just the guy who broke into my house and got naked last night. Long story.

Four seconds later, I had question mark texts from Luna and Daisy in a group message.

Me: Guys, it's a long story, and I'm hoping to get rid of him today.

Cam: I ran an image search. That hunk of pheromones is The Derek Price.

Daisy: You hired him! I'm so proud. I was going to gift him to you, but I know how you feel about people being up in your business.

Luna: Wait. Emily hired a prostitute?

Daisy: Business. Not "bis-natch." He's a crisis management specialist and a damn good one, too. He shines up the tarnished. I used him after the shoplifting debacle of 2016.

Cam: I'm running through his website and social media presences. Seems legit. And also very very gorgeous. Like carved by angels out of heavenly marble gorgeous. Question: is it legal for human beings to be that attractive?

I rolled my eyes. *Since when did legit mean a naked meet and greet after breaking and entering?*

My board had saddled me with a criminal to keep me from being labeled as one.

I shot a glance at Derek and his “heavenly” profile. Damn it. Okay. I could admit that he was attractive. Handsome even. He had those slight hollows under his cheekbones that made him look pensive and angular. His jaw was sharp and lightly shadowed in stubble like he was too careless to worry about shaving regularly. Behind his sunglasses I knew were heavily lashed eyes bluer than Biscayne Bay. The scar under his eye was acceptable. The dimple... not revolting.

He wore a tailored suit sans tie, and his skin had the dusky bronze hue of a year-round Miami resident. Fine. He wasn't hideous. But that didn't mean he was good at his job. Or that I required his services.

Daisy: Tell him I said hi.

She added a winky kissy face.

I would do no such thing. I wasn't going to let this Derek Price any further into my life than he'd already bulldozed his way in.

We hit the causeway, leaving my palm-treed haven behind us. Immediately, a rusty minivan cut across three lanes of traffic and slammed on its brakes in front of us. I braced my hand on the dash and squeaked out a warning.

Jane usually responded by shoving her middle finger salute through the open sunroof. But Derek was cooler. He merely cut the wheel to the left and accelerated around the—was that child even old enough to be driving?

“Everyone behind the wheel in Miami is an animal,” he observed cheerfully.

As if jumping to prove his point, a pickup truck that hadn’t passed inspection in at least a decade bounced off the concrete divider and continued to skim it for a hundred yards before jerking back over into traffic.

“We should have taken the helicopter,” Jane said.

“If we took the helicopter, we wouldn’t be able to go through a drive-thru,” Derek said.

She perked up in the back seat. “Carbs ’n Coffee?”

It was a local doughnut chain with speedy drive-thrus and pastries with specialty flavors like Coconut Chia and Chocolate Lemon Drop. My stomach growled on command. When was the last time I’d had a donut? Mom had made that snide comment about “expanding bottom lines” on Christmas Eve. I hadn’t had a simple carbohydrate since.

It was sad that giving up sugar was easier than defying my own mother.

I said nothing as Derek neatly squeezed between a Lamborghini and a station wagon and took the exit into downtown Miami.

“Bless you,” Jane breathed as he pulled into Carbs ’n Coffee and lowered his window.

“What’ll it be, ladies?” he said with a dazzling grin.

I *was* dazzled. But only because I was hungry.

Jane rattled off a tooth-rotting order, which Derek relayed to the crackling speaker.

When had I last been through a drive-thru? I had a chef three days a week at home, and healthy deliveries filled in the gaps.

“I’ll have the spinach egg white wrap,” I said, even as my stomach begged for something sweeter. I was in the midst of the worst scandal of my life. I didn’t deserve delicious. “And coffee, black.”

“We’ll also have two black coffees, two cinnamon sugar vanilla donuts, and—” He shot me a look that reeked of disappointment. “A spinach egg white wrap.”

We pulled forward, and the drive-thru attendant pushed a tray of coffees and white baker bags at Derek. The scent. That glorious warm, yeasty, sugar scent filled me with a sharp pang of regret.

I needed to get a hold of myself when a bag of donuts made me start regretting my life choices.

Derek doled out the coffees and tossed Jane her bag.

“Here,” he said.

He had a donut wrapped neatly in a napkin.

“No, I ordered the wrap,” I insisted. *Was he hard of hearing?*

“And you’ll have your wrap after you eat your sugar like a good girl.”

Jane snorted from the back seat. “I really like this guy, boss,” she said with her mouth full.

“Come on, Emily,” Derek said, waving the donut in front of my face. My eyes ticked and tocked, following the pastry’s path. “You know you want me.”

I snatched it out of his hand just as the car behind us honked.

“Here’s for us and for whoever’s next in line,” Derek said to the cashier handing her two crisp twenties.

The cashier bobbed the cash, probably blinded by his obnoxious good looks. I soothed myself with a tiny bite of cinnamon and sugar.

“Mmmm.” There was nothing subtle about my vocal reaction to hot sugar exploding in my mouth.

“I quite like that sound,” Derek said as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“Shut up,” I said and took a bigger bite.

“Now that we’re properly fueled,” he said, “let’s talk about your entrance to work this morning.”

“Get out of car. Walk into building,” I said, spraying crumbs all over the man’s dashboard.

He handed me another napkin. “That was yesterday. You didn’t smile or wave or answer any questions. You pulled up like Grace Kelly and let security whisk you inside.”

“And how does your vision differ?” I asked, losing the appropriate level of snark as it filtered through donut. I wondered if board meetings would be more pleasant if I provided pastries.

“We’re going to get out, laughing and smiling like we haven’t any cares in the world. You’re going to hold that donut just as you’re doing now. And you’re going to smile at those photographers like they’re your best friends.”

“Why would I do that? That’s just going to encourage them to ask questions.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“What if they ask about you? I’m supposed to say, ‘Oh, my board hired a breaking and entering babysitter for me to make sure I don’t ruin a multi-billion-dollar empire?’”

“Well, let’s hope there’s something that rolls off the tongue a little more naturally. Should you start to spiral in that direction, I’ll step in and handle it,” Derek said smugly.

I hated people “handling” things for me and had the distinct impression that he’d guessed that.

“I don’t want to stand around on the sidewalk answering questions about cocaine and bad dates. I want to go inside and do my fucking job.”

It was almost laughable that everything I’d worked so hard for was hanging in the balance. One tiny misstep, and I could lose everything.

“Just remember, you need the people out here with their cameras,” he said, rolling to a stop in front of my office building.

I scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“You want something from them. You want their absolution. Their support. Their favor. You want them skipping out to buy shares of Flawless when it goes public because they like you, they believe in you.”

My expression told him in no uncertain terms what he and the rest of the people on the sidewalk could go do.

“Try to be slightly human,” he suggested.

Jane snorted. “Good luck with that.”

“Hey!”

“Sorry, boss,” she said, clearly not remotely apologetic.

Derek leaned over me for the door handle. “Now, hold your donut up, darling, and smile.”

DEREK

The smile Emily slapped on her face was just this side of frozen. “Give me your bag,” I insisted, taking her purse from her so she could hold her coffee and donut for the unruly crowd awaiting their glimpse.

The billionaire with drive-thru coffee and distressed jeans looked miles more approachable than she had yesterday.

“Emily!” There were two dozen photographers stationed on either side of the entrance to the building. Security kept them from blocking the door with sawhorses and ferocious frowns.

My charge cleared her throat, and I realized beneath that glossy layer of bravado, she was nervous. “Hello,” she called weakly.

“Emily!” More photographers jockeyed for her attention, shouting her name as they lined her up in their camera bullseyes. I gave her a little nudge forward. Jane and I flanked her as she approached the front door.

“Do you feel lucky you avoided an arrest?” a woman bellowed from the front row.

Emily’s smile wavered, and I felt a rarely used protective instinct flare to life. Most of my clients brought their shitstorms upon themselves. But my instincts were telling me that this wasn’t her fault.

“What kind of donut is that?” someone else called.

Emily turned to the man. “It’s a cinnamon sugar vanilla donut from Carbs ’n Coffee,” she said, holding it up proudly. “Breakfast of champions.”

There were a few titters of laughter. But it was enough to embolden her.

“If I’d known you all would be here loitering, I’d have brought some for everyone,” she said.

“Tomorrow!” a jokester in the back yelled.

Emily beamed in his direction.

“Emily, whose shoes are you wearing?” someone on the right called.

“Mine.”

I hid my smile and gave her a subtle elbow.

“Mine via Sophia Wang. She’s relatively new,” she corrected.

“Who’s the hottie?” a woman demanded from behind the camera that was documenting every millisecond.

“I’m Jane,” Jane deadpanned.

The crowd cracked up.

“Nice to meet you, Jane. How about you, handsome?” the woman tried again.

I pointed to myself, feigning confusion and looking over my shoulder. “Me? Oh, I’m just one of Emily’s dear friends.”

Emily turned to look at me and arched an eyebrow. I grinned at her, fully aware of the picture we were making.

“None of my friends look like you,” another woman called from behind her camera.

“I’m just here to carry her purse,” I assured the crowd.

Emily’s smile tightened. “If you’ll excuse us, we’ve got a big day at Flawless today, and I’m excited to get started,” she said, only a hint of tightness in her tone.

“Is the IPO still on?” someone yelled.

“Are you and Derek dating?”

“Have you apologized to your family for the embarrassment?”

“Were the drugs yours or Van Winston’s?”

We were whisked neatly inside by building security. Emily’s tight smile stayed in place as she thanked the guards but vanished as soon as the elevator doors slid shut.

“Jane?”

“Yeah, boss?”

“Could you dig up a few extra-large cauldrons and some hot oil for me?” Emily asked. “I’m thinking of doing some renovations to the roof.”

I hid my smile.

I FOLLOWED her into the Flawless offices. “Good morning, whoa—” the woman behind the desk breathed, the papers in her hand floating to the ground unheeded. Jane smirked next to me.

“Good morning, Rosario. This is Mr. Price. Don’t get used to him,” Emily said crisply.

I waved in the woman’s direction. She wiggled her fingers, eyes wide.

“Must be nice to be so good-looking you turn people’s brains to mashed cauliflower,” Jane mused next to me.

“It does come in handy.”

Emily led us through a well-decorated network of hallways, cubicles, and conference rooms to another set of glass doors. Two immaculate desks staffed by two immaculate assistants flanked the doors.

“Easton, Valerie, this is Derek Price. He’s very handsome, and he’s aware of it. So we can all move on now,” Emily said. “Derek, these are my assistants.”

“Valerie,” I said, extending my hand. “We spoke this morning.”

“Yes. Good morning, Mr. Price,” Valerie said, shaking my hand briskly. She looked nervous.

“Easton,” I said, shaking his hand.

He gave me a wary once-over.

“Ms. Stanton? Your father is waiting in your office,” Valerie said.

“Dammit.” Emily paused, glanced at the donut, and shoved the remains in her mouth.

She and Jane both took healthy hits of coffee and straightened their shoulders.

“I have my stun gun set on crispify,” Jane said.

Meeting the father on the first day. This should be fun.

Emily gave me a long, unreadable look. “Okay. Let’s get this over with,” she sighed.

I followed her inside. Her office was smaller than I’d expected. Significantly smaller. The CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company didn’t even rate a corner office?

The room itself was done in what I assumed was Emily’s trademark off-whites and light grays. The wall of glass gave visitors a spectacular reminder of all that Miami had to offer beneath them. The furniture was stainless and white. Modern. Peaceful. Feminine. Or, at least, if not for the large man glowering at a newspaper behind the desk.

“You’re in my chair, Dad,” Emily observed.

Territorial. Nice.

The man looked up. He was balding, a little paunchy with ruddy cheeks. He looked like an aging boxer, but the six-thousand-dollar suit and Rolex said otherwise.

“Someone’s got to play leader around here since you’re too busy running around getting arrested.”

The set of Emily's jaw suggested there was a torrent of words begging to be set free.

"I wasn't arrested," she said crisply, dropping her coffee on the desk and nudging the chair. "I was questioned and released."

Byron Stanton rose to his full six feet and frowned fiercely at his daughter. "Do you have any idea what kind of a clusterfuck this is?"

"Yeah, Dad. I have a really good idea of the clusterfuckery."

"I'd expect this behavior from your brother," he began.

Emily rolled her eyes. "When have I ever let you down?"

"Tuesday," he snapped.

I saw the wince just before it disappeared.

"When have I ever not come through? I'm doing everything in my power to fix this."

"If this IPO doesn't go through because of your little stunt —"

"It wasn't *my* little stunt. It was a public appearance that the board of directors and publicist were desperate for me to do. Do you have any idea how many things I have on my calendar right now? I didn't need to be parading myself around for photographers so the public can remember I exist. Do you know what we're doing today, Dad?"

He crossed his arms over his barrel chest.

"What? You and Jane driving around and picking up prostitutes before the five o'clock news?"

"We're reviewing the biobandage results. Remember the scar treatment I spent fifteen months working on? Today, we find out how well it works."

"*If* it works." Byron smirked.

"How well it works," Emily insisted, standing her ground. "Now, you might as well finish chastising me so I can get back

to running my company.”

“This might be your company, but don’t forget you have a board of directors and a few hundred employees to answer to. If you’ve fucked us all over, Flawless will be the one wearing the scars. So you’d better get out there and raise money for orphans or give away free lipsticks to the homeless. Whatever it takes to save face. Make it go away.” He pointed a burly finger at his daughter.

“I’d suggest that you have some faith in me rather than running behind my back and hiring me a babysitter,” Emily snapped.

For the first time, Byron registered my presence. I had a feeling he didn’t notice most of the people who crossed his path. Quiet servants, invisible employees. The people who made his world go ’round.

“So you’re the famous Derek Price,” he said.

“I am,” I said, setting Emily’s bag on her desk. Neither of us offered a hand to the other.

“I certainly hope the exorbitant fee you charge covers more than carrying purses.”

“Derek, meet my father, a rude child when he’s grumpy and hungry. Dad, meet Derek, a trespassing criminal hell-bent on annoying me. Now, if you both will get the hell out of my hair, I can get back to running this company.”

Byron grunted.

His daughter’s high-handedness obviously pleased him, and I wondered if his bluster was just for show.

“Better call your mother today,” he said, buttoning his jacket. “She’s yammering on and on about being too embarrassed to show her face at the club. And I need her to go to the club, Emily. If she spends much more time at home, one of us will murder the other.”

Emily’s frostiness warmed by a few degrees. “My money is on Mom.”

“And mine’s on you. Make me proud, slugger.” He landed a light punch on her arm.

“I will,” she said, sitting behind her desk and effectively dismissing him.

For the first time, Byron smiled in approval. “Jane, you’re looking trigger-happy as always,” he said.

“Always ready and willing to stun gun anyone who requires an attitude adjustment,” Jane shot back with a baleful look.

“Mr. Price, I expect you’ll keep my daughter on the straight and narrow for the next seven weeks.”

“I’ll see that Emily has all that she needs,” I said.

“I should hope so. I admire the way you wormed your way into a position we didn’t know we needed filled.” It was both sarcastic and a compliment.

He offered his hand, and I shook it. We were two brawlers sizing each other up, wondering what the other was up to. I saw my opening when he glanced away.

“You’ve got a few donut crumbs there,” I said, brushing at his jacket.

“What?”

“If you two are done crushing bones, I’ve got a very busy day today,” Emily said, sounding annoyed from behind her monitor.

EMILY

“Disgraced CEO hires publicity shark Derek Price to repair image”

“Derek Price has hands full with disaster Emily Stanton”

“Alpha Group founder hints at relationship with beleaguered billionaire”

My father stormed out of the office looking for someone else to terrify, and I relaxed into my chair.

“On that note, I’m going to head back to Bluewater and meet with security to find out just how our well-hung Mr. Price got in last night,” Jane announced.

Derek chuckled.

“You could just ask him,” I suggested, scanning the fifty new emails that had rolled in on the drive here.

“It’s much more entertaining this way,” he said, sitting down on my couch and opening his laptop.

“Jane, I’ll call a car for you. You can pick me up tonight —”

“No need, Jane. I’ll see the boss home,” Derek said, without looking up from his screen.

With an elegant flick of my wrist, I flipped him off.

She snorted. “Play nice, you two.”

“Alone at last,” he said when Jane left.

“Don’t you have an unsuspecting woman to show your penis to?” I asked primly.

“Ms. Stanton, what would your HR department say?” he asked, feigning horror.

I didn’t feel like joking with him. His presence was a reminder that my own board didn’t trust me to run my own damn company.

I tapped the end of my pen on the notebook I always kept handy for notes and formulas. “What did my father mean by you wormed your way in?”

“Oh, that. I happened to personally witness those handcuffs snapping around your beautiful wrists. I also happen to be acquaintances with Imani on your board of directors.”

I closed my eyes. “So you called her.”

“So I called her.”

I was suddenly very, very tired. “Derek, why are you in my office? Surely this ‘fixing’ doesn’t require you to shadow me 24/7?”

“My darling Emily, how else can I help you?”

“Are you in my calendar right now?” I barked. Appointments were moving, times changing right before my eyes.

“Why, yes, I am.”

“How did you even get access?”

“Do you really want me to bore you with the details of how I do things?” he asked.

My printer whirred to life and spat out several pages. “Stop using my equipment!”

“You’re welcome to use my equipment at any time, Emily.”

I was going to find a way to destroy this man. Somehow. Someway. I would make him rue the day he agreed to be my babysitter.

I snatched the papers out of the tray and marched them over to him. “Derek, I mean this in the nicest possible way. If you don’t get out of my office and let me get to work, I am going to lose my shit in a scene so un-Stanton-like that the entire building will be talking about it for years.”

“I’d better get you two donuts tomorrow,” he mused.

I threw the papers in his face and had to restrain myself from wrapping my hands around his neck and choking the life out of him.

“Take it easy, love,” he said, relenting. “I’ve got a few things to go over with you first. I’ll be quick. I promise.”

“I give you five and you leave me alone?” I pressed.

“Is everything a negotiation with you?” he asked, amused.

“Yes. Now get out.”

“You give me five and I’ll stop distracting you.”

That was definitely not a promise to leave my office, I noted.

He patted the cushion next to him.

I took a deep breath and counted backward from ten. Luna swore by counting away the mad. But it never worked for me. It just made me angrier that I’d wasted ten seconds in which I could have done something more productive.

“Five minutes,” I repeated and sat, making sure to leave several inches of couch cushion between us.

“First up, a non-disclosure agreement,” he said, spreading the paperwork out.

“You want me to sign an NDA?”

“No. I’m going to sign one for you, which is something your team should have done the second they hired me.” He pulled a fountain pen from his pocket and scrawled his name across the contract.

His signature was bold, confident. Just like the man it belonged to. It irked me. Just like the man it belonged to.

Derek looked up, our eyes met and held.

“There. Now I’m all yours. You can tell me your deepest, darkest secrets, and I’ll never tell a soul.”

He was using his physical appeal against me, and I was not exactly falling for it, but my foundation felt a little shaky.

“I don’t have any secrets,” I lied.

He tapped me on the nose with his pen. I imagined myself catching him off guard with a palm strike to his aching perfect nose.

“You most certainly do,” he said. “But I’ll let you keep them a little longer. For now, let me give you a visual demonstration of the services I intend to provide you.”

For a fraction of a second, I was convinced he was cueing up a sex tape. It was a millisecond of envisioning his perfect ass as he thrust into a very lucky woman that had my face turning six shades of tomato.

It felt warm in my office. Close.

He pressed a button with a flourish and a video played on screen. It was me, arriving at work yesterday.

“While I admire your impeccable taste in vehicles—I hope you let me drive her—watch yesterday compared to today.”

With the sound off, I watched as I pulled up in front of the building and got out of the Porsche. I strutted like an angry supermodel toward the front door without acknowledging the presence of the photographers. I looked... fierce. Powerful. Angry.

“And today,” Derek said, cueing up a second video.

There I was again, casual in my jeans and messy hair. Smiling, laughing. I turned and beamed—when had I ever beamed in public? Stantons didn’t beam—at something Derek had said, laughed at Jane. I wasn’t alone. I wasn’t with an entourage. I looked like a woman having a good time with friends.

“Now, I won’t insult your intelligence by pointing out the marked difference between yesterday and today,” he said. “But I will further prove my point with a few stills.”

He clicked through a few pictures. Back and forth from my grim arrival yesterday to my donut-toting one today.

“We literally walked in the door ten minutes ago. How did you put this together so quickly?”

“Minions,” he said with an eyebrow wiggle.

He was stupidly handsome.

“This is my goal,” he continued. “To take you from unapproachable and frosty to down-to-earth and likable.”

“I don’t need to be *liked*, Derek. I need to have the space to do my job. Not take the time to present Lynetta Dirk with the Women in Business Award at a luncheon today,” I said, glaring at an event he’d hacked into my calendar in mere hours.

If my time was spent on a public apology tour, I’d fall behind on what really mattered. My work. Flawless wasn’t some hobby. A lark. It wasn’t even just about smoothing wrinkles. Or a billion-dollar IPO. It was science and growth. And it was *mine*.

“The presenter canceled last minute, and you were kind enough to swoop in on a moment’s notice.”

“Did you have the original presenter killed?”

He scoffed. “She is alive and well.”

My smart watch buzzed, and I spotted a text.

Luna: Super cute and approachable! Love the outfit!

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath.

“Emily,” Derek said, looking deeply into my eyes. I looked away, pretending to study my calendar. “You’re not some drug-addled socialite on the verge of destruction, and you’re also not a ‘ladies who lunch’ mannequin.”

“I realize that,” I sniped.

“Good,” he said amicably.

“I have shit to do, Derek. Never-ending shit to keep this company running smoothly. I don’t need to suddenly become friendly and approachable. I need to prove that I am more than capable of running this company.”

“I’m not here to hold your hand through day-to-day operations. I’m here to make the public realize what an intelligent, savvy, interesting woman you are. You don’t invest in businesses, love. You invest in people. And right this second, you just skated on a drug arrest.”

“The publicists want to push attention on to Lita. Let her do the award giving. Let me work,” I said. “Why can’t we do that?”

“Marching out a substandard Emily Stanton is not going to build confidence,” Derek said, sinking back on the couch. His arm rested on the cushion behind me. “Lita does not own this company. Lita is not the face of the company.”

“Lita is not a substandard me,” I argued.

He waved it away. “Do you want to sit here and argue the unfairness of it all, or do you want to do something about it?”

I couldn’t believe I felt like pouting. I blamed Derek... and the emotional effects of a long overdue sugar rush.

“Do something.” I sighed.

“Good. Now let’s get down to business.” He took my hands in his. “Your board of directors hired me. But as far as I’m concerned, *you* are my client. My job is to get you what you want. So what do you want, Emily?”

He enunciated each word as if he were asking me the most important question of my life.

“I want this to go away. I want everything to go back to the way it was before I got in that stupid car.”

He studied me with an intensity that made me want to squirm. I held eye contact on principle. No one made me

squirm.

“Then I’ll get that for you. But you have to trust me to do my job.”

“I don’t even know you,” I argued.

“I’m Derek Price. Age forty-three. Charming bachelor by choice. I dropped out of college to run a firm that specializes in fixing the damaged images of public figures. I charge exorbitant fees without the smallest measure of guilt because I’m confident that the service I provide is invaluable. I abhor anyone who can’t be bothered to be real. If you’re an asshole, be brave enough to be an asshole.”

I pulled my hands out of his grip and crossed my arms. Some people didn’t have a choice in how they were perceived.

“And in high school,” he continued, “I very nearly destroyed my life with a series of terrible decisions culminating in me stealing a cop’s personal car out of his driveway.”

“You didn’t.” If he’d meant it to shock me, it had worked.

“I did. I had an excellent run of petty thievery until I set my greedy sights on that SUV,” Derek said almost fondly.

“What happened?”

“Oh, I was arrested and hauled downtown to face my worst nightmare.”

“Jail?” I asked. I didn’t want to be interested, but I couldn’t help myself.

“My very angry single mother. My father left all of us when I was twelve. My mother worked seven days a week at a hair salon to make ends meet. My siblings and I took it upon ourselves to help out. My older brother got a job waiting tables. My middle sister started a tutoring business. My youngest sister clipped coupons. And I—”

“Stole cars?” I was horrified. And oddly intrigued.

He spread his palms, a magician distracting his audience. “I’m a thief at heart. Fortunately, winning at business is almost

as much fun. Besides, it worked itself out.”

“How?”

“Detective Michael Perez ended up being the best thing that happened to my family.” Derek sighed. “We all call him Dad now. And his kids are my siblings regardless of blood. Turns out that I’m not the only thief in the family. One look at my beautiful, angry mother who was still wielding scissors as she threatened my life and she stole his heart.”

I’ll admit it. A very teeny, female part of me swooned in the recesses of my very busy heart.

“So he just erased the charges?”

Derek laughed. “Of course not. Neither of my parents let a good deed go unpunished. I had two hundred hours of community service to keep me occupied.”

“Don’t your clients care about your... colorful past?” I pressed. It seemed so unlikely that the elegantly wealthy would willingly part with fistfuls of cash and hand them over to a man with a criminal past.

“It makes me real, darling Emily. I’m openly flawed, vulnerable even. There’s a security there that no polite, socially acceptable mask can deliver. You know that you can trust me.”

I trusted very few people in my life, and one romantic sob story about a teenage felony wasn’t going to have me welcoming the man into my circle of trust.

“Do you still steal?”

A smile flickered across his face.

“Only when absolutely necessary,” he said, slipping a hand into his suit jacket.

Oh, God. “Is that my father’s...”

“Wallet. Yes. It seems he left it behind. Pity.”

DEREK

I gave Emily an hour to play catch up and used the time to deliver her father's wallet to Valerie, the attentive, ambitious assistant.

I perched on her desk, turning on my charm, and quizzed her on Ms. Stanton's daily habits. I got very little out of the woman and nothing but smug looks from Easton, the other assistant.

I approved. These were the kinds of people someone like Emily needed to surround herself with. Loyal, sharp, immune to a handsome stranger's sly charms.

Jane returned after terrifying the Bluewater security team, and together we commandeered a small conference room to debate—argue loudly—Emily's new schedule since I'd taken the liberty of adding a few of the necessary appearances and activities into The Boss's calendar.

"I'm telling you, Tea and Crumpets," Jane said, kicking back in her chair at the head of the table. "She's not going to go for this. You want her making an appearance Wednesday night at some concert. It's *not* happening. And what billionaire CEO has time to sit through a fundraiser luncheon for—" She paged through her phone. "Oh, hang on, STEM Girls? She might actually do this. The boss loves this shit."

"Have a little faith in me, Jane," I insisted, drumming my fingers on the glossy wood tabletop. "And who wouldn't want to see Beyoncé live?"

She snorted. “It’s not the Beyoncé part. It’s the Wednesday. No plans on Wednesday nights.”

“Why?”

Jane shrugged. “Ask her yourself.”

Jane was cagey, rude, and unapologetic. I liked her immensely. Plus, her not telling me things told me just as many other things. She was another loyal follower of Emily’s, which meant there was an interesting woman who earned loyalty from her team under that very shiny layer of polish.

The door opened, and the room filled with the lovely cool breeze that was Ms. Emily Stanton. “Derek,” she said, shooting Jane a look that said *you better not be telling secrets*. “Lita has time to meet with us if we head over now.”

“Head over?” I asked, catching the flash of annoyance in Jane’s eyes.

“Yes. To her office,” Emily explained as if I were a pesky five-year-old. It pleased me that I could annoy her so easily.

I rose and buttoned my jacket. “Jane, I trust you have enough to get started working out transportation and security.”

“Yeah, yeah. Pip pip cheerio,” Jane called after me.

“I like your Jane,” I told Emily as she led the way back toward the reception desk.

She shot me a wary look over her shoulder.

“What?” I pressed.

“I don’t know what you mean by that.”

I laughed. “I meant just what I said. I like her.”

“Hmm.”

We passed reception. Emily was warmer with her greeting on this pass—I took the credit for alleviating some of her stress—and I noticed the receptionist all but bloom under the fraction of friendliness.

“While I have your undivided attention,” I said, handing Emily a folder. “This is for you.”

Frowning, she flipped it open as we walked. “You already wrote a speech for the luncheon?”

“Just the highlights.”

She closed the folder with what could only be described as a growl and knocked briskly on a glass door before opening it.

This was the office I would have expected for the CEO. Spacious, plush, and the enviable corner. Lita could take in views of Biscayne Bay and downtown Miami with one swivel of her chair. It was easily three times the size of Emily’s office and decorated in a rather garish fashion. The eclectic world traveler vibe had somehow missed its mark. There was something just slightly off about the dark, imposing furniture and colorful Eastern art.

“I thought my eyes were deceiving me when I saw the headlines, Emily. That outfit.” The woman behind the desk was curvy and glossy like a pin-up model. Her hair hung in a dark cascade over one shoulder. She wore a red dress that paid special attention to all the right places. Dark lipstick over subtly filled lips, thick lashes, long nails.

Lita Smith wasn’t afraid of showcasing her looks.

“I decided it was a casual day,” Emily said breezily. “I wanted to introduce you to Derek Price. Derek will be working with us to contain the situation.”

Lita offered me a bright smile. “Derek. From what I’ve seen all over the gossip blogs this morning, you’re an excellent purse carrier. I’ve heard a lot about your work with the fallen,” she said, offering her hand.

“The fallen?” I shook her hand.

“The mighty. The ones who take tumbles off their pedestals.”

“Don’t tell me that’s what you think of Emily,” I said.

Lita let out a silvery peal of laughter and clasped my hand in both of hers. “Don’t be ridiculous. Our Emily is impeccably perfect. In fact, I’d be willing to bet this will be your easiest job. The entire thing was a misunderstanding, one I feel

completely responsible for,” she added, releasing my hand and placing a hand theatrically over her heart.

“Let’s not rehash all that,” Emily said briskly. “Derek has been hired to un-tarnish my image. Which means I’ll be making more public appearances rather than less.”

I noticed that she left out the part where the board had gone behind her back. No commiserating here.

Lita pursed her lips. “I see. I assume you’ve run this past Helen,” she said, addressing me.

“Helen and I have spoken. I’m the point person on this,” I cut in.

“Well, whatever I can do to help, I’m yours, Derek.” Her lips curved in a feline smile.

Flawless’s chief marketing officer was an expert flirt.

“I do have something I need,” Emily cut in. “I need you to take the temperature of the board. Reach out to a couple of the directors and see how they’re feeling about this mess.”

“Happy to,” she chirped. “I’m always telling you I can handle more. You don’t have to do all the work yourself, Lady Stanton.”

Emily rolled her eyes in that familiar way female friends do. “Speaking of, are you still available to swing by the lab today?”

Lita winced. “Today’s a little tight. I’m in back-to-back meetings. What’s happening at the lab?”

Emily paused for the slightest moment. “We’re removing the biobandages today. It might be good to have marketing there,” she said. I thought I detected an edge of testiness in her tone.

Lita frowned, but her forehead remained unmarred. The modern miracles of science. “I have that in my calendar for next week,” she said, scrolling through her phone.

“It’s today. At three,” Emily said.

“It’s that damn Roderick. He doesn’t know how a calendar works,” Lita groaned.

“I told you not to hire an assistant based on looks,” Emily reminded her.

“I didn’t hire him for his looks,” Lita argued unconvincingly.

“His nickname is Ram Rod, and he can bench press you,” Emily pointed out.

Lita grinned shamelessly. “Yeah. I guess he can. Look, I’ll send a VP and a photographer over today.”

“If this goes well, I’m going to want another look at the draft of the press kit for the product,” Emily explained.

“Of course you will,” Lita said with an eye roll that ended in a friendly wink.

“I just want to make sure everything is right,” Emily said lightly.

“Derek, you’ll find that Emily here has difficulty trusting people to do their jobs. But it’s one of the things we love best about her,” Lita teased.

Before Emily could respond, we were interrupted by a knock.

“Knock knock, ladies and Tea and Crumpets,” Jane called from the door. “Boss, it’s time to leave for the luncheon.”

“Derek, like I said, if there’s anything you need at all, don’t hesitate to call me,” Lita said, following us to the door. She slipped a card into my hand and gave me a meaningful look. “My cell is on the back.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to working with you.” I pocketed the card and followed Jane and Emily out with the distinct sensation that Lita was staring at my ass.

“*Me-ow*. She didn’t even get to see his schlong like we did, and she’s already going after him,” Jane mused, punching the button on the elevator.

“I give off a big schlong vibe,” I explained.

Emily snorted indelicately. “Can we please stop discussing Derek’s penis before we have an HR scandal to deal with, too?”

We stepped into the elevator car together. Emily pulled out her phone and dialed. “Valerie, I need you to reach out to Bill Haddad in marketing. Have him arrange to be at the lab with a photographer at three. Thank you.”

She tucked her phone back in her bag. “Lita has a lot on her plate,” she said.

“Yeah, Tea and Crumpets’s schlong,” Jane said.

Emily elbowed her.

“Why is your chief marketing officer’s office three times the size of yours?” I asked.

“Because she’s an important asset to this company and a valuable friend to me,” Emily said. It sounded like she’d given the answer before. “And I trust *her*.”

I smiled at the jab.

Turning to me, she looked up. “Why did you carry my purse this morning?”

I glanced down at her as she slid her sunglasses on. “In addition to being perfectly secure in my manhood—should you need an emergency tampon run, I’m your man—I was making sure the world knows who’s the boss.”

She pursed her lips, but they fought back, curving ever so slightly. “Do you ever do anything without an ulterior motive?”

“I like to think of it as multi-tasking.”

DEREK

Emily's public presentation persona could use a little loosening up, but the speech went over well. The audience was warmly polite, and no one demanded her to answer questions about the near-arrest.

I considered it a lukewarm positive.

By the time I was done cracking her lovely, hard-shelled exterior, I had a feeling the world would be falling for Ms. Emily Stanton. I just had to figure out where exactly she kept her humanity hidden.

While two hundred and fifty women dug into their Caesar salads, I pulled Emily out the side door of the ballroom where Jane was waiting with my car.

I slid into the back with her and reached over the front seat.

Jane's fingers drummed on the wheel in time to a sexy salsa number from a playlist she'd synced to my vehicle.

"Would you prefer the cilantro lime chicken or the tuna salad?" I offered Emily both containers.

She blinked. "Oh. Ah. I'll have the chicken."

"He asked for your favorites, just so you don't think he's big-dicked, gorgeous, and psychic," Jane said, easing down the alley.

A smile flitted around Emily's pink lips.

"So, how did it go?" Jane asked.

“I got pity applause.” Emily sighed, the smile evaporating.

“Better than a boot to the face,” Jane said cheerfully.

“You did very well,” I assured Emily. “It takes a while to win trust. This was just a baby step in the right direction. Next on the agenda...” I said, taking my readers out of my pocket and skimming the calendar on my phone.

“The lab,” Emily announced through a mouthful of food. She sounded a little livelier, and I was curious if it was the food or the anticipation.

“Tell me more,” I urged, removing my glasses and tucking my phone away.

She dropped her fork neatly in the container. “Eighteen months ago, we discovered an interesting phenomenon involving the moisture barrier of scarred skin,” she began, and it was like the sun had lit her from within. “Stop me if I get too technical.”

Jane smirked in the driver seat and then tapped the brakes hard when an elderly man with a walker sauntered into the street from between two parked cars.

“You don’t have much time left! Stay on the sidewalk,” Jane yelled through the open window.

“The moisture barrier is what holds our skin cells together,” Emily continued, immune to traffic issues. “Like glue or caulk or mortar. But what we were seeing on scarred tissue is that the moisture barrier itself was damaged. So we started experimenting with ways to reinvigorate it. Fast forward to the present, and we have what I believe will be a new way of treating and essentially healing scars.”

“That’s big,” I observed.

She awarded me a smile and not one of the toned-down, proper ones. This was a light-up-her-lovely-face grin. *Wow. Was that an angels’ chorus I was hearing?*

“It is,” she agreed. “We’re testing these biobandages on three subjects. One is an athlete who had ACL surgery a year ago. Another is an early twenty-something with severe acne

scars on her face. And the last is a domestic violence survivor. Her scars are particularly challenging.”

“Because?” I pressed. I was interested in what she was saying and how excited she seemed by the subject.

“Age of scarring, for instance, is a hurdle most topical treatments can’t beat or improve effectively. The older the scar, the more difficult it is to make it less noticeable. And Mallory, our subject, has scars that are old and very deep. The scientist in me is crossing her fingers for an improvement. The human being in me hoping for a miracle for Mallory.”

I had literal fucking goosebumps.

“When you say ‘we’?” I prodded.

“My team. This is my lab facility,” she said as Jane pulled up to an innocuous white stone building. “We have systems biologists, chemists, research scientists, and lab techs. This is where all our products are developed and tested.”

“Oh, God. I’m not about to walk into a room with fifty beagles in cages, am I?” I asked. That would be the end of our professional relationship, no matter how lovely her smile was.

In an uncharacteristic move, Emily shoved my shoulder. “No animal testing,” she said primly. “The lab at school was an emotionally scarring experience. Lita and I vowed that we would never test products on animals. It’s also part of why Luna and I are friends. Her cosmetic company Wild Heart is vegan and cruelty-free.”

“So the testing is more expensive and probably takes significantly longer,” I predicted.

Emily nodded, reaching for her door handle. “Yes, but this way I can sleep at night knowing that I don’t have a bunch of sweet rats or dogs caged up just so I can make another billion.”

“In that case, we can still be friends,” I told her.

“Goody.” She rolled her eyes and got out.

The lab was, from my uneducated assertion, state of the art. There were several fancy-looking workspaces. Everything

looked new, pristine. Stainless steel sparkled, work tables gleamed, and an entire herd of scientific-looking people bustled about looking important and scholarly.

“Here,” Emily said, handing me a lab coat. “Put this on.” She was already wearing one and had pulled her hair back into a no-nonsense bun. I liked the look more than it made sense.

I shrugged into it and decided to wonder what exactly it was that attracted me to her later. I didn’t have a type. I loved women, period. It was quite possible that I was seduced by the puzzle as much as the woman.

“Do I look science-y?” I asked, smoothing a hand over the fabric.

“You look protected from spills,” she said with a smirk.

“You look excited,” I observed, slipping my phone into the pocket of the lab coat.

She bit her lip in adorable nerd-like excitement, and the attraction went from a zing to a thump. “I am,” she confessed.

“This could be a revolutionary product for your company.”

“This could be life-changing for Mallory,” she countered.

I followed her through the bowels of the lab into a smaller, brightly lit room. Her subjects were seated at the front of the room. A photographer was setting up his lighting equipment. The rest of the inhabitants were an odd mix of business-suited executives and lab-coated geniuses. Everyone seemed excited.

“Mind if I talk to the subjects?” I asked Emily.

She was frowning over some data on an iPad a tech had handed her. “Sure. Be nice,” she said.

As if I would be anything but.

“And don’t record anything,” she said.

“You’re ruining my fun,” I complained.

“The patent is pending, and the subjects have a right to privacy,” Emily said. “Don’t screw with me or them.”

I introduced myself to the participants. Nervous and energetic Nina was twenty-three and had a flesh-colored bandage on both cheeks. Dewayne wasn't just any athlete but the star point guard for the Miami Buzz. His last season had come to an abrupt end due to a ligament tear and knee surgery.

And Mallory, who was, by best guess, in her mid-forties. She sat with ruler-straight shoulders. Her long hair was swept over the left side of her face. When she looked up at me, I saw why. Her bandage molded around her jaw up to hug the line of her nose. Her perfunctory smile made me think she'd rather be anywhere but here.

“What are you hoping to see once the bandages come off?” I asked Nina.

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “I want to be normal. I don't want to have to spend an hour every day covering up acne scars or hours on the weekends scouring YouTube for new products or solutions. You know? These stupid scars are getting too much of my life. I'm over them.”

I moved down the line. “How about you, Dewayne?”

He leaned his big frame back. “Man, I just want to leave last season behind me. You know? Blew out my knee. Had the surgery. Now I'm training. I wanna come back faster and stronger. I don't want to live with this big-ass reminder of the worst moment of my career carved into my knee.”

“And you, Mallory?” I said.

She was silent for a long moment, and I thought maybe she wasn't going to answer me. “I just want to see an improvement,” she said softly. “I'm not greedy. I'm not asking for perfection or for what I looked like before. I just want my scars to be better. I'm better. I want my face to reflect that.”

Emily joined us, giving me a suspicious look. I held up my hands to show her that I hadn't recorded or stolen anything.

“Are you three ready?” Emily asked, shifting her attention to her subjects.

They nodded, and she ran through the details. “The sensors we embedded under the bandages have been monitoring for

things like moisture and bacteria. That data looks great. We're all excited to see what the visible results are. Does anyone need a drink of water or anything before we get started?"

No one did, so Emily asked everyone in the room to take their seats.

"Don't be nervous," she whispered to Nina when the nurse began to gently tug at the edge of the first bandage.

Nina blew out a breath and squeezed her eyes shut as the nurse efficiently peeled the bandage back.

She was telling Nina not to be nervous, but the way Emily flattened a hand to her own belly told me she was the one experiencing nerves. But the moment passed, and the bandage was loosening.

I could see by the spark in Emily's eye, the parting of her lips that indicated she liked what she was seeing. Her hand left her stomach.

"Let's take the other one off, too," Emily said, leaning in.

"How does it look?" Nina asked, trying not to move her lips.

The crowd in the room laughed gently, and the photographer danced his way in and out, capturing reactions.

"It looks good," Emily said. "Very good."

"Good how? Good like I won't need to spackle six layers of pore eraser on every day?"

Emily signaled to the back of the room, and Nina's before pictures appeared on the screens behind them.

"Goodbye to foundation good," Emily said, handing the girl a compact mirror.

"Holy *shit*," Nina gasped. The room rumbled with laughter again as the occupants craned for a better look.

"Let me just take these quickly," Emily said, snapping a photo of each side of Nina's face. Moments later, the new images appeared on the screens side-by-side with the before angles.

The difference was nothing short of remarkable. Nina's red labyrinth of scarring had become healthy pink like she was fresh from a facial. Even the ice-pick-like scars were more even as if the skin had miraculously resurfaced itself.

"Holy shit," she said again, looking at the photos. "I can't believe it!"

She surprised Emily with a bouncy hug, and Emily's laugh was buoyant. My fingers itched to capture the moment.

"Come on, guys. Me next," Dewayne insisted.

The nurse slid her wheeled stool in front of him and went to work on the bandage on his knee.

"Come on, big money," Dewayne muttered like a mantra.

The nurse's self-satisfied smile gave it away. Emily punched her fist into the air, one moment of unadulterated satisfaction. This was *her* three-pointer. Her game-winning buzzer beater.

Dewayne's dark skin was glossy with residue where the bandage had been. The jagged surgical scar had been reduced, smoothed. The discoloration evened. It wasn't perfect, but it was very damn good.

Dewayne jumped out of his chair and did a little boogie, pulling Emily into it. She laughed, light and easy. The joy of accomplishment flushing her cheeks.

Nina was busy snapping selfies, and Dewayne insisted on getting in on the action. I made a note to find and follow their social media accounts.

Mallory, meanwhile, sat with her jaw tight, staring at the floor in front of her.

"Mallory," Emily said softly. "It's your turn."

"I'm afraid to hope," she confessed in a voice barely above a whisper, and my heart broke into pieces for her. The damage humans could inflict on one another remained an awful mystery.

Emily sank down in front of her. “You are seven years out of a relationship that could have killed you. You got your master’s degree and landed the job you always wanted. You put your kids through private school. And you make damn fine pottery on the weekends. Scars or not, you *are* hope.”

I felt my throat tighten uncomfortably when Mallory linked her fingers through Emily’s. She nodded. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

The nurse worked slowly and carefully. I could feel the room behind me holding its breath. Tension grew. Anticipation. Hope.

“Oh, my,” the nurse said, dropping her professionalism. “This looks very good, Mallory.”

“Really?”

Emily couldn’t contain herself and leaned in.

Reaching behind her, she held out a hand. A psychic lab tech handed over the camera.

“Mallory?” Emily said as she snapped a picture.

It popped up on the screens, and everyone in the room inhaled sharply.

“Yes,” she whispered. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

“Open your eyes.”

The nurse held up the hand mirror, and Mallory opened her very lovely green eyes. They widened with shock.

The scar had been an ivory path carved from jawline to nose, splintering under the eye in a spiderweb of trauma. Now it was... smaller, thinner, smoother. Some of the threadlike splinters had vanished completely.

“This is after one week, Mallory. Imagine what three weeks will look like,” Emily said as the woman before her took a shaky breath.

Mallory turned to look at the pictures. She was nodding slowly, slowly. And there was a small, tender smile playing at

the corners of her unpainted mouth. Acknowledging a new reality, a new *future*, that Emily had given her.

Yes. There were some members of the human race who made it their duty to tear others down, tried to destroy them. And then there were the Emily Stantons of the world. Ones who cared and fixed and tried to make things better.

Was that sweat stinging my eyes?

I glanced around. It appeared that everyone had sweaty eyes. Or allergies. People were blowing their noses while others wiped their faces with their sleeves.

Mallory was hugging Emily now. A hard, tight embrace more powerful than any words of thanks.

My client was a motherfucking genius, and if she kept smiling like that, I was going to have a problem not falling hard for her.

EMILY

Mom: Emily you must call me immediately.

Mom: I need to speak with you about this unfortunate situation.

Mom: Kerrigan Mortimer is shopping for a third wife. A wedding would be just the thing to distract everyone from your misstep, don't you think?

Mom: I'll never be able to show my face at the club again. Crystal Fordham had the audacity to ask what rehab facility I'll be sending you to. Call me!

Leaving the happy chaos of the lab behind me, I ducked into a storage room for a moment of quiet.

It was a habit I'd developed years ago. Sometimes things in my life were so big, so thrilling, that I needed a few minutes to take it in. To say a thank you to the universe. And to feel really damn proud of myself. Then I would compartmentalize it and neatly dive back into the next thousand details requiring my attention.

I blew my nose into the tissue I'd snuck out of the box by the door. It wouldn't do for my team to see *the* Emily Stanton tearing up over, well, anything.

We'd done it. The formulas would need to be refined and tested further. But this was a win. I was already thinking of price points and how to keep these little magical marvels affordable. Everyone deserved the chance to heal their scars. I didn't want this to end up as some high-end plastic surgery upgrade only available with the right bank account balance.

Money was a physical presence in my life. But sometimes, the hunger others had for it overwhelmed me. There would be a fight. A low-cost scar treatment didn't exactly fit with the rest of our high-end products. But I was confident we could find a way around it. Perhaps a more budget-conscious brand with a new line of products?

I laughed softly to myself.

My vision for the company had been evolving for quite some time. And in quiet moments like this, I worried that I would lose the ability to fight for that vision once I had shareholders to answer to.

"Suck it up, Stanton," I whispered out loud. I would meet whatever challenges came my way just as I always had.

The walls of this room were crammed full of wire racks with equipment and the accessories of scientific study. Every test tube, every dry erase board, every pipette was mine. And I was going to use them well. This was just the beginning of the advancements possible. I wanted to make sure that Flawless was on the front lines of development.

There was so much more to do.

"Emily?"

The door opened behind me, and I quickly swiped the tissue under my eyes.

For one whole minute, I forgot all about the mess that required Derek Price's presence in my life.

"Just doing a quick inventory," I said without turning around. "I'll be out in a minute." A brisk brush-off that anyone tuned to human nature would read to mean "*Leave, now.*"

He closed the door, but I could still sense him in the room with me. My acute awareness of his presence was yet another annoyance.

I felt hands on my shoulders, and then he was turning me to face him. Manhandling was something I did not tolerate. But rather than kicking him in the spectacular junk, I studied the tips of my shoes.

I was puttering around a lab in open-toed stilettos. I was an embarrassment to scientists everywhere.

“Emily,” he said again, nudging my chin up with an arrogant thumb.

I met his gaze with hostility. I hated being anything in the neighborhood of vulnerable. And being vulnerable in front of a man I’d known for less than twenty-four hours? Well, that was unheard of. An impossibility. A rogue data point that would be ruthlessly stripped of significance.

“What? Why are you here?” My voice was cool, clipped.

“That was fucking amazing. You dazzle me,” he said, running his hands down the sleeves of my lab coat.

I felt my eyebrows wing up. *Uh-oh*. “I beg your pardon?” I said stiffly.

“I’m going to cross a professional line here,” he warned me. “It’s your fault because that in there was like witnessing a miracle.”

“Cross a professional line? You?” I scoffed, more nervous than I cared to admit. I’d handled unwanted advances with a frosty efficiency before. But this felt... different. “Are you breaking into my house and taking a bath again?”

“No. I’m going to kiss you right here in this science closet.”

“It’s a storage room, not a science closet. And no. You’re not,” I said, hands flying to his chest. There went my frosty efficiency.

“Afraid I am. And I’d apologize, but we both know I’m not going to really be sorry.”

He was leaning in. My body, already revved from scientific achievement, happily threw itself into overdrive. His chest, firm and toned, pressed into my palms, testing my resistance.

“I don’t know you,” I said quietly as his mouth moved closer. I didn’t kiss strangers. Certainly not strangers who trespassed and stole. *God, what would he take from me?*

My heart beat out a tempo loud enough that I was sure he could hear it.

“I’m starting to know you, and I quite like it,” he countered.

I was wearing a lab coat with my “librarian bun” as Jane liked to call it, and the sexiest man I’d ever laid eyes on was putting the moves on me. My brain scrambled to rationalize.

He’s using you.

He wants something from you.

He’ll hurt you.

He’s not right for you.

“You can slap me after, I promise,” he said just before his lips brushed mine.

Oh, those lips. Firm, demanding, insistent.

Biology took over. And not the knee-jerk self-defense kind. It was an instant chemical reaction.

“Dazzled,” he whispered the word again, his mouth moving over mine. And then it was me who was dazzled.

I heard the thrum of my blood as it pumped through my veins. I tried to stay still. To be impassive. I couldn’t allow him to think that it was acceptable to kiss me like this.

But, oh, it was.

Even my stomach stopped the acrobatic act it had been performing for the last hour and went warm and liquid.

I gripped him by the lapels of his coat and kissed him back as if there was nothing else in the world I’d rather be doing.

As if there were no demands waiting for me outside that door. No family responsibilities. No concerns over perception or next steps.

I kissed him as if this moment was the only one that mattered.

Derek's body pressed against mine was the only sensation I had to concern myself with.

Sorry, Mom. I'm too busy being seduced to worry about image and reputation.

He was lean and rangy. Made to wear fine suits and slim ties. His height was lovely. Most men I dated were eye-to-eye with me when I was in heels. But Derek had inches to spare.

Our tongues twined in an instinctive dance, and my senses were full of him.

Wrestling control back, he kissed me thoroughly, hungrily. Tongues mating, lips bruising. My breath was his. His hands slipped inside my jacket and coasted over waist and hips.

"We need to stop," I said, kissing him with a desperation that was quite frankly terrifying.

"Absolutely. It's vital that we stop kissing immediately." His tongue danced back into my mouth.

Oh, God. He was hard. His erection pressed against my belly. I'd seen him naked already. And now I was *feeling* him. Was this a planned seduction? Some master plot designed to coax me into letting my guard down?

If it was, it was working quickly. Less than twenty-four hours, and I was allowing him to kiss me. Hell, I was *forcing* him to kiss me.

What would the board say if they could see us wrapped around each other? Derek one day into his babysitting job. Me two days off a company-derailing scandal. If I was this hard up for physical contact, I could have Daisy or Luna hook me up with an acceptable one-night stand. I could *not* pursue a physical relationship with my fixer.

As if sensing my mental gymnastics, Derek pulled back and cupped my face in his hand. He brushed his thumb over my swollen, half-devoured lips. “You’re incredible,” he whispered.

My head moved in a half nod, half shake.

“We can’t do this again,” I told him. “Your advances are officially unwelcome.”

“Yes, that’s the message I got loud and clear,” he said lightly. His thumb skimmed under my lip, and he looked at me almost fondly.

“Get that look off your face immediately,” I commanded.

He grinned and my knees nearly went out from under me. A smiling Derek Price was dangerous, a weapon of mass destruction.

“I’m serious, Price. This isn’t happening. We aren’t happening.”

“Not until you’re ready,” he promised.



“YOU LOOK like you just got ravaged in a closet, boss,” Jane said, eyeing us in the rear-view mirror when Derek and I climbed in the back seat of the Range Rover.

I shot him a frosty glare. He grinned devilishly.

“Emily was on the receiving end of several hugs from her study’s subjects,” Derek said smoothly. He tugged the tie out of my hair, and as I shoved his hand away, I wondered if I was imagining the possessiveness in that move.

One mistake of a kiss did not entitle the man to any further physical contact.

“Must have gotten a few victory kisses, too,” Jane mused.

Grumbling under my breath, I pulled out my lipstick and compact to right the damage that one steroidal pheromoned Derek Price delivered.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and I'd faced the media, delivered an award, confirmed a significant scientific achievement, and been kissed senseless in a storage room.

For the first time in my adult life, I felt like calling it an early day and going home to hide in my bedroom.

DEREK

“Sophia Wang shoe style sells out after post-jail Emily Stanton steps out in them”

“*Flawless board scrambles to save IPO*”
So you broke into her house and pulled the old Say Hello to My Little Friend?”

A meaty fist swung at me. I dodged and landed a blow on the behemoth’s jaw.

Jude Ellis was the size of a small country. The running joke was that his massive biceps should be registered as weapons. We’d been sparring together since before hangovers lasted three days and closing down clubs and strutting into work with lipstick and glitter on our collars got old.

“Had to get her attention,” I grunted, absorbing the blow to my gut.

This was a friendly match in our favorite dingy gym in Miami. The warehouse hadn’t been so much converted as two boxing rings had been erected in the middle of cracked concrete floors. Racks of weights and heavy bags took up the rest of the space. The brick walls were papered with yellowed newspaper articles about old fights.

It was dirty. Gritty. It smelled like sweat and testosterone. And it reminded me fondly of my youth. Always looking for a fight, a challenge.

“You got balls, brother. She could have had her security shoot you,” Jude said, ignoring my feint to the left.

That was the problem with knowing someone so damn well. Poker and boxing became more like a choreographed dance than a competition.

“I get the feeling that Ms. Stanton would prefer to shoot me herself,” I said.

“A little fire under all that ice?” He was a man of few words. Ex-military. A vault about his history. But our friendship didn’t require encyclopedic knowledge of each other’s pasts. We both enjoyed a good challenge and ice-cold beers after a fair fight.

We exchanged rapid-fire blows to the torsos.

“I believe there might be—” I ducked when he took a swing at my head and threw an uppercut. “A dragon under that very proper exterior.” That kiss we’d shared had been anything but cold and civil.

Sweat sheened my torso and dampened my hair. My muscles were warm. I loved shedding the civility of a suit and stepping into the barbaric energy of the ring.

In the next ring, the local female featherweight champion was training with her coach. The sound of blows reverberated off the concrete.

Not wanting to be left out, we put on our own show of fast feet and lightning strikes.

“Price!” The voice was sharp and authoritative. And decidedly feminine.

“Uh-oh. Your dragon’s here,” Jude said, in the clinch.

Action around the gym came to a halt.

Already amped from sparring, I felt the quickening of my pulse. There was something very appealing about Emily Stanton, and it went far beyond her billions. We broke apart, and I strolled to the ropes, breathing heavily.

She stood out. Surrounded by men and women in the throes of beating out their aggressions into canvas and flesh, Emily stood coolly in heels, tight cropped pants, and a short-sleeved sweater in graphite that managed to be both demure

and sexy. Everything about her was decidedly feminine, even the power, the temper, that radiated from her.

Her arms were crossed, and that razor-edged line of her jaw was tight. And I remembered in vivid detail just how those lips tasted.

“Emily, what a lovely surprise.” I was curious how she’d found me.

“Bullshit,” she said succinctly. “You booked me for Malcolm Ellison’s beach party.”

Malcolm Ellison was an entrepreneur of questionable reputation. But his soirees were wildly famous. Attendees were in the news for days after a party and usually included the A-list of Miami’s residents. It would be considerable controllable press for our tarnished billionaire.

“I did,” I said, picking up my water bottle.

“You’re in trouble,” Jude whisper-sang behind me.

I reached behind my head and flipped him off.

“I’m not going,” Emily said.

“Oh, really?” I asked, fascinated.

“Hey, man, I gotta roll. Meeting a client in an hour,” Jude said. He was a reluctant one-man security outfit and couldn’t seem to stop getting business thrown his way.

“Thanks for the rounds,” I said, deliberately turning away from the woman who was ready to breathe fire.

“You bet. Beer next week?” he offered, scooping up his gym bag.

“In the books.” We hugged it out, one-armed man style.

When I turned my attention back to Emily, she was stepping through the ropes into the ring, her \$1,200 shoes neatly tucked in the corner.

“Are you coming to fight me?” I asked.

“I am if you think I’m going to that asshole’s party.”

“Fallen CEOs can’t be choosers,” I reminded her.

The action around the gym had picked back up, leaving the two of us in the ring.

“My job is to paint a new picture for the public. And the only way I can do that is by putting you out there.”

“The man grabbed my VP of finance’s ass and called me a stupid whore at a fundraiser for clean water in sub-Saharan Africa.”

Asshole. “An open bar, I presume?”

“I’m not going. Which brings me to the most important agenda item: I now require approval on every event you’re adding to my calendar.”

“Forget the party. You stabbing Ellison with a Jimmy Choo wouldn’t do much to repair your reputation. But you are going to have to do things you don’t want to do if we’re going to clean this up.”

She took a step forward and lifted that aristocratic chin. “All I *do* are things I don’t want to,” she shot back.

Her lips curled in on themselves as if she was trying to take the words back.

“Tell me,” I pressed.

But the walls were back up. The temper banked down.

We were standing too close. She was in my space, and I could smell whatever delicate perfume she wore, feel the energy crackling off her. If anyone needed to go a few rounds, it was the wounded, frustrated Emily Stanton.

“I want vetoes,” she said.

“Fight me for them.”

Her eyes widened. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me.” I tapped my gloves together. “Fight me for them. We’ll go a round.”

I expected her to scoff at the suggestion. To toss her hair over her shoulder and storm out. To fire me.

“I’ll change,” she said with a brisk nod.

My client was full of surprises.

I should have known I was in trouble when she returned to the ring in short shorts, a sports bra, and her own headgear and gloves in hand.

But I was a man. A stupid, stupid man.

I was too distracted by that lithe, athletic form. Her breasts were small and firm. Her abs were spectacular. Those long, long legs were strong and lean. Her skin had that Miami sun-kissed glow. Who knew an athlete existed under all those designer clothes?

“I’ll go easy on you,” I promised.

The dragon stirred behind those cool gray-blue eyes. It was my last warning.

She decked me in the jaw, threw a body shot, and dropped to the mat to sweep my legs out from under me.

I went down like the big, dumb asshole I was.

She rolled, sliding her body over and around mine. My flight or fight system couldn’t decide whether to be incredibly turned on or terrified. By the time I realized the danger, she’d locked her legs around me from behind and wrapped an exquisite arm around my throat.

There were hoots and chuckles coming from every corner of the gym.

I was no slouch in the ring. But I’d underestimated my opponent.

“I want vetoes,” she enunciated in my ear.

She squeezed tighter, and my vision grayed a bit around the edges.

“You’re not even sweating,” I gasped out. My fingers were working at her arm around my throat.

“I kickbox for fun,” she said evilly. “Now, about those vetoes.”

I didn't have much at my disposal against her Muay Thai, but I'd be damned if I let her win that easily. Digging my heels into the mat, I worked myself into a bridge and forced all of my weight onto her chest. She could strangle me, but I could suffocate her.

I found the pressure point on her wrist and shamelessly stabbed it. Her grip loosened, and I rolled, mounting her on the mat.

There was nothing cool in those eyes of hers now. The dragon was awake and possibly even enjoying herself.

She hitched her hips and wrapped her legs around my waist, locking them behind my back. And then she realized her mistake. Those eyes widened again.

Biology reared its head. Jude and I didn't throw blows below the belt. There was no need to wear a cup when I sparred with him.

There was also no danger of me getting a hard-on in the ring with him.

We lay locked together and sweating, our breathing heavy. My weight was pressing her into the mat, my cock hardening to concrete between her open legs where I had her pinned. I could feel the heat from her core through the spandex of her shorts and the mesh of mine.

Her legs never lessened their pressure.

She bucked against me once, perhaps to dislodge me, perhaps to feel the shallow thrust against her sex.

I was gritting my teeth. I was on top, but I sure as hell wasn't the one in control.

The feel of her beneath me was toying with the part of my brain that wasn't fully civilized. I wanted to close a hand over her throat and thrust like an animal. To feel her let go. I wanted to dominate her. Submit to her. *Please* her.

Her left hand fluttered on the mat, and I glanced in that direction. I never saw the right that she plowed into my face. It

was enough to shift my balance, and then we were rolling and grappling again.

This time she won the top.

I outweighed her by almost a hundred pounds. I could throw her off. Probably. But she was straddling me, her thighs squeezing my hips like a boa constrictor.

Her chest was heaving with effort.

I'd taken a respectable number of women to bed. I thoroughly enjoyed sex. But never in all of my forty-three years had I seen anything as sexy as Emily Stanton, sweaty and victorious on top of me.

"One veto," I offered.

She squeezed me with those magic thighs, and my dick rubbed against her enthusiastically. The breath she let out was shaky. "Five," she countered.

I gave one small, testing thrust. I was a beast. An animal. I was seconds away from seeing exactly how far she would let me go.

Her eyes were unreadable.

Disgusted with myself, I tried to lift her off me, but her thighs tightened again. Dear God. This woman was going to kill me. I only hoped she'd let me make her come before she did.

"Not until we have a deal." Her voice was raspy, breath hot on my chin.

"Three vetoes. Final offer," I said.

This time, it was she who gave the shallow little thrust. Even fully clothed, I was the Ponce de León of female anatomy. I knew that my cock was coasting through her open folds. There were people in easy view of this tableau. Witnesses who could watch me dry fuck my client into oblivion.

"Fuck," I breathed. *Where was that control I was so proud of?*

“You must have left it in your other pants,” Emily whispered.

And now I was speaking my inner thoughts out loud. The woman was a witch. An enchanting temptress.

“What are you doing?” I gritted out the words.

She dipped lower until we were nose to nose. “Winning.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Love, three vetoes or I’m not going to be able to control myself, and I’ll do something that will go a long way in ruining not just your reputation but your ability to enjoy other men in bed.”

She arched an eyebrow.

I groaned at the friction against my cock.

“Someone’s *cocky*,” Emily whispered.

“Is that a pun?” I gritted the question out.

“Three vetoes and allow me to restate that there will be no physical relationship between the two of us. You’re not my type.”

The woman was a manipulative liar, and I was already half in love with her. I just needed to be patient, give her enough time with my smoldering sexiness before her resolve shattered.

“A physical relationship with you is the last thing on my mind,” I groaned. My cock twitched painfully against her at my lie.

“Good. We have a deal,” she said. And then the great and powerful billionaire CEO kissed me playfully on the nose before hopping to her feet.

I lay there on my back, staring up at the fluorescent lights that hung from the twenty-foot ceiling. *What the hell had just happened to me?*

A peek at the real Emily Stanton. That’s what.



Me: Revenge favor.

Rowena: My fave. Who?

Me: Malcolm Ellis.

Rowena: Level of revenge?

Me: General douchebag. Make it sting. Make sure he knows it's me.

Rowena: Lemme see what we've got...

Rowena: Seems Mr. Douchebag has been bidding on a particular piece of art that the artist isn't keen on selling. Female artist. Takes offense to his hot mic comments regarding the "blow job lips" of the journalist interviewing him. He's got a hard-on for the painting and keeps raising his bid.

Me: Buy it and send him a thank you note for making the artist so amenable to my offer.

EMILY

“From drugs to scars: The inside story on heiress Emily Stanton”

“Game-changing new scar treatment in the works at Flawless”

“Bookie lays odds on billionaire’s rehab prospects”

“Listen, ladies. If we stay focused and don’t let any of these people derail us, we can get out of there in forty minutes flat,” Daisy said with uncharacteristic optimism.

We were on her terrace, preparing for the Bluewater quarterly neighborhood town hall. One would think that an enclave of wealthy neighbors would be too busy to attend a boring community meeting. But no. Not in Bluewater. We’d accidentally built a community of eccentric, lovely weirdos who were as invested in the community as its founders.

It was charming, sweet even.

But tonight, I just wanted to crawl into my bed, binge watch something mindless, and pretend that I was a normal human being.

I was so. Very. Tired.

It had been two weeks of Derek running me from public appearance to interview to photo op. Two weeks of me squeezing in late hours of work at home. Two weeks of me trying not to think about the kiss... and the erection.

Things felt more out of control than they had the day after my near arrest. There was some good press but not nearly enough to turn the *SS Sinking Emily* around.

I felt beaten down in a way that was entirely new to me.

I needed sleep. And comfort food. And a vacation.

“We’ll talk like the Micro Machines guy.” Cam’s suggestion pulled me from my internal pity party.

“Pregame?” I suggested, digging deep for some semblance of energy. I’d often wondered how royalty did it, performing at their public appearances when they were uncomfortably pregnant or teetering on the verge of exhaustion. *Be a duchess, dammit*, I told myself.

“Pregame,” Daisy agreed. She produced a bottle of organic French vodka. “For the snooty vegan palates.”

“Oooh! Organic,” Luna said, whipping out her phone to capture the pouring of the shots.

We’d done town halls without alcohol in our systems. And they were much more painful sober.

“To the shortest town hall in Bluewater history,” Cam toasted.

“Cheers!”

We clinked gold-rimmed shot glasses and downed the vodka.

“One more?” Cam rasped.

I nodded.

“One more and Emily can tell us all about being shadowed by the sexiest man alive,” Daisy suggested with a mercenary grin.

After brushing off their thinly veiled interrogations for two weeks straight, I’d seen this coming. I was not about to confess that I’d kissed the man mere hours after meeting him. Nor would I mention our fight in the ring that ended with me nearly orgasming from a handful of dry humped thrusts.

There were some dark, dirty fantasies that should remain private.

“I would prefer to forget he and his purpose in my life exist for one night,” I said, nudging my glass back at Daisy.

“Is he kind?” Luna asked. She was sprawled on her belly on a daybed, kicking her bare feet up behind her. The pool was shaped like a scrotum. It was a not-so-subtle nod to the fact that we’d designed and developed Bluewater in the shape of the female reproductive system.

It had mostly been an accident until one day, while we were pouring over drone footage, Luna said, “Does this look like a...”

“Reproductive system?” Cam had supplied. “Yup.”

So we’d added the fallopian tubes. One served as the community’s marina. The other was where we built our four homes... including Daisy’s cock and balls swimming pool.

“Kind?” Daisy scoffed. “How is that the first question you ask about a man who looks like that?”

Luna tossed her hair over her shoulder. “That’s what really matters, isn’t it? He can be as beautiful as David Beckham, but if he’s an asshole, that knocks the points off him.”

“But assholes can be so much fun in bed,” Daisy insisted.

Cam and I snorted into our shot glasses as the urinating man statue steadily returned water to the pool behind us from his marble urethra.

“Wait. That came out wrong,” Daisy snickered. “My point is, you shouldn’t be close-minded against the assholes of the world.”

Daisy liked to try to argue morals with Luna, but Luna’s Zen-like acceptance of literally the entire world made it impossible.

“I’d like to point out that Emily still hasn’t responded to our inquiry,” Cam said, pointing an accusatory finger in my direction.

I downed the second shot, a smooth fire coating my throat and temporarily reviving me.

“He is remarkably unflappable,” I said.

My friends looked at me expectantly.

“That’s it?” Cam said. “No ‘he’s a skeezy dirtbag’? No ‘he’s Prince Charming in a business suit’? No ‘he’s a divine god in bed’? Just ‘he’s good at his job’?”

“No detailed description of what I can only guess is an incredible cock?” Daisy teased, ignoring the chairs and flopping down on the terrace tile.

I immediately fought off the vision of Derek’s incredible cock that surfaced from where it was emblazoned in my memory banks.

“In this case, what matters is how good he is at his job,” I insisted. “How was he to work with over your shoplifting thing?”

Daisy’s new assistant at the time had gotten jealous when her boyfriend said Daisy was “totally fuckable.” In a revenge plot that made sense to no one, the assistant had snuck a \$40,000 Cartier bracelet into Daisy’s bag.

“That was fucked up,” Cam sighed.

“So fucked up,” Daisy agreed with an elegant shrug of her shoulder. “Derek was brutally beautiful. Ruthlessly efficient. But I wasn’t paying for the babysitting service. At the time, my scandal was a little less big-dealy than yours.”

I wondered if she’d ever found him naked in her house.

“You two ever... you know?” Cam, reading my mind, made a hip thrusting motion from her chair. The gesture was incongruous with her impeccably tailored suit.

Daisy laughed and slapped the pool tile with her ringed hand. “I *would* have but he was very clear on the ‘no personal relationships with clients’ thing. He missed out on all this.” She gestured at her breasts.

Against my will, I perked up. So he *didn't* turn on the charm and pheromones with every client? Was I special?

For the love of strong women everywhere, pull yourself together, I told myself.

“So what’s with him showing up naked in my house?”

Daisy pursed her raspberry pink lips. “He’s an unorthodox kind of guy. My guess is he was trying to get your attention in a way that wouldn’t allow you to just cold-shoulder him.”

“I don’t cold-shoulder people.”

My friends, comedians that they were, mimed shivering.

“Hilarious, jerks.”

Cam checked her watch. “We have to go, jerks.”

“I don’t want to,” I groaned. Whining was very un-Stanton-like, but I felt like indulging just this once.

“Last time we were late, they got all hopped up on the smoothies, and now Bluewater has an eight-foot carved parrot next to the disco since the residents decided the rooster statue was lonely. Also, we had to rename the nightclub the disco,” Luna pointed out.

“Who’s driving?” I asked.

“We’ll take my cart,” Cam offered. “I made some modifications to it that I think you’ll like.”

You could take the woman out of the aerospace engineering office, but you couldn’t take the aerospace engineer out of her golf cart design.


Cam’s modifications on her four-person vehicle included aerodynamic spoilers, ventilated seats to combat Miami swamp ass, and a fringe of neon-lighted tassels that danced in the breeze where they hung from the roof.

“It’s like being on a flying carpet,” Luna sighed happily as Cam tooted off in the direction of the clubhouse. We cruised over the bridge and down the palm-lined street, past luxury homes into the little downtown area.

I felt the same driving through Bluewater as I did walking the halls of Flawless. *Pride*.

Both places were a reminder that I was doing *something* in the world. I was leaving a mark. Or, in Flawless's case, I was removing them.

Cam punched the horn, and it played a jaunty verse from Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up." I made a mental note to see about upping my golf cart game by installing a margarita blender in mine.

WE WEREN'T EARLY ENOUGH.  The vegan strawberry shakes at the bar were gone. The only evidence of their existence was pink solidifying stains left behind on the white linens. The catered desserts, displayed on a beach-themed tablescape, had probably been magnificent. There were no survivors there either. Only sad, lonely crumbs.

Daisy, our resident real estate mogul and developer of Bluewater, had decorated the clubhouse in upscale South Florida style. Lots of rattan and wooden shutters, white coral stone, stucco. The personality came from generous pops of color, unexpected artwork, and our eclectic neighbors themselves.

It was a full house tonight.

We had bohemian artists with their southern exposure studios. The owners of a national organic grocery chain that had bought the \$2 million lot next to their nine-bedroom farmhouse just to plant a garden. We had the secretive Mr. Joneses, both exceedingly vague about everything. I was positive that wasn't their real name, and none of us were buying their "retired business executives" cover story.

Then there was the former crown prince of Eswatini. His highness had politely declined his royal birthright after meeting a feisty fashion magazine editor. They spent the winters here in Bluewater, summers in Paris and Milan, and spring and fall in Eswatini.

The WWs, or Wealthy Widows, had commandeered an entire wing of Bluewater's luxury condo building and kept everyone on their toes organizing enclave-wide events including progressive dinners, pole dancing workshops, and, of course, the April Fool's Day two years ago when they'd secretly hired a troop of mimes and unleashed them on the enclave.

Next came our techy geniuses. Some retired, some still working seventy-hour weeks to bring the world the next advancements in technology. Those in attendance were clustered together around the patio doors on the far side of the room discussing something that had them geeking out.

I wished I could join them. But in a Bluewater Town Hall, it was essential to stay on task.

"Okay, ladies," Luna said. "Let's do this. Forty minutes in and out."

In a fit of lunacy, the four of us had made ourselves property managers of Bluewater. We could have hired an outside company. We *should* have hired an outside company. But that would be giving up control.

We'll have a say over everything, we thought.

It'll be great, we thought.

Turns out, we were stupid.

Sure, we were able to screen property buyers to make sure each neighbor was a good fit for Bluewater. We had no party animal socialites. No reality TV stars petitioning to film in the community. No gossip mongers selling pics of our more famous residents to the tabloids.

But it was a lot of work. So. Much. Work. Running a company *and* a community was the equivalent of three full-time jobs. And that was without adding a scandal into the mix.

I took my seat behind the long table at the front of the room. Cam, Daisy, and Luna lined up next to me. I shot a look at the smaller empty table in the corner and suppressed a shudder. The Negotiation Table. I hoped we wouldn't need it tonight.

With a few hundred entrepreneurs, sports executives, and extremely well-paid attorneys as residents, there were no yeses or nos in Bluewater. Only deals.

Daisy pointed a manicured finger at the bongo player in the corner of the room—a previous negotiation when residents decided they didn't like Daisy's gavel. He riffed out an attention-getting beat, and the residents took their seats. There were no tacky folding chairs here. No, town hall attendees settled into swiveling cushioned clamshell-style chairs in a range of teals and turquoises. We'd discovered people were less likely to jump to their feet and argue when they were comfortably seated.

“Okay, Bluewaters, first up on the agenda is feeding Steve. The Joneses are heading to Greece for a week and need someone to cover for them,” Daisy began.

DEREK

“Want some popcorn?” Jane shoved the greasy bag in my direction. I helped myself to a handful and watched the entertainment unfold. She’d invited me to Bluewater’s Town Hall so I could get a peek at outside-the-boardroom Emily Stanton. Or so she could continue the time-lapse interrogation she’d begun upon my coming on board.

Both were spectacularly entertaining.

“Where did you say you went to college again?” she asked as if we’d been interrupted in the middle of a conversation.

“Florida State. Who’s Steve?” I asked.

“Resident disabled alligator. Lost part of a front leg to a boat prop. They found him in a lagoon when development started. He couldn’t survive in the wild so they let him stay. They have a deal with him. One rotisserie chicken a day as long as he doesn’t eat anyone’s dog,” Jane explained.

“You’re not serious.”

“I most certainly am. Be nice to me or I’ll feed you to him.”

I would definitely require a photo of Emily feeding her pet alligator, I decided. “Interesting.”

“Just because those gals are worth a few billion collectively doesn’t mean they don’t have big-ass hearts,” Jane insisted. “The whole community follows suit. That guy over there who doesn’t know how to button his shirt?”

I followed her finger.

“Mr. *Point Break*?”

“Yeah. He’s a 3-D prototyping guru. He made Steve a new prosthesis.”

I cleared my throat. “How does one attach a prosthesis to an alligator?”

“One spikes the son of a bitch’s breakfast with enough sleepy time meds to send him off to alligator nap town for three hours,” Jane explained.

“Fascinating.”

“So, you gonna flash the boss your wang again?” she asked, shoveling more popcorn into her mouth.

I glanced in her direction, but Jane’s attention was on the spirited debate about fresh coconut delivery going on at the front of the room.

I cleared my throat. “I’ve been relegated to the No Touching Zone.”

She snorted. “Gonna have to work harder than a smooch in a closet if you want to win the boss over.”

“She told you?”

“She didn’t have to.” Jane picked up her diet soda and took a noisy slurp. “But she did anyway.”

I laughed.

“She doesn’t let many people close enough for canoodling. The fact that she didn’t kick you in the balls proves that there’s interest there.”

“Does it now?”

She shot me a bland look. “Don’t act like you’re not salivating over her.”

“She’s a fascinating woman,” I admitted.

“Said the man fighting boners all day every day.”

“Does Bluewater have an HR department?” I mused.

“Ha.”

We turned our attention back to the front of the room where Emily and her three friends displayed varying states of frustration.

“You don’t by chance have any tips on getting her to let down her walls?” I asked.

“And by walls you mean pants?”

“Funny.”

“I’m fucking hilarious,” Jane agreed. “I haven’t made up my mind about you. Until I do, you’re on your own. The boss is plenty impressive on paper. But the real Emily? Beyond the bank statements and the business calendar? She’s the best person I know. And anyone who doesn’t see that doesn’t deserve her.”

“Fair enough.”

A commotion in the crowd caught our attention. The debate started when a man with wispy white hair and a pineapple-themed shirt made a motion that motions should be made in forty-five-minute slots as opposed to the standard sixty seconds.

Daisy Carter-Kincaid, my former client, was sprawled back in her chair, rolling her eyes. The lovely brunette on her left—lifestyle guru and cosmetics CEO Luna da Rosa—took slow deep breaths and appeared to be humming softly. The woman sandwiched between Emily and Daisy—Cameron Whitbury—seemed to be mentally willing the digital timer to end.

Emily’s only outward tell of her growing frustration was the flaring of her delicate nostrils. I admired her control as much as I craved the opportunity to rattle it.

“Time!” Cameron called triumphantly.

The bongo player rattled off a peppy beat.

“Negotiation!” someone with a thick middle eastern accent called from the front row.

“Yes!” Jane hissed. “This is the best part.”

“I second the call for negotiation.” An elderly woman dressed in what looked like silk pajamas waved frantically from the third row.

“That’s Mrs. Chu,” Jane whispered, shoving another handful of popcorn into her mouth. “South Korean. She owns a chain of boutique jewelry stores. And that Jimmy Buffet fan is Chipper Bergman. He’s got three of those green Masters jackets in his closet. But he was also president of his high school debate club. Loves a good argument.”

I watched in fascination as Emily stood. Smoothing a hand over her skirt, she crossed to the small table in the corner. Bergman met her there, and they solemnly shook hands.

“Can we have two minutes on the clock?” Cameron called out wearily.

The timer on the wall reset, and Emily and her opponent sat facing each other.

“Discuss with open ears and open hearts,” Luna reminded everyone.

“Namaste,” Daisy yawned into her hand.

Judging from the cool look Emily shot at poor Bergman, this would be no gentle conversation. She was out for blood.

The bongo player signaled the beginning of the countdown. “Go!” The crowd cheered.

They leaned in, squaring off. I couldn’t hear what was being said, but Emily looked formidable. After a few quiet exchanges, Chipper pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped at his head.

“No one wants to go up against Emily,” Jane explained. “She’s a shark.”

It takes one to know one. And I’d recognized her the second she gave me that frosty ice queen look in her bathroom.

That’s what we were. Two sharks circling each other.

As the clock ticked down, Emily reached across the table, hand out. An offer made.

Bergman swiped his bald spot one more time. Finally, he nodded. They shook just as time ran out.

“What is the outcome of the negotiation?” Cameron called, all business.

“Mr. Bergman and I have settled on extending motion petitions to sixty-five seconds,” Emily said, a self-satisfied smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

“Ruthless,” Jane said with pride.

“And Mr. Bergman also agreed to an amended motion for a two-hour time cap on town halls,” Emily announced.

Daisy pumped her fist in the air at the head table.

“And as a compromise, Ms. Stanton, has agreed to bring in a sushi chef for our town hall refreshments,” Bergman announced.

The crowd went wild.

Wins all around.

I felt the weight of Emily’s gaze on me as I applauded with Jane. She didn’t look pleased to see me there. I winked at her.

She frowned and shifted her glare to Jane.

“Uh-oh,” Jane said, scooping up another handful of popcorn. “Boss is mad.”

“I think she’ll get over it,” I predicted.

Jane’s hum led me to believe she didn’t think that was likely.

“So, you think someone on the inside is trying to make her look bad?” she asked.

The popcorn-hoovering woman was beyond astute. “As a matter of fact.”

“I knew you were smarter than you looked.”

“I’m very smart *and* very good-looking,” I assured her. “Do you have a suspect?”

She smirked. “I have a few suspicions. Of course, anyone can spin anything. Someone could even find it convenient that a crisis management expert just happened to be available when a billion-dollar scandal hits.”

“Convenient?” I scoffed. “Ask your boss if there’s anything convenient about me.”

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

“And, like your tips on wooing Emily, I assume you aren’t going to share your suspicions with me?”

“You’re a smart guy, Tea and Crumpets. You’ll figure it out.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You better or you’ll really piss me off.”

“I assume a stun gun will be involved.”



I DUCKED out of the ballroom in hour two of the meeting, while a debate raged over what to do about the two amorous dolphins that had apparently been putting on a nature show every afternoon along Bluewater’s coastline.

Observing Emily in a more natural habitat was fascinating, to say the least. First in the lab and then in the community she’d built. Jane was right. There was much more to the coolly professional Ms. Stanton. I’d seen it in the lab and the gym.

And it was my job to expose that human side of her to the world.

She’d fight me. But I would win.

And a win for me was a win for her.

That would be the next step, I decided, letting myself into my condo. *Prying her open like an oyster.*

The Miami skyline unfolded in front of me through the glass wall. I was no billionaire. But I certainly did well

enough. I'd built my business and my life in a way that suited me. Working hard and playing harder. I lived in a luxury condo building downtown and wore custom-tailored clothing. My business employed a small and aggressively loyal team. I supported my family in ways that made them feel spoiled rather than condescended.

The rest of my time was my own to do with as I saw fit. I boxed and sailed and read. Dated interesting women and spent time with friends and family.

Dumping my keys and wallet in the designated glass dish next to the door, I toed off my shoes.

I shrugged out of my jacket on the way to my bedroom.

In the bathroom, I turned on the water in the shower and stripped down, head full of potential avenues. The puzzle of public opinion and how to manipulate it always fascinated me. In this case, my gut told me the world wanted to see the *real* Emily Stanton. Not some shiny facade.

The question was, how to crack that very proper veneer and offer the world a peek.

My phone signaled on the vanity, and I glanced at it.

Emily: Stop lurking around Bluewater.

I smirked.

Me: I was an invited guest.

Emily: Remind me to fire Jane tomorrow. Do you shadow all your clients so closely?

Me: Only the ones I'm most interested in. Is your meeting over?

There was the expected pause. I had a policy to be honest, at least when I wasn't lying for professional gain. I'd

discovered that in an ironic twist, people were usually happy to give you what you wanted if you were honest about it.

Emily: Over. Three hours and twenty-two minutes. The time cap will be enacted at the next meeting.

Me: I can't wait for the sushi.

Emily: I hope my "situation" will be resolved by then.

Me: Then perhaps I'll be there in another capacity.

I was flirting with her. Shamelessly. It kept her off-center and me entertained.

There was another long pause, during which I felt like a teenager waiting for his crush to respond.

Emily: We do have a bongo player position opening up. I'll let you know where to send your resume.

A joke from Ms. Stanton. And a victory for me.

Me: Good night, Emily.

Emily: Good night, Derek.

Still smiling, I grabbed a beer from the mini fridge in the bedroom wet bar and took it with me into the shower. Steam billowed around me, blotting out the rest of the world.

The kiss had been a mistake. I didn't mix business with pleasure. It made things... sticky. However, I also didn't rigidly adhere to rules. What was the fun in that?

My cock stirred.

It had a habit of doing so when I thought of Emily. Her watchful eyes, the slivers of humor and pride she did her best

to hide under the surface. Keeping the real Emily locked away. Was it a protection? Or was it simply the result of pressure?

I fisted my shaft, gliding my hand over it.

So tempting. To think about her desperate for me. Unbuttoning that very proper blouse while I watched hungrily.

No.

As much as Emily Stanton dazzled me, stirred me, stole into my thoughts like a thief in the night, she needed me to perform a professional service for her.

And until she gave me permission for a more personal service, my hand would stay off my cock.

I took a long swig from the bottle and lowered the temperature of the water.

DEREK

“Flawless IPO faces SEC scrutiny after CEO’s near-arrest”

“Emily Stanton not fooling anyone with goodwill tour”

*“Five things you need to know about Derek Price starting with
what he looks like in a Speedo”*

“Why the hell not?” I demanded into my phone.

“Ms. Stanton declined your invitation to attend the gallery opening,” Valerie said politely.

“Does she have something better to do than clean up her reputation?” This was the third Wednesday the woman had refused to participate in anything, and it was starting to grate on my nerves. That and the fact that she’d remained coolly professional toward me.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to ask her yourself, Mr. Price.”

“Put me through to her,” I insisted. “Please.”

“She’s gone for the night,” Valerie said, and I thought I heard a hint of amusement in her tone. “I believe she has a standing date on Wednesdays.”

I swore colorfully, then apologized with a modicum of sincerity. *A date?*

“Have a good night, Mr. Price,” Valerie sang before hanging up cheerfully.

Despite the fact that it was only Wednesday, it had already been a long week.

Even I was tired. But the days immediately after a scandal were the most important. We were making headway. It was just slow going. And calling it a day at 7 p.m. on a weeknight when there were places to be seen wasn't helping Emily.

I dialed my office. "Rowena," I said when my head research nerd picked up.

"What's up, D?" she asked, her mouth full.

Conveniently enough, my head researcher and my media liaison had crushes on each other and "worked late" flirting over Thai takeout several nights a week. I could give a flying fuck if my employees dated. As long as no one let a breakup damage the teamwork, they could do what they liked.

I was a firm believer that relationships and their ensuing breakups didn't need to be messy. People complicated relationships with ridiculous expectations. If you were honest about who you were and what you wanted, no one could sanely accuse you of misrepresenting yourself, could they?

"How are we trending?"

"Mmm, lemme check." She chewed. "I was just plotting a few data points that Lance gave me."

Rowena was an Ivy League dropout who, under my tutelage, had developed a program for digesting and weighting media reports, then spitting out complex probabilities of public opinion.

She made presidential approval ratings look like an elementary school vote by raised hand.

"We're looking at a solid twenty-six percent positive," she said. "Up four points from last week."

Four points. Good. But not good enough. A smiling appearance at a gallery could have nudged her up another point. Ms. Stanton and I were going to have a discussion about priorities. A loud one. In front of her *date*.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I pulled up to the security gate at Bluewater.

“Would you like me to announce you to Ms. Stanton, man?” the guard at the gate asked.

“She’s expecting me,” I lied. “I’m on the list.”

“Have a nice visit,” he said, buzzing me through.

Indeed.

She was home, I noted, pulling into the circular driveway. Lights were on, and I could distantly hear music. Was she entertaining? Was I about to walk in on her and some mystery man?

The thought irked me more than it should have. This was the type of thing I needed to know about my clients. A secret boyfriend? That was definitely something I should know.

And I was going to explain that very clearly to her.

Avoiding the security cameras on the front of the house, I skirted the building. It was a series of white stucco boxes, connected by arched walkways. I crossed between the garage and the master bedroom and came up on the beach side. If the front of the property was luxurious, the back of it was positively decadent. Emily had two hundred feet of pristine, private beach. Chaise lounges under palapas dotted the white sand. Her white coral stone terrace included a kidney-shaped pool with a sunning shelf and hot tub, a professional grade barbecue, and enough seating for the better part of a senior class on spring break.

None of it looked like it was used.

I crossed the terrace, sticking close to the house. The glass accordion doors off the kitchen were open, and music poured out.

So Emily was having a little party.

Wasn't that nice, I thought grimly.

I stepped inside, ready to shock her, annoy her. Ready to impress upon her boyfriend the importance of doing exactly what I tell him. Namely, get lost.

But there was no boyfriend. There wasn't even a party.

The commercial grade refrigerator door was open. Beneath it, I caught a peek of bare feet and long legs.

The music—Abba, if I wasn't mistaken—blared through hidden speakers.

And then the door closed, and there was Emily Stanton, billionaire, CEO, society princess in men's boxer shorts and a tank top performing a truly terrible rendition of "Dancing Queen" while jiggling a cocktail shaker.

There was a martini glass—only one—with two skewered olives on the blue Brazilian stone countertop next to her open laptop and neat piles of paperwork.

Emily shook and sang, whirling in a tight circle. Her blonde hair whipped out behind her.

"Ha! Stuck the landing," she said with a little shoulder boogie.

"You certainly did," I agreed.

She shrieked and, on instinct, hurled the cocktail shaker at me. I caught it, but the lid came off.

It wasn't a fearful scream, I noted as cold vodka soaked its way through my shirt and pants. It was a battle cry.

She lunged for the kitchen shears on the counter. I wasn't sure if it was a reflex or if she actually intended to kill me.

"Relax. It's me," I bellowed over Abba.

Emily was wielding the shears at me even though recognition lit her eyes.

"I know it's you!"

"Now, Emily," I began calmly, putting the shaker down on the countertop.

"Don't you 'now, Emily' me," she yelled. "You do *not* get to come and go as you please in my home!"

She had a point. So I went on the offensive.

"What are you doing at home on a Wednesday night in men's boxers that is so much more important than repairing

the damage you've done to your reputation?" My voice raised to carry over the music.

She threw a dish towel at me. Judging from the material, it cost more than most people's bed linens.

"What makes you think me paying you gives you the right to enter my house whenever you feel like it?" she shouted.

"Turn the music down!"

"Get out of my house!"

"Not until you stop willfully endangering the IPO you say you want!"

She snatched her phone off the counter and punched in a code. The music cut off abruptly, leaving more space for our angry silence to fill.

"Listen up, Price. I can take a night off. One night. That's all I get. I don't take vacations. I work weekends. I rarely leave the office or the lab before nine every night. I deserve one uninterrupted night alone."

The flashing anger in her eyes was Morse coding D-A-N-G-E-R at me.

"Valerie told me you left early for a date," I said.

"Yes, with myself. You're interrupting. And you owe me a martini."

I glanced down at my wet Oxford. The alcohol fumes were strong.

"Then I'll make you another," I said, unbuttoning my shirt.

"Stop it!" she said, still pointing the shears at me.

I dropped the shirt on the counter and unhooked my belt.

"Why do you keep taking your clothes off in my house?"

"You're just so welcoming, Emily. Such a lovely hostess. I feel so comfortable here."

"Bite me."

I dropped my pants and dared her to look.

She didn't disappoint. I could feel the heat from her gaze as it trailed over my chest and torso before it paused on my Dolce & Gabbana briefs. "Where's your vodka?" I asked.

"In a puddle on the floor. What are you doing here, Price?" she asked, suddenly weary.

I felt it, too, as I toed off my shoes and left the pants on the floor. It had been a long couple of weeks, and my desire to fight was gone as quickly as it had come. "Ah, here it is," I said, finding a stash of high-end liquors in one of the cabinets. "How dirty do you like it?"

"Don't be an ass," she said, slumping onto a barstool.

I helped myself to ice from the dispenser and went to work on the martini.

"Aren't you the least bit embarrassed?" she asked me, watching me as I worked.

"Not at all. I happen to think I have an excellent body."

"You burst in here thinking I had a date, Derek."

"I burst in here because you didn't feel the need to explain to me that you needed a break. I would have worked it out. If you need something, tell me. I will get you anything that you want. If you can be bothered to be honest with me." I capped the shaker and wrapped it in the very expensive hand towel.

"If I need something, I take care of it myself."

"Ah, but, Emily darling, we're a team. Remember?" The cheerful sound of ice and alcohol melding filled the kitchen.

"I can't watch you shake that," she said, turning away to take in the ocean view, ignoring my flexing pecs and abs.

"Then how will I earn my tip?"

"I'll give you a tip. A sharp one plunged into your chest," she offered. This was not the cucumber-cool, pristine flower petal that the rest of the world saw. This was the real Emily Stanton, and I was enamored.

"You're a little mean on your night off. I quite like it."

“Sometimes I really, really want to punch you. Just one shot in the middle of a sentence. I fantasize about it,” she mused.

“Yes, let’s talk about fantasies,” I said, conversationally as I poured the martini into her waiting glass then slid it toward her.

She stared at it for a beat, too stubborn to taste it and tell me what a magnificent bartender I was.

I opened the fridge and dug around for a beer.

“Are you purposely tensing your ass cheeks right now?” she demanded.

“Oh, you noticed? Perhaps you’re not dead on the inside after all.”

“I’m going to go watch the sunset,” she said. “You can let yourself out. Or I can call Jane and have her stun gun you for real this time.”

I found a Belgian beer on the door. “Promises. Promises.” But she’d already left the room and was climbing the stairs in the foyer.

I followed her.

The stairs went up another tastefully decorated level before leading out onto a rooftop deck.

“Very nice,” I commented, appreciating the view of Biscayne Bay.

Emily glared at me. “Why are you here?”

“If I’m being honest,” I said. “I find you annoyingly irresistible.”

Her eyes flitted down to my groin again. “For the love of God, would you please put on a pair of pants before I get a call from Cam next door? The woman’s got a telescope.”

I glanced down in mock contemplation. “You’re certainly not saying she’d need a telescope to see this, are you?”

A beach towel hit me in the face.

“Cover up, Mr. Confidence.”

I obliged, wrapping the blue and white striped towel around my hips and taking the seat next to her. To be obnoxious, I scooted it closer to her.

“I really don’t like you right now,” she said.

“Unfortunately, that seems to do nothing to my attraction to you,” I observed.

DEREK

Emily said nothing, sipping her martini and quietly staring off at the horizon.

“I was jealous,” I admitted finally.

“Let’s let the topic drop before one of us humiliates *himself* any further,” she suggested primly.

“Let’s not. What’s life without a little humiliation, a little pain? A little honesty?”

“A little honesty? Okay fine. You are under the idiotic assumption that I’m some ladylike wallflower who needs a boost of confidence,” she scoffed.

“I certainly didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your ‘let me save the day’ cape.”

I gestured at the towel. “Do you want this to be pants or a cape? Because I’m willing to do whatever makes you happy.”

“Then leave me alone on the only night that I get to be myself by myself.” She enunciated every word like it was a threat.

“No.”

She stood, and I thought for a moment that she would try to strangle me. But once again, her magnificent restraint kicked in.

“You’re a piece of work, Price.”

“You want to shock me? Then show me. Show me the *real* Emily,” I demanded, rising to my feet.

She spread her arms wide, vodka skimming the rim of her glass but not daring to spill.

“This is it. I’m wearing boxer shorts that I stole from an ex-boyfriend who thought he wanted to marry me until he found out that I cared about him less than starting my own business. I squeezed in a kickboxing class between here and the office because spending all day every day toning it down for the world is frustrating. I block out every Wednesday night to be alone. And you are ruining it. I’ve done every appearance you’ve scheduled. Dressed the way you asked. Smiled the way you instructed. I deserve my Wednesday.”

“Toning it down?” I repeated, purposely ignoring the rest.

“I’m not some shrinking violet or other delicate flower. I’m a badass, Price. I’m aggressive, very, very smart, and powerful. I’m intimidating. And if I don’t ‘tone it down,’ people start to whisper things like ‘bitch’ and ‘gird your loins’ when I walk past. I have things that I need to accomplish. And I can’t do them all if everyone is terrified of me or too busy cracking jokes about how I’m a *Devil Wears Prada* boss.”

She was finally coming into focus for me. And oh, did I like what I saw.

“If you’re such a badass, why are you letting people like me and Lita and your mother tell you where to be and what to do?”

Unexpectedly, she flopped back in the chair. “That’s the billion-dollar question. Isn’t it? What’s your theory, smart guy?”

“Oh, you won’t like my theory,” I chuckled.

“There are a lot of things about you I don’t like. What’s one more?” she said airily.

Oh, yes. If the prim and proper Emily Stanton was tantalizing, this unedited, confident version was irresistible to me. I was going to make a very big mistake, and it was likely going to be quite costly.

I'd enjoy every second of it.

“I’ve spent three weeks watching you. You’re a chameleon. Competent in front of the directors. Terrifying for your assistants. Temperamental teenager to your father. The passive-aggressive good daughter to your mother. The unreachable CEO to your colleagues. The question is, which one is the real you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Price.”

“Oh, but you do,” I said, stepping into her space. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

I could see her temper flaring just below that flawless surface.

“Your job is to make this situation go away not get inside my head,” she reminded me.

“Let’s discuss the psychology of vulnerability, shall we?” I said. We were as close as we could be without touching.

“You’ve seen my calendar. I don’t have time for a psychology class.”

“You’re in the business of selling things,” I said. “Tell me, Emily, do you lie about your products? Make outrageous claims?”

“Careful, Price,” she warned me. “Questioning my integrity is not the way to a long and healthy life.”

My smile was hard. “Or are you transparent? Authentic? Are you clear about exactly what your products are?”

“You already know the answer to that, and if this is how you earn your astronomical fee, I’m going to want a refund.”

“How am I supposed to sell you, Emily?” I asked.

“Sell me?”

“That’s what I’ve been hired to do. Sell you to the public. Make you relatable, desirable, trustworthy. Show the world that their money is safe with you. And I can’t do that with a mask. I can’t make a facade likable. If you want to win, you need to do it as you.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“And you’re hiding behind the pretty ice queen routine. If you don’t show me who you really are, then how am I supposed to sell you?”

“You can’t be serious. The entire world revolves around photo filters and airbrushing. Sound bites written by professional manipulators. Paid advertising. Nothing is real anymore,” she shot back.

I laughed without humor. “Only if you’re playing the small-time, love. And you’re not small-time.”

She huffed out a breath. “I don’t have time for a philosophical discussion. Lay your insanity out for me.”

“Happy to. When you are vulnerable and authentic, people automatically gravitate toward you. They are reprogrammed to like you because you aren’t wearing a mask. You aren’t hiding from them. You’re brave enough to be real in a world full of people too terrified to be themselves.”

“You want me to go out there in that world full of people who already openly hate me? Who would give anything to see me fail and be destroyed in the process?”

“You’ve already been torn down,” I reminded her. “Now it’s time to rebuild you. And if we rebuild you as you, you’ll be untouchable.”

“Untouchable? You’re awfully confident in your abilities.”

“Trust me, Emily,” I urged. I needed her to trust me.

She shook her head, took a sip of her drink. “Is this your approach with all your clients?”

I laughed. “God, no. Some of them are simply terrible people. Those I give shiny masks. But you? You’re playing it safe and small. Whether it’s fear or just all that you know, there’s a much bigger, brighter world out there for people like you.”

“People like me,” she repeated.

“I’m not here to kiss your ass, darling. I’m here to strip you down and make the world fall in love with you. That’s not possible with all my clients.”

“I’d rather have a mask.”

“Do you want to change the world or hide from it?” I asked.

“Why can’t I do both?”

“Because you’re Emily fucking Stanton, and you have something to say. You’re not some media mogul with two mistresses and an angry wife. You’re not some vapid starlet with a DUI and a drug problem.”

“Do you really believe you can get me out of this mess?” she asked, showing the first real hint of rawness.

“I know I can. In fact, I’ll guarantee that you’ll be in a better place than you were before you got in that idiot’s Ferarri. But in order for that to happen, you have to trust me.”

She stared out at the horizon for a long beat. “What do you see when you look at me?” she asked finally.

“You’re passive aggressive rather than direct,” I said. “Your apologies are purposely lackluster. You do things just to annoy your mother because you have to do something to make her realize she doesn’t run you. You let Lita, your CMO, take the office that should be yours and then meet in hers because ‘there’s more room.’”

Emily smirked into her martini.

“You’ll go toe-to-toe with your father in a shouting match and then wear a color your mother insists makes you look washed out. Yet you’ll turn around and compliment a low-level employee by name. You go about getting what you want by any means possible. And I respect that.”

“You respect that?” she scoffed.

I leaned over into her space, revved when she didn’t pull back. “Your self-control is not just admirable. It’s a goddamn turn-on.”

She studied me, that sexy, smug smile still tugging on lips I wanted desperately to kiss again. “And why is that?” she asked finally.

I leaned closer still. “Because I want to strip you of that exquisite self-control of yours and see what’s underneath. I want you naked and begging because the only thing in the world that matters to you is my cock settling between your perfect thighs,” I confessed. “I want to conquer you because you’re unconquerable.”

We were so close I could feel her breath on my cheek.

Her nipples pebbled under the thin material of her tank. I longed to reach out and swipe my thumb over them both. I wanted to hear that intake of breath the first time I touched her in a way that neither of us could walk away from.

She raised her glass as if she couldn’t possibly care that I was an inch away from her, and my dick had turned to stone. “What makes you think I’d let you conquer me?”

“Ah, Emily,” I said, giving in and stroking a finger down her bare cheek. I trailed it down her neck and across the sharp clavicle, then dipped it lower, under the scoop of her tank and over the curve of her breast. “That’s the fun part. Don’t you think? See which of us conquers the other?”

I could feel her heartbeat speeding under my finger. Her chest was rising in silent, short pants. I was harder than marble. I wanted to kiss her again. Taste her. To pull down those boxers and lick her.

Then I’d burn the ex-boyfriend’s underwear and give her anything she wanted as long as it was mine.

“You don’t sleep with your clients,” she pointed out.

“I haven’t wanted to before now.”

“We are a supremely bad idea,” she reminded me.

“I agree. But wouldn’t it be a fun mistake to make?”

“I don’t have room for any more mistakes,” she said.

Giving myself some much needed space, I took my seat again. “How do you decide who you trust?” I asked, abruptly changing the subject. Blandly.

“Stop trying to push me off-center.”

“Just answer the question.”

She turned her back on the sky and faced me. “The same way anyone chooses. Just because I’ve got a higher tax bracket doesn’t mean I exist in a different world of relationships,” she said.

“Humor me and explain,” I insisted dryly.

“Past experience is generally a good indicator of who can be trusted,” she said.

“Is it now?”

“Cut to the chase, Price.”

“Jane,” I said. “You give her full access to your life. You rely on her.”

“I trust Jane implicitly,” Emily said.

“How about your friends? Daisy. Cameron. Luna?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You trust your father?” I pressed.

“Of course,” she said, exasperated.

“Even though he—and the rest of your board—went behind your back and hired me? That’s very big of you.”

She schooled her features into her classic Ice Queen expression. “Point, Price?”

“Lita,” he said. “How do you know you can trust her?”

“Lita?” Emily laughed as if the question were ridiculous. “Because she held my hair when I threw up Cristal on my twenty-first birthday. Because she was there with me in the lab from the beginning. Flawless is our vision. She’s the only one who believed in me. Because she’s kept secrets.”

“Yet she isn’t your partner. Neither is your father,” I pointed out.

“You’re annoying me with your questions,” she said.

“I’m asking simple, direct questions. You say you trust people, yet it looks to me as though you’re keeping them at a precisely measured distance.”

She stayed silent for a long beat, and I wondered if I’d pushed too hard, then decided it didn’t matter.

“Both your father and Lita are minority shareholders. Your father could have invested in your company. You could have given Lita a bigger piece.”

“Derek, how I structure my company isn’t any of your concern,” she said, her tone frosty.

“Emily,” I replied in an exact imitation of her own chilly annoyance. “I’m merely doing my job. I need to know who you trust and why if we’re going to get you out of this situation.”

She turned back to the sunset. She looked tired, and I wondered if all of this was taking an invisible toll on her.

“My father has steamroller tendencies and no understanding of—or interest in—the female skincare industry. As a director, he’s encouraged to provide guidance and feedback, not direct the vision of my company.”

“And Lita?” I pressed.

She sighed and chose her words carefully. “While she has been there since the inception of Flawless, she doesn’t have—forgive the pun—skin in the game. She wasn’t lucky enough to be born into a trust fund as I was. I fronted the cash. I own the company.”

“There’s more you’re pretending to be too polite to say,” I pointed out.

“Lita has never been one to bleed or sweat for a cause.” Her shoulders tensed. “She cares as much as is convenient. I don’t mean that flippantly. She cares deeply for me and for Flawless. But not everyone is interested in making their work

the top priority for every one of the twenty-four hours in a day. I understand that and respect it.”

“Is there a resentment there?”

“You mean does Lita resent me?” she clarified. “I think she’s quite comfortable with our arrangement. In fact, there are many times I envy her ability to prioritize her personal life. She has no qualms about escaping for a long spa weekend or taking every single one of her vacation days. Her life is her priority. Flawless is mine.”

“And you wonder if anyone can care as much as you do if they aren’t willing to put in the time,” I guessed.

She paused. “Maybe.”

“I care,” I said. “And I’m not going to stop until you have what you want.”

The last sliver of sun dipped below the horizon.

She returned to the chair next to me and sat. “No offense, but I’ll believe it when I see it,” she said.

“How about a side wager?” I offered.

“You want me to bet that you won’t save my reputation?” she asked with a laugh.

“I’m very competitive. The higher the stakes, the better I perform.”

“We’re not discussing your bedroom habits,” she said haughtily.

“Funny. See? No one in the world knows what a wicked sense of humor you have. I can show them.”

“I’m a real comedian,” Emily said dryly.

“If you’re as smart as I know you are, you’ll see this as an opportunity to win no matter what. Choose something that will make you feel like you’ve won.”

“What are the terms?” she asked, pursing her lips.

“I will deliver you your IPO.”

“And if you don’t?”

“What do you want from me?” I asked. “Name it.”

A slow, devious smile transformed her face. “Fine. I want fifty percent of Alpha Group. You save my company or lose half of yours.”

It was small potatoes in comparison to Flawless, and we both knew it. But Alpha Group was *mine*. I wouldn't lose it without putting up one hell of a fight, and Emily knew it. Her calculating brain was enthralling.

“It's a bet,” I said, raising my bottle to her.

She lifted her glass. “It's a bet,” she echoed.

EMILY

“Van Winston reveals drugs belonged to Emily Stanton”

“Stanton’s long-standing history of drug abuse”

“Van Winston attorney hints at charges for billionaire”

Long didn’t even begin to describe the day I’d had. After Derek left from his second breaking and entering last night, I’d stayed up until three working my way through overdue tasks and emails. Then I’d dragged my body out of bed at six for a half-assed workout before starting it all over again.

I was a machine. A robot, letting Derek or Jane or Easton escort me where I needed to go. And my batteries were running dangerously low.

I indulged myself and rested my forehead on the cool glass of my desk. Enjoying five whole seconds of the sanctuary my office provided.

If I could just grab a quick cat nap. Maybe a snack? I’d be back in business.

My office door opened, and I sensed Derek’s annoying presence. The man oozed some sort of unignorable energy. Daisy would call it Big Dick Energy.

“Sleeping beauty,” Derek crooned. That slight accent, like he couldn’t quite commit to British or South Florida, made everything he said sexier. Which annoyed me further.

“Ugh. Go away,” I grumbled.

“I can’t. I need you, love.” I heard him take a seat in front of my desk.

Everyone needed me, I thought wryly as I sat up and straightened my hair.

He placed a coffee cup on my desk.

If I hadn’t been so tired, I would have reflected on the oddity of how essential my mere physical presence in a room was.

I’d attended a breakfast networking event for female entrepreneurs. Strong and sexy pantsuit, no time for the made-to-order omelets. From there, we zipped across town for a radio interview about Flawless and its mission in the skincare industry. Jeans and a trendy, bejeweled top with strappy sandals. Double shot of espresso.

In the car, I’d approved the hiring of a new chemist and the director of global retail design without the deep dig I usually did into a candidate’s background. I was trusting—hoping—my team had done their due diligence.

Then it was on to an early lunch with two of my grumpier board members. Navy sheath dress with a red bag that screamed “I’m in charge.” I spent so much time smiling reassuringly that I’d forgotten to actually eat anything.

Back at the office, I’d shut my door, kicked off my heels, and scraped together nearly ninety minutes to plow through the most urgent items on my running a business list.

Then it was back in the car to meet a crew of hand-picked business journalists for a private tour of the lab. It took two hours, and my feet and head were in a war to see which could ache more. I was also starting to see spots. Lovely little flecks of light danced in front of my eyes every time I stood up.

It was 6 p.m., and I’d been running flat out for twelve hours straight. Tired didn’t even begin to describe how I was feeling.

“What could you possibly need now?” I asked, opening the report that topped the stack on my desk. I stared blankly at

colorful pie charts, words and numbers swimming before my eyes.

“The name of your date for the gala tomorrow night,” Derek said, drumming his fingers on the arm of the visitor’s chair. He looked impeccable as always. A navy suit, subtly striped shirt open at the collar. The blue in the shirt matched the eerily blue eyes that were fixed on me now. It annoyed me that he hadn’t required multiple costume changes today.

“I don’t have a date for the gala,” I said, wondering if I even had a dress.

“I accept,” he said cheerfully. “You’re wearing black, by the way. I’ll be in Tom Ford.”

“Emily Stanton can’t even get her own date,” I quipped. The gossip blogs would have a field day with it.

“Or am I your date and you’re falling head over heels with me?” His smile was lethal.

“You must be awfully desperate to win our little bet if you’re willing to throw your own reputation out the window.” The most recent headlines were not much more flattering than they had been three weeks ago.

He didn’t look remotely concerned enough for my liking. “Emily darling, have you ever turned a container ship around?”

I shot him a bland look and took a hit of caffeine.

“It takes careful nudging. And just when you think it’s too late, that it’s destined to chug off into a pier, killing hundreds of people, it starts to turn. Imperceptibly at first. And then before you know it, you’re heading in the opposite direction.”

“Aren’t you at all concerned?” I pressed. “They’re accusing me of hiding a drug problem. That Van Winston moron is telling tabloids that the drugs were mine. People are believing this bullshit.”

“Trust me,” he said. “Things are progressing as planned and even a little ahead of schedule. You’re not giving them any fuel for the fires. You’re painting lovely pictures of a

capable, powerful, intelligent woman who runs an innovative empire. The rumors will burn out... or be crushed.”

“I do like crushing.”

Derek’s lips quirked. “Good. Because I’ve already met with your general counsel, who is happily constructing a terrifying letter regarding defamation. We’re demanding a retraction and a public apology. And if the blogs and papers really want to make good on their sincerity, they’ll be donating to tomorrow night’s cause.”

“Which is?” I couldn’t remember.

He pulled out his phone and reading glasses, and my toes curled into the carpet. I liked the look on him. “Ah, yes, the children’s pediatric cancer wing renovations at the hospital,” he said.

I sat back in my chair. It was a good cause. I needed to check with my father about the family donation. But it meant an interminably long night after another interminably long day. “And you’re volunteering to be my date because?”

“I thought I’d made it abundantly clear that I plan to make love to you? Remind me to up my game.”

“Derek.”

“What does everyone love more than a drug scandal?” he asked, steepling his fingers.

“A love affair.”

“Exactly.”

“So we’re going to go to a gala together and be ambiguously suspicious with our chemistry—”

“Ah, you admit we have chemistry,” he said triumphantly.

“I fail to see how fueling speculation on my love life is going to distract anyone from the real issue. The SEC asked for more documentation supporting our filing. That’s code for ‘this might not happen.’”

“You give the SEC what they need, and I’ll give the media what they want. Classic misdirection. Give the public

something sexier to obsess about while the original scandal dies a cold, lonely death.” Those blue eyes were burning into me, warming me from the inside.

“What about your reputation, Mr. Price? Sleeping with a client paints an unprofessional picture of your business.”

“Ah, but falling in love is another story entirely.” He rose and crossed behind my desk. Big hands rested on my shoulders. Slowly, they began to knead at the knots that had taken up long-term residence there.

I bit my lip, but the moan still escaped.

I felt the satisfaction in his soft laugh.

“So now we’re in love? This is ridiculous, Derek. The hoops I’m jumping through because of one stupid mistake. Do you have any idea how much time I’m losing to something that should be a non-issue?”

“I know exactly how much time you’re losing. It’s my job to minimize that. We’ve paraded Good Girl Emily out and about. Regardless of the headlines, opinions are shifting. Now we’re feeding them something juicier. We’re adding another layer to you.”

“You tell me that nothing sells better than the truth,” I reminded him.

He leaned down, his lips brushing my ear. I shivered. “Who says this isn’t the truth? It’s clear we have something here.” He stroked a finger over the goose bumps that dotted my neck.

“We’re not in a relationship.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re both not contemplating the idea of it.”

“My board is going to be pissed. They hired you to shore up my reputation, not ‘fall in love and give me orgasms,’” I said, using air quotes.

“The orgasms are free of charge.”

“Don’t joke. Your business is just as important to you as mine is to me.” Which was exactly why I demanded fifty percent of it. I needed him vested in my cause. In my success.

“But the difference is, I know how easily opinion can be swayed, manipulated.”

“Hmm.” I was too tired to argue.

“Why are you poring over social media campaign data?” he asked, peering over my shoulder.

Oh. So *that’s* what it was.

“I don’t know. Because it’s my *job*.” For a smart guy, sometimes he could say incredibly stupid things.

“It most certainly is not,” he scoffed. His hands abandoned my loosening knots and riffled through the stack of reports on my desk. “Why are you still doing any and all this?”

“Because it’s my company. No one else is going to work harder for it. Oprah signed every single check,” I said.

“Until she couldn’t or she’d be doing nothing but signing checks all day,” he shot back. “You leveled up years ago, but you’re still trying to hold the reins.”

“Who am I supposed to turn them over to? Lita?” I felt guilty as soon as her name escaped my mouth.

“No.” His response was abrupt.

“Wait. Why not?” He’d been to lunch with Lita twice and sat in on several meetings with her. I knew why I wouldn’t give her more responsibilities but was curious why Derek agreed.

“Because she wouldn’t take the work seriously,” he said simply.

“We started this company together,” I said, automatically jumping to Lita’s defense. And she’d witnessed the worst thing that had ever happened to me and never once let a hint of it slip to anyone.

“Yes, and you have been more than generous with her.”

“She was in that lab with me. We came up with the name together.”

“And it’s your name on the office,” he pointed out.

“I had the capital. She didn’t. And we’ve already had this conversation,” I pointed out.

“You protected what was rightfully yours,” he said, perching on the corner of my desk. “It was a smart move. You’re a smart woman. Don’t get defensive about it.”

“I wouldn’t be here without Lita,” I insisted.

“You would. But she wouldn’t be here without you.”

“We used to be best friends.” I was exhausted. That’s why the truth that I’d never spoken before escaped.

“People change, Emily.”

“I don’t need you coming in here and trying to cast doubt on one of the only people I know I can trust.” Exhaustion made my fuse microscopically short.

“I’m agreeing with you, and you’re getting defensive. I think you’re the one with the issue.”

I pushed my chair back from the desk, making him step out of the way in the process. Annoyed. Frustrated. Hungry. “Look. I need to get back to this,” I said, gesturing at the stack of folders on my desk. As if to emphasize my point, my email inbox autoloaded what looked like twenty new messages.

Damn it. I was never going to catch up. I was never going to win.

I stood quickly.

The spots were back. But they weren’t white twinkles now. They were big, black blobs that were bleeding together.

“Emily.”

Derek said my name, but he was so very far away.

DEREK

“*I*’m fine.” Emily’s voice was weak but pissed off from my passenger seat.

Good. Fine. I was pissed off, too.

“When is the last time you ate a proper meal?” I asked, turning onto the causeway, leaving downtown Miami behind us. The back door to the white contractor van in front of us flew open, and a stack of empty paint-splattered cans fell out. I swerved around it and rolled the passenger window down.

“Back door,” I yelled to the other driver.

“Sorry, buddy. I’m not into that,” he shouted back.

“Freaking Miami.” Emily sighed, sitting up straighter. “Where are we going? Also, what exactly happened?”

“You fainted in your office because you’re a stubborn idiot,” I explained. “I’m taking you home.”

She’d gone ghostly pale and glassy-eyed before slumping gracefully into a dead faint. It had taken five years off my life.

“The reports,” she said, looking down in her lap and then craning her neck to see into the back seat. “The social media team needs my input tomorrow morning. I have to reschedule the new chemist’s onboarding tour. I didn’t call her back. And there should be an end-of-day report from legal.”

She was working herself into a righteous lather. How *dare* I drag her away from her work.

“Everything that can be handed off has been. Anything left can wait until tomorrow,” I snapped.

“You don’t get to call the shots, Price. You have no idea what it takes to hold a corporation this size together,” she shot back, crossing her arms over her chest and scowling through the windshield.

“You don’t get to scare the life out of me by rolling your eyes back in your head and passing out on your feet because you’re too fucking stubborn to offload tasks you should have handed off years ago.”

There was probably a rule somewhere about shouting at a woman who had recently regained consciousness. But I was a rule-breaker at heart. “This is your fault entirely. You know that you can tell me when you need a break. When you need a moment. A fucking meal. Yet you martyr your way through a packed schedule because you can’t bear to be honest about your own limits.”

She opened her mouth on a righteous gasp of indignation.

“Everyone has limits, Emily. You don’t get bonus points for pretending you’re exempt.”

We rode in hard, angry silence for several minutes until my phone rang through the SUV’s speakers.

“Jane,” I said, by way of a greeting.

“Is the boss okay? Do you want me to babysit tonight?”

“The boss is right here, and since when do you do what Derek asks you?” Emily snipped, grumpily.

“Hi, boss,” Jane said, remarkably unconcerned.

“I pulled babysitting duty tonight,” I told Jane. “Rest up. I’m sure she’ll be a nightmare to deal with tomorrow.”

“Copy that.”

“You both are fired,” Emily said.

“Be a good girl for the nice man,” Jane told her. “Good luck, Tea and Crumpets.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. I clicked off and made the turn into Bluewater. The guard waved us through, and we returned to our stony silence. She was putting on a good show of anger, but I knew she was shaken, too.

“Stay,” I told her when I pulled up to the front of her house.

I got out and came around to her side of the SUV. She opened her own door, uselessly proving that she was capable of it. But I had the last laugh when her knees buckled. “Not so tough now, are you, love?”

“Shut up, Tea and Crumpets.”

I made a move to scoop her up, but she stopped me.

“Don’t. You. Dare. I will accept a steadying arm, but that is it,” she insisted firmly.

Rolling my eyes, I slid my arm around her waist and offered her my free hand. She took it in a death grip, and together we made our way to her front door.

I keyed in the code while she complained about needing to change it again and how I needed to stop hacking into her security system.

“Where are we going?” she demanded when I steered her past the kitchen.

“To bed.”

“Derek, I’m starving.” I heard the raw need in her voice and softened ever so slightly.

“And I will see to that in a minute. For once in your life, just do what you’re told.” I pushed her not very gently down onto the bed and then made my way into her closet. I pawed through a few drawers before I found her blasted other man’s boxers and a soft tank.

“Here,” I said, returning and tossing them at her. “Change. And do not leave this room.”

“Bossy,” she muttered under her breath as I left.

I made my way back to the kitchen. It was pristine without being stark. White-washed cabinets were complemented by glossy blue marble counters. The ceiling was done in a driftwood gray that suited the space. Like most of the rest of the house, glass doors opened up to the view of Biscayne Bay.

I moved to the pantry. One could learn all one needed to know about someone with a peek in their medicine cabinet or their pantry.

Emily's pantry, disguised by two doors matching the rest of the cabinetry, revealed that she was obsessively organized and had absolutely zero imagination when it came to food.

It was roughly the size of my own master bedroom. But there were no convenience foods or treats. No bags of chips. No microwavable popcorn or Red Dye No. 52 marshmallow cereal. No secret stashes of chocolate. There were shelves with meticulously lined glass jars filled with oats, flour, and chia seeds. Smaller kitchen appliances and larger pots and pans lived behind closed glass doors, all so spotless I wasn't sure if they'd ever been used.

Finding nothing useful, I ventured back into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. *Aha!* Portioned prepared meals were neatly packed and stacked in glass containers. I opened one, sniffed, and deemed it acceptable. Some kind of Thai chicken dish with vegetables and rice. I helped myself to a second container of the same and popped them both into the microwave.

Minutes later, I returned to Emily's room with a tray, food, and my briefcase.

She eyed the food hungrily from the bed. "Thank God, you picked these. Cristoff gets unbearably annoyed when I don't eat every last morsel he leaves me."

I settled the tray over her lap and kicked my shoes off. "Cristoff? Is he another three-legged alligator in your care?"

She snorted inelegantly. "He's worse than an alligator. More cantankerous, too. Daisy and I share him."

I arched an eyebrow in jest. "How very nouveau."

“He’s a chef, not a gigolo. Which, by the way, is what Luna thought you were. Cristoff is a crabby, loud, terrifying chef who makes divine creations and throws violent temper tantrums.”

“He sounds delightful.”

She dug into her chicken. “Mmm.” She rolled her eyes back in her head. “Delicious.”

I rounded the bed and slid onto the mattress on the opposite side.

“What are you doing?” she asked with her mouth full.

Fluffing the pillows behind my head—why did women insist on having a phalanx of pillows on their beds—I reached for the second dish of chicken.

“I’m babysitting you.”

“I’m fed. I’m in bed. Your job is done,” she said.

I gave her a long, steely look. “Clearly, it’s not. I’m staying right here and making sure you get at least nine hours of sleep and a hearty breakfast. You running yourself into the ground is not part of my plan.”

“You can’t be serious,” Emily said, neatly scooping up a bite of rice.

“Deadly, darling.”

“Fine. But we’re not having sex,” she insisted.

“Right now, I’m more inclined to strangle you than have sex with you.” I found the remote on the side table and turned the TV on. “Now, let’s see what the lovely Emily Stanton watches when she’s in bed.”

I scrolled through her recently watched shows and grinned.

“I refuse to be embarrassed by my viewing habits,” she sniffed as I clicked on a tiny home builder reality show.

“You can’t expect me to not comment on the irony,” I said dryly. “I had to drop breadcrumbs just to find my way from your kitchen to your bedroom.”

“Shut up, Price.”

“It’s nice to see it’s not all documentaries and biopics,” I mused.

“You make me sound so boring,” she complained.

But there was nothing boring about the woman in bed next to me.

“Well, *this* is cozy. And confusing.”

Cameron Whitbury, aerospace billionaire and next-door neighbor, poked her head in the open bedroom doors.

“Cam!” Emily said in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw Captain Chivalry here half dragging you into the house. You looked sick or something. Are you feeling okay?”

“She is not,” I said at the same time Emily said, “I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Emily decided to run herself into the ground on no food for who knows how long,” I informed her.

“I can report that she also hasn’t been sleeping. Her home office lights aren’t going out until three the past several nights,” Cam said.

“Here’s an idea, how about you all butt your pretty little noses out of my life?” Emily grumbled.

I glared at her.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Emily complained. “I’m trying to run my business *and* appease the board *and* make nice with the media *and* win over the public. I am trying to do everything.”

“Maybe you should stop,” Cam suggested. Clearly, at home here, she crossed to the bed and flopped down at Emily’s feet. She was wearing a tailored pantsuit and flip-flops, which I assumed she’d donned after shedding some spectacular pair of stilettos.

“I would expect you of all people to support me here, Cam,” she said.

“Hey, I’m not the one passing out at work. When I do, you can come over and rub my face in it.”

“Jane has a big, fat mouth.”

“Ladies, ladies. Let’s not fight while we’re all in bed together,” I said, helping myself to more chicken. I wanted to meet this Cristoff. He was excellent with poultry.

Cam sniffed the air and stuck her face in Emily’s dinner. “That smells divine.”

“There’s another one in the fridge,” I told her.

“I shall return,” Cam said, sliding off the bed and strolling out of the room.

“Cristoff will be very happy,” Emily sighed.

When Cam returned with her own dinner, I opened my laptop to tackle some work while the girls watched a couple from Seattle construct a six-hundred square foot shed in a forest.

“Digging the reading glasses,” Cam said approvingly.

“Right? It gives him this nerdy sex god vibe, doesn’t it?” Emily yawned.

I ignored them.

I had my own game of catch up to play. My business was small but full-service. When we had a client such as Emily, my team worked around the clock doing whatever was necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Rowena was digging into Merritt Van Winston’s background as well as that of his immediate family.

Lance was ghost-writing glowing posts and articles about Emily, Flawless, and Bluewater and spreading them far and wide within our network of friendly media. My other clients were being “fixed” by my small team of junior associates. We had a B-list sex tape scandal that was proving to be a bit tricky and a messy divorce that needed decluttering.

But Emily Stanton's situation was currently my firm's main priority.

I had the email from Flawless's publicist who forwarded the daily list of media requests. Most of which were tabloids and gossip blogs hoping to nail our lovely leader to the cross in the name of clicks and advertising. But today, there was an interesting request. I forwarded it to Rowena and requested an in-depth dig.

The latest numbers were showing a slow but significant upswing. If I could keep Emily on her feet and lovely for another few weeks, I was confident the entire thing would be behind her.

I handled a number of emails, requests, and the drudgery that comes with running a business. The numbers and dollar signs didn't excite me the way stats on a viral story did. But I recognized their value and did what I could with them. I relied on accountants and bookkeepers to handle the more boring details. But I knew where every penny came from and where it was going.

Emily yawned again next to me. Her color was better, her body fueled. If I could just force a good night's sleep on her, we would begin fresh in the morning. And I would monitor her more closely since she was apparently incapable of taking care of herself.

Cam finished her meal and the show and got ready to head home. But not without first forcing a promise out of Emily to check in repeatedly tomorrow.

"Take good care of her," Cam ordered from the doorway.

"I promise."

I took the tray of dirty dishes into the kitchen and loaded them into one of the two dishwashers. I reset the security alarm and took a quick tour of the first floor, making sure doors and windows were locked.

Returning to the bedroom, I found Emily sound asleep beneath the duvet. The TV screen flashed, and I turned it off. I was sure there were motorized blinds of some sort to cover the

French doors leading to the terrace, but I couldn't figure out how they worked. There were worse things than waking with the sunrise, I decided.

I stripped to my underwear and pulled back the covers on what I now considered my side of the bed. Finding a phone charger in my nightstand's drawer, I wondered how many guests there had been to make use of it. Though it didn't really matter since I planned to make sure I was the most memorable.

Sliding between the silky linens, I settled back on the pillows.

Next to me, Emily breathed slow, even breaths. I tucked my hands beneath my head and contemplated the hand-painted abstract mural in glowing shades of rose and blue on Emily's bedroom ceiling.

Yes, a number of things were going to change starting tomorrow.

EMILY

“Emily Stanton’s collapse: Drugs, pregnancy, or both?”

“Female billionaire collapses under weight of scandal”

“Stanton threatens Merritt Van Winston with defamation suit”

I woke gradually and in decadent stages. There was no alarm startling me to life. That was my first hint that something was very wrong. The second was the light. There was some. Natural and soft playing through the shears that hung framing the terrace doors.

Every morning, I awoke before dawn to a shrill alarm and started my day without complaint.

Yes, something was very, very wrong.

And then I remembered.

My eyes flew open. I slapped a hand to the pillows next to me. Derek. He was gone. Perhaps he’d never been? Had I hallucinated it all? The fainting—how humiliating—the argument in the car, dinner in bed with him and Cam?

I sat up and scrubbed the sleep from my eyes. A pair of men’s shoes sat by the door. The pillows on the other side of the bed had a distinct head impression.

There were voices, deep male voices, coming from the direction of my kitchen.

Before I could decide whether to get out of bed and boot these kitchen dwellers from my house or swing by the

bathroom first, Derek appeared in the doorway. He was dressed in yesterday's clothes and carrying another tray.

I'd spent the night with him.

I'd spent the night with plenty of men before. But had never felt quite this awkward... or unfulfilled.

"Ah, she's awake," he announced cheerfully. I pulled the sheets up to my chest, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable.

"Why are you still here?" I croaked.

Whatever it was he had on the tray smelled divine, and I wanted it.

"Oh, we'll get to that," he said, the slightest hint of a warning in his tone. "But first, are you well enough to eat somewhere besides bed?"

Pride chafed, I swung my legs over the side of the bed. "I'm not an invalid," I sniffed haughtily.

"Good. Then we'll dine al fresco," he decided. Juggling tray and door handles, Derek led the way onto the terrace.

The morning heat was welcome on my skin. The waters, pool and ocean, sparkled under the sun that had already crested the horizon.

"What time is it?" I asked, looking for my watch and finding my wrist bare.

"Six-thirty."

Dammit. I was already an hour behind in my day. Though it was hard to have regrets when my body felt so damn rested. But still. There were schedules to adhere to. Tasks to complete.

Derek put the tray down on the table with a flourish. "I made friends with Cristoff. He was so delighted that you ate everything he'd cooked for you earlier this week that he made us eggs Benedict and fruit salads."

My stomach let out a shameless whine. But not of its usual bowel distress variety. This was raw, primal hunger. Derek

pushed the handle down on the French press, and the scent of fresh coffee invaded my nostrils.

It was hard to be angry when a man who looked like Derek was feeding me breakfast outside on a perfect Miami spring morning. But I'd still give it my best shot.

He set a plate in front of me and unfurled a denim blue cloth napkin, tucking it neatly onto my lap.

"I can take care of myself, thank you very much," I complained, reaching for a knife and fork.

"You're welcome," he said, pretending my thanks were sincere. "But I believe you proved yesterday that you are, in fact, incapable of such a task."

"Someone's grumpy in the mornings," I said, shoveling the perfect bite of egg, meat, and English muffin into my face. "Oh my God, Cristoff's hollandaise!"

"To restate my point from last night, which you are probably too exhausted to recall, you need to stop trying to prove to the world that you can do everything. You're going to micromanage yourself into an early grave."

I chewed in silence and stared at him. Obviously, the man had a point. Perhaps even a marginally valid one. But that didn't mean I could just snap my fingers and rid myself of responsibilities.

"Derek," I sighed, gratefully accepting the delicate glass mug of coffee he handed me. "Even if you have the slimmest point, I don't have the time to start the offloading process. Training. Follow-up."

"I'm hearing problems, not solutions," he said, cutting into his breakfast.

I threw a grape at him. Smugly, he popped it into his mouth.

"Emily, love. It takes a visionary to run a company like yours. And you can't have visions when you're too busy sweating over the details. If you run yourself into the ground, Flawless will flounder, I'll have an ugly little imperfection in

my track record of unblemished successes, and everyone who ever said that you can't win."

"You forgot to mention that in that particular instance, I'll also own half of your company," I pointed out.

"So you can understand why I'm motivated."

I squinted out at the turquoise waters of the bay and sighed. "You are exceptional at pushing my buttons," I mused.

He preened. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said about me."

I snickered and sipped my coffee. I could hear Cristoff destroying my kitchen. The man cooked to Metallica and threatened anyone who interrupted him with physical violence. Jane was half in love with him.

Unhurried mornings were nice. I wondered if it was because of the sleep or Derek.

I felt downright cheerful.

"I say this with all the love, lust, and adoration that I feel for you," my platonic bed buddy began. "You need to pick a lane. This stock offering is going to set you and the next three generations of your family up for life. Maybe it's time to revisit the question: What do you really want?"

"Look," I said, biting into the most perfect strawberry in the history of strawberries. "Nothing's changed. I want to grow Flawless. I want to see this IPO through because, not only is it the next step, but now it's a matter of pride. I also want to show every single naysayer out there that they were so wrong they owe me public apologies."

Derek took a sip of freshly squeezed orange juice. Cristoff had freakishly strong hands.

He was quiet for a long moment, watching me as if weighing my answer. "If that's what you want, then that is what I'll help you get," he said simply. "Money. Power. A legacy."

It sounded a little empty, a little unimaginative when he said it. "Why am I sensing disapproval?"

“Money, power, and legacies are fine for some people. Most people. I think you’re not being honest with yourself. Perhaps you’re throwing yourself headfirst into work so you don’t have to think about how unfulfilled you feel.”

He dabbed his smug mouth with a napkin, and I contemplated tossing him in the lagoon and leaving him for Steve to deal with.

“Perhaps you’re wrong about me, and I’m just another power-hungry executive clawing her way to the top.”

“Now, let’s not get testy,” he teased.

I wanted to stab him with my fork, but I didn’t want to ruin my eggs with blood splatter. I had priorities, after all.

“Since you’ve made it abundantly clear that you’ll stay the course, that is where we’ll focus our efforts,” he said.

“So pleased that’s settled,” I snarked.

“I can tell from your vivacious conversational efforts that you’re already feeling better. Let’s try not to drop into a dead faint again today.”

I flipped him off in an immature yet satisfying gesture of disdain.

He grinned at me, and I found myself beaming right back. Sleeping next to the man had done nothing to lessen his effect on me. I doubted spending fifty years married to the man would dilute his sex appeal.

That would be one lucky, perpetually infuriated wife, I predicted.

“So what’s the diabolical plan of public manipulation today?” I asked.

A string of expletives exploded from the kitchen behind me.

“Isn’t it interesting how Cristoff doesn’t feel the need to tone down his badassery,” Derek mused. “Yet he is still wildly successful.”

“Enough with the life lessons today, Price. Get it through your thick head. I’m going to continue to work very, very hard. We Stantons don’t half-ass anything. My father and I are workaholics. My mother is a master manipulator. And my brother is fully committed to partying his life away. There is no sailing off into the sunset for a private island with a tiny house and taking up knitting for me. So let’s focus on getting me where I need to go.”

“As you wish,” he said pleasantly.

~
AFTER BREAKFAST, Derek helped himself to my shower... leaving the bathroom door wide open should I decide to wander in and catch another eyeful of his nudity.

An internal struggle ensued, and in the end, decorum won out. I ducked into my closet to find something powerful that didn’t say “collapsed from exhaustion yesterday.”

It needed to be slimming since pregnancy rumors would be spewing forth from the rumor mill. And I’d need to be photographed with alcohol—responsibly, of course—as soon as possible.

I felt a twinge of annoyance.

Why? Why did I have to use up so much of my energy, my time, trying to stay a step ahead of public opinion? I was the head of my own company. I was the one calling the shots. Why did I have to work so hard to make other people more comfortable?

“Dammit,” I whispered. *The naked man in my shower had gotten to me... again.*

I chose a pair of skinny black cropped pants and a fitted black sleeveless top. When in doubt, dress in head-to-toe black. I was working my way through my jewelry drawers looking for just the right bracelets when I heard Derek yelp from the bathroom.

A manly, slightly British yelp, of course.

I hurried out of the closet and into the bathroom and promptly doubled over.

The shower was polished stone on three sides with a tall glass wall separating it from the rest of the bathroom. Derek was standing under one of the shower heads, hands clutched in front of his family jewels. At the entrance of the shower was Brutus, the gigantic free-range Saint Bernard.

“I’m so glad you find this amusing,” Derek said, mustering a dry tone.

I couldn’t stop laughing.

“What the hell’s so funny?” Jane strolled into the bathroom, eating one of Cristoff’s special peach tarts and immediately choked.

I slapped her on the back, and we clung to each other in hysterics.

“Does someone want to remove this hulking beast before he makes me a eunuch?” Derek demanded.

“We’ve gotta stop meeting like this, Crumpets,” Jane quipped. “C’mere, Bruty.”

She held out a tiny bite of tart. Brutus shambled out of the shower and shook off, raining shower water in a ten-foot radius. I dabbed at the corners of my eyes with a washcloth.

Derek turned off the water and reached for a towel but not before Jane and I both got another appreciative eyeful of his full-frontal nudity.

“Don’t be scared. Brutus is just looking for someone to snuggle with,” Jane crooned.

Brutus delicately put the hand that held the remains of the tart in his mouth.

“Harmless? He just bit your hand off,” Derek said, cinching the towel low on his hips.

I was still laughing. My face hurt from it.

Jane pulled her tart-less hand free. “He’s a baked goods whore. He always knows when Cristoff is here and comes to

mooch.”

“Hey, buddy,” I said, ruffling the fur on Brutus’s giant head. “Did you make a new friend?”

“He stuck his very cold nose against my very unprepared ass,” Derek complained.

I smushed the dog’s face in my hands. “Did you scare the bossy man, Brutus? Did you? That’s such a good boy!”

“How did something this size sneak into your house?” Derek asked, taking another towel and moving to the wall mounted body dryer.

“If there’s a terrace door open in Bluewater, Brutus here will find it and make himself at home,” I explained over the soft whoosh of dryer air. “His parents live across the bridge in one of the houses on Tequila Lane. They rescued him when he was two years old and tried everything they could to keep him contained. But he’s a Houdini. He’s kind of a mascot for the enclave,” I said, reaching for another towel and scrubbing the dog down.

“He showed up for bridge at Mai Ling’s condo last year. There’s security footage of him pushing buttons in the elevator,” Jane said.

Reluctantly, Derek came closer.

“You’re not afraid of dogs, are you?” I asked, surprised.

“I’m afraid of gigantic things that trespass in my shower.”

“Gee, now you know how I feel,” I said, batting my lashes.

“Solid dick joke,” Jane snorted. “Come on, Bruty. Let’s see if Mean Cristoff has any of those organic doggie quesadillas for you.”

With a salute directed at Derek’s groin, Jane ambled out of the bathroom followed by the one-hundred-and-seventy-pound Brutus, leaving me alone with nearly naked Derek.

“And here we are again,” he said, hooking his finger in the drapey neck of my shirt.

“Put some pants on, Price. I’ve got work to do now that I’m done laughing hysterically at you.” I mimicked his manly yelp.

“Darling, someday we’ll tell this story at our fiftieth wedding anniversary as the exact moment you realized you were head over heels for me,” he quipped.

“Did you hit your head in the shower?” I asked sweetly.



Daisy: WTF, Stanton? You collapse at work and don't bother letting your posse know?

Luna: Are you alright? Do you need an appointment with my aromatherapist?

Cam: Relax guys. Mr. Naked Dreamy took good care of her. And if my trusty surveillance skills are accurate, his car is still in her driveway.

Daisy: Oooooooooooh! Dick pics or it didn't happen!

Luna: Sending you my aromatherapist's contact and a 30-pack of organic, latex-free condoms.

EMILY

Jane plowed through Bluewater ten miles over the speed limit. Traffic today was even worse than usual. It was as if every unlicensed driver in the city had gassed up their unregistered rust buckets and taken to the roads, double-parking and cutting off law-abiding drivers with abandon.

My mother was going to kill me. She'd called me four times today, each time extracting my promise that I would be at the gala, beautiful, and on time.

The traffic insanity had apparently infiltrated the enclave. We careened through the security gate only to come to a screeching halt when Mrs. Montecito's golf cart swerved out in front of us. She had a long-standing habit of starting happy hour early, and it looked like today had been two-for-one margarita day at Bluewater's beach bar.

"Okay, I can shower, dress in two minutes, sit for hair, and do half my makeup in the car," I decided, recalculating my list.

"You almost lost an eye last time you did your makeup in the car," Jane said. "Hang on, boss."

I grabbed the handle above the door and squeezed my eyes shut while Jane jumped the curb and sped down the golf cart trail. Palm fronds and fragrant flowers whipped at the side of the Range Rover.

We were going to get arrested, and I didn't know who'd be angrier. My mother or Derek.

Jane swerved again, flattening a saw palmetto as she plowed back onto the road, leaving Mrs. Montecito's golf cart weaving behind us.

"Jane!"

"I'm just driving like everyone else in Miami."

"You'll get us thrown out of Bluewater." I released my grip on the handle and tried to massage blood back into my fingers.

She snorted. "You own the place. You can throw everyone else out if they whine too much."

I dreaded the next town hall.

Jane slammed on the brakes in the driveway, sending a cloud of crushed seashells up into the stratosphere. I hopped out and sprinted for the door. It had been a busy day of reassuring everyone that I felt just fine and following up on all the tasks Derek dumped on other staff members.

After plying me with lunch at my desk, he'd left to take care of things at his own offices with the promise that he'd pick me up promptly at... *Oh, hell. Now.*

"Tea and Crumpets will be here any second," Jane yelled after me as I shouldered through the front door.

"Stall him!" I called over my shoulder and bolted for my bathroom.

My phone rang. It was my mother.

"Mom, I can't talk right now," I said, turning the water in the shower on. I kicked my heels off across the bathroom. One landed on the tufted ottoman shaped like a daisy. The other landed between the vanities. Thank God I had very nice, organized people who cleaned up after me, otherwise I'd never find both shoes again.

"Are you ready yet? I want to see a picture of your dress."

"I'm not ready yet," I growled, yanking my shirt off over my head and kicking it in the direction of my shoes.

Shit. I was out of body wash. It had been on my shopping list.

“What do you mean you’re not ready yet? You’re supposed to be there in an hour!” She made it sound like I was running late for a life-saving surgery.

I grabbed a short robe from the bathroom closet and dashed out of the room.

“Traffic was bad. I’m home now and getting ready, which would go a lot faster if you’d stop calling me.”

“Don’t you dare be late, Emily. I’m not posing with your father’s ex-wife with both of my children conspicuously absent. What will everyone say?”

My mother’s motto in life.

I found Jane and Luna in my kitchen snacking on cheese and crackers. I snagged one out of Luna’s hand and stuffed it in my mouth.

“Maybe they’ll say it’s nice that you get along with your husband’s ex-wife?” I guessed.

“Emily, don’t speak with your mouth full!”

I mimed scrubbing down my entire body.

Jane pointed at the tote bags on the kitchen counter. At least one thing had gone my way. My personal shopper had left her bounty like a magical fairy.

“Gotta go, Mom,” I said, digging into the first bag and hanging up on my mother.

“Well, it’s an unorthodox look. But you’ll certainly have people talking,” Derek announced behind me.

“Traffic,” I yelled, finding the body wash and taking off down the hall in a barefoot sprint. “Hi, Luna!”

I jumped in the shower and did the fastest wash of hair and body in human history.

Towelng off, I realized I still didn’t know what I was wearing.

Back to the kitchen I went. “Dress?” I asked expectantly.

Derek had joined the girls for snacks and what looked like a nice white wine. “In the garment bag on your bed,” he said.

I snatched his glass of wine from his hand, cursed his perfectly tailored tux, and hauled ass back to my bedroom.

I shimmied into the dress, forgetting both bra and underwear. Neither would be good for the lines of the dress anyway. It wasn’t one that I’d had in my closet. I would have recognized it. This was a sleek, black, off-the-shoulder gown that clung very nicely to my breasts.

“You decent, boss?” Jane called.

I had wet hair, a bare face, and an unzipped dress. “Enough.”

She appeared in the bathroom doorway. “Bad news. Hair can’t make it. They got stuck in traffic downtown and got rear-ended by—get this—a \$250,000 Bentley.”

“Shit.” My hair hung, damp and limp in my face. My mother was going to murder me. “Okay, it’s fine. I’ll just do some kind of bun thing,” I decided.

Maybe a chignon or a simple knot.

“Find me some big jewelry that will take attention away from my hair,” I instructed her, turning my hair dryer on full blast.

“Derek’s already on it,” she yelled over the sound.

I rolled my eyes. I was beginning to think the man had a fetish about pawing through my closet.

Derek poked his head into the bathroom, holding up sapphire drop earrings to his own lobes. “Yes?”

“You’re ridiculous. Yes.”

My phone buzzed. It was a text from my mother.

Mom: We’re leaving now. You’d better be on your way!

“Agh!”

He grinned and stepped inside. He dropped the earrings on the vanity and zipped my dress. “You know I’m not going to think about anything but you being commando under that dress all night,” he teased.

“Derek, unless you’re a secret hairstylist, I need you to get the hell out of my bathroom right now,” I screeched over the hum of the hairdryer.

“It would seem that once again, I’m exactly what you need.” He plucked the dryer out of my hand and grabbed a brush from the drawer.

“Chair me, Jane,” he called.

Jane appeared a moment later with one of the turquoise ottomans from my bedroom, a slab of cheese hanging out of her mouth.

“Cheese and cracker the boss, Jane,” Derek said, pushing me down on the stool and going to work on my hair.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered as he deftly dried and volumized and smoothed.

“Product?” he asked, switching the dryer off.

I pointed to the slim closet next to the sink. While he rummaged, I put on the earrings.

“Lovely,” he announced.

Jane returned with a plate of cheese and crackers and a tall glass of water.

“How was your day?” I asked, stuffing the first cracker in my mouth.

“Productive,” he said. He placed a comb between his teeth while he buried his hands in my hair. “Yours?”

“Same,” I said, trying not to close my eyes as his fingers massaged my scalp. I wondered what it would feel like if he washed my hair.

“I think we’ll do something that makes a bit of a statement,” he said, swooping my hair this way and that. “Something that says badass.”

Involuntarily, my lips responded in a smug smile.

I relaxed and snacked as he twisted and tucked, fingers working quickly and competently.

“How did you learn to do this?” I asked as the style began to take shape.

“After my stepfather made me give up thievery, I had to earn a living somehow. My mother was keen to keep a close eye on me. She made me work at her salon after school. I picked up a few things in the years I was there.”

“A few things meaning women?” I asked.

He gave me a cat that ate the canary look in the mirror. “Perhaps. You have to admit, I’m excellent with my hands.”

“I’ve seen you steal wallets and style hair. That is the extent of my experience with your hands.”

Was I flirting with him? This was not a smart move, no matter how I played it. Encouraging Derek would only get one of us hurt.

“Perhaps you’ll experience something a little more hands-on tonight?”

“For the cameras, of course,” I said.

He fluffed the hair at my crown and sprayed it.

“Not *only* for the cameras, love.” His eyes were a hypnotic blue in the mirror. I wanted him to press those lips to the back of my neck. To bite the skin where my neck and shoulder met. To trail his tongue over me.

I felt a rush of something delicious between my legs. “Are you this flirtatious with all your clients?”

He tucked another stray pin into place at the nape of my neck then leaned in so I could feel his breath on my shoulder. “Only you, darling Emily,” he whispered. “What do you think?”

“I think us having sex would be a huge mistake.”

Amused, he laughed. “Some mistakes are worth making. But I meant your hair.”

He’d styled it in a teased pompadour on top and sleek bun in the back. It was edgy, interesting. My mother would hate it.

I loved it.

“Not bad, Price.”

“You’ll want a smokey eye and a more subtle lip,” he told me. “Unfortunately, I’m only good at kissing away makeup so you’re on your own there.”

“I’ll do my face in the car,” I told him, giving my reflection another pleased glance.

“Do it now. I’ll get us there in time,” he promised.

And for some reason, I believed him.

DEREK

Emily looked decidedly unamused when we pulled up to Bluewater's private airfield.

The helicopter was ready and waiting. An attendant passed us each a headset, and we were ushered onboard, heads ducking low beneath the twirling blades.

"A helicopter, Derek?" Emily groused, her voice crackling in my ears, as she removed the scarf from her head.

"Darling, what's the fun of being a billionaire if you can't take a helicopter to a gala?"

Primly, she arranged the skirt of her dress over her legs. "Tell me we're not landing on the rooftop of the hotel."

I chuckled. "We're landing ten minutes away from the event and a car is waiting for us. No one will know it was Emily Stanton bypassing the traffic tonight."

We took off, lifting from the ground in a defiance of gravity and within seconds were swooping over the bay.

Emily was glued to her window. Even billionaires could take a moment to appreciate the cerulean waters as the sun sunk lower on the horizon.

"Thank you for this, Derek," she said quietly in my ear.

I reached out and took her hand. She didn't turn away from the window, didn't snatch her hand back. Nor did she bite my head off. It was a very small, satisfying win.

~

THE FORSYTHE-LOWENSTEIN CHILDREN'S Memorial Hospital Gala was hosted by the very posh Club Indigo Hotel. The entrance to the hotel was set up like a Hollywood red carpet because if Miami's wealthy set were going to show up and open their checkbooks, they damn well wanted to be photographed doing it.

It made my fingers itch to lift a wallet or sparkly bauble. Just for fun. Just to remind myself that I could.

Emily leaned in to my side in the back seat of the limo. "Don't even think about picking anyone's pockets, Price."

Mind reader. She knew me so well.

"I'm astonished and devastated that you would think that," I teased.

"Um-hmm." It sounded like a purr.

The limo eased forward another car length.

"Are you ready to be romantically ambiguous?" I asked, changing the subject.

"You're not going to use this as an excuse to grab my ass, are you?"

I didn't need an excuse. I needed a clear, direct opening from her. Until I received such a message, loud and clear, my flirtation would be entirely in words and long, smoldering glances.

"No, but you grabbing one of my perfect cheeks wouldn't hurt. Remember the power dynamics, love. You're the boss. You're in charge. You're the one being adored."

"And the one doing the groping." She sounded downright cheerful about it. "Are you sure sparking rumors that we're involved is the best strategy?"

"Positive."

The limo made it to the front of the line, and we were expelled onto a rich, gold carpet lined with society

photographers and gossip bloggers. Emily stunned in the sleek, black dress.

I kept my hand at the small of her back longer than necessary. Long enough for a few of the more canny press to ask if we were here together professionally or personally. Emily locked eyes with me, allowing a secretive smile to light up her face. “Mr. Price and I are good friends. We enjoy spending time together,” she said, her fingers landing lightly on my lapel. The camera flashes exploded in a show of fireworks.

It wasn’t an ass grab. It was a classier kind of possession.

I offered her my arm, and together we climbed the steps, leaving the questions behind us.

Inside, we were guided by white-gloved attendants to the ballroom. Restrained South Beach was the flavor of the room. Pillars and arches flanked a dozen sets of French doors. The white stucco walls were bathed in nightclub purple lighting. Gold damask tablecloths were draped over tables topped with elaborate candle and flower displays. Heavy gilt chandeliers dripped crystals from the mission-style ceiling above.

I was in the wealth tier that preferred to write a check and avoid \$20,000-a-plate dinners. But this level of financial responsibility required appearances, gowns, jewels, and an entire evening for the money to be best spent.

“There you are, Emily.” Venice Stanton entered behind us, lovely in Hollywood creamy silk. Byron Stanton’s mob-boss broad shoulders fought against the restraint of Hugo Boss. The tone was lightly disapproving.

“Hello. We must have beat you here. We managed to make it in record time,” Emily said, leaning in to kiss her mother on the cheek. It was a greeting designed for cameras.

“Don’t be silly, darling. Arriving too early makes one look desperate,” Venice trilled.

Emily looked as though she were about to break her mother’s nose.

As a precaution, I took her hand and squeezed.

She bared her teeth in what might have passed for a smile. If the individual were stupid. And inebriated. Or face blind.

I understood women like Venice Stanton. They could both fiercely love their daughters and still feel as though they were in direct competition.

“Hey there, slugger,” Byron said, grazing a kiss on his daughter’s cheek. “Price,” he said with a brisk nod.

“Derek.” Venice smoothed the sharp edges from her tone and looked me up and down. “How lovely to finally meet a man who understands just how important perception is.” It was a compliment directed at me and a jab at the rest of her family.

She offered her hand, knuckles up. Dutifully, I kissed it, aware of the flash of a photographer’s camera.

“This is ridiculous,” I heard Emily growl next to me.

“Oh, there’s Bethenny,” Venice said, patting her perfect coif as she side-eyed her husband’s ex-wife from several yards away.

Bethenny Stanton—she’d kept the last name in what I could only assume was a solid “fuck you” to Venice who had tempted Byron out of his wedding vows and into her bed—had made shrewd investments with her prenup money and now headed the board of two charities. Where Venice was tanned and blonde, Bethenny was a lovely mix of Vietnamese and Welsh backgrounds.

She approached in a shimmery, simple column of gray. Her dark hair was cut with razor-like precision to her shoulders. Her hands were ringless. The only adornment she wore was a pair of chandelier earrings that glistened like her dress.

“Is that one of those *new* designers?” Venice said the word “new” as if it were lemon juice on her tongue.

“Of course,” Bethenny said, leaning in for a more sincere hug from Emily. “I enjoy supporting new artists wherever I find them.”

Venice pursed her lips and scrambled for her next match point.

“Emily, you look stunning as always. What is your secret?” Bethenny asked, giving her an affectionate squeeze.

“Why, she uses her own products religiously,” Venice said, steering the conversation back toward something winnable. “Of course, it’s unfortunate poor Emily didn’t inherit my side’s genes.”

“Bethenny, it’s wonderful to see you. Derek, how about a drink?” Emily offered suddenly. She squeezed my hand in an S-O-S.

“You read my mind.”

“Oh, darling, first we need a picture,” Venice insisted.

She waved a photographer over and positioned herself between her husband and me. Emily and Bethenny were pushed to the outskirts.

“Mrs. Stanton, look this way,” the photographer coaxed.

“I am, darling,” Venice trilled.

“I meant the other Mrs. Stanton,” he said.

If looks could kill, the photographer would have been impaled on one of the skewers of shrimp that were being passed around.

“There’s always plenty of room for more Mrs. Stantons in the world,” Bethenny said lightly.

Emily coughed to cover a laugh, and we all smiled big, phony smiles for the camera.

“How about that drink, Price,” Emily said when it was over.

“How about several?”

We abandoned what could be dubbed as the sinking ship that was Venice Stanton’s plans for an evening of event domination and headed in the direction of the bar.

“Or your plastic surgeon’s phone number on speed dial,” Emily seethed under her breath.

“What was that?”

“Only the perfect comeback for my mother.”

“She seems to be a bit... competitive,” I offered.

“My entire life, she’s demanded that I be successful in whatever I do while still cutting me down for not being exactly like her.” Emily ordered a champagne. I stuck with beer.

“That’s quite the mixed message.”

“And don’t even get me started on how my father wishes I were the son he never had or rather a better version of the useless son he was saddled with. I keep hoping that they’ll move to New York or Paris or anywhere but here. It would be nice to have some breathing room.”

“Have you tried hypnosis?”

“What? Bring a hypnotherapist to family dinner to implant suggestions?” Emily laughed.

“Please pass the potatoes. Seattle is nice this time of year,” I teased.

“If I get desperate, I’ll consider it.”

We took our drinks and found our table front and center, of course, near the stage.

Emily eyed the stage and shuddered.

“What was that for?”

“Oh, just remembering how I met Cam, Daisy, and Luna.”

“I’d like to hear that story.” How did four female billionaires find their way to each other? Was it luck? Money? Had they bonded over their bank accounts, or did it run deeper?

“Maybe someday,” Emily mused. “For now, let me catch you up to speed on the wealth in the room.”

While I emptied my beer, she began a rundown, light on background, heavier on current gossip, keeping me

entertained.

I knew most of them. Miami was a smaller town than most realized. I'd worked with several people in the room. Some discreetly on—shall we say—sensitive issues. Those clients gave me a subtle nod before disappearing back into the crowd.

It was fascinating, really. I ran a successful business. I had money in the bank. Perhaps not with the same number of zeroes but still respectable.

Yet to some of them, I was a mere servant. They paid me to meet their needs. It was an unsettling thought. One that had me offering a more personal thank you to the woman in the checkered vest who buzzed by and took my empty beer bottle.

She smiled at me.

“Someone is a fan,” Emily mused, watching the waitress disappear into the crowd of the wealthy and the well-dressed.

“Believe it or not, I have some concept of how it feels when other people set rather ridiculous expectations for you,” I said, itching for another beer. I settled for Emily's champagne flute.

“That's mine,” she said when I took it and sipped. “Get your own.”

“I'd rather have yours.”

“We can't always have what we want,” she reminded me.

“But we can certainly try.”

“Everyone's looking at us,” she said, doing a subtle scan of the room.

“It's because they're trying to decide if we're sleeping together,” I told her.

“We just got here. Word hasn't had time to spread.”

I pulled out my phone and called up a gossip blog at random.

Billionaire Emily Stanton mixes business and pleasure with date Derek Price.

“Never underestimate how quickly salaciousness travels,”
I advised, showing her the screen.

“You better be right about this, Price. Otherwise, my father
might try to beat you to death with a centerpiece tonight.”

EMILY

The gala was a typical fundraising event. The same attendees—the wealthy and the notable. The same divine wardrobe choices. The same conversations about politics and gossip and celebrity trainers and bottom lines. The same pricey yet still disappointing food. And, of course, the murmurs of “such a good cause” as Miami’s wealthiest residents competed for the title of most generous.

Derek was pulled away by a former client, a beautiful young woman who had once been accused of breaking up the marriage of a beloved celebrity couple. He shook her fiancé’s hand heartily and listened to the happy couple’s Parisian wedding plans.

Blissfully unencumbered for a moment, I returned to the bar and took another flute of champagne. It was for show, not sipping. With age and responsibility came the wherewithal to not get spectacularly drunk in public.

I ducked into a corner behind a heavy velvet curtain to check my phone. My mother would have a conniption if she saw me with it in hand. It wasn’t that she required my undivided attention. It was more that she abhorred the physical reminder of my attachment to work. How could I meet an eligible bachelor if I was too busy responding to my chief financial officer? What man would want me if I couldn’t be bothered to put down my SEC filings and smile prettily while he told amusing anecdotes to an appreciative crowd?

I had the usual dozen texts. And one that actually excited me.

Esther: Got some results you might be interested in. Swing by the lab Sunday?

Me: How interesting will I find them? Sunday's good.

She responded immediately, and I could picture her in the lab, her Converse-clad feet propped up on a work table while data scrolled by on her computer monitors. She was probably eating cold Chinese takeout. And I'd have given anything to be there with her.

Esther: I'm rerunning a few things to verify, but I think I'm going to owe you \$5.

I hugged my phone to my chest. Feeling that old, familiar excitement that used to sweep over me every time I crossed the threshold to my college lab. It was ironic that being successful in science could take me so far away from the lab. But I had skills that went beyond peering into microscopes and analyzing reams of data.

I gave in to the excitement and danced a little boogie.

"Oops. I try to hide from the party and walk in on another one," said a woman poured into a gown the color of the midnight sky hugging her voluptuous curves.

Embarrassed that I'd been caught, I offered her a polite smile. "Welcome to the VIP section. I'm Emily Stanton."

"Franchesca Baranski," she answered, shaking my hand enthusiastically. She pointed over her shoulder with a thumb toward a man whose beauty rivaled Derek's. "That tall drink of water over there is my husband, Aiden Kilbourn. He's probably negotiating the price of a small country."

"He's very handsome," I said.

Franchesca lifted a shoulder, her thick dark curls spilling over it. “Yeah, he’s okay,” she said fondly. “Who belongs to you?”

I liked that she didn’t ask who I belonged to. I spied Derek across the room schmoozing with a diplomat and her artist husband. “That gentleman over there who is quite possibly picking pockets.”

She nodded approvingly. “Nice. He’s so pretty it kinda hurts my eyes.”

“He has that effect,” I agreed. “Are you hiding from anyone in particular?”

“Eh, these things aren’t my jam. I’m more of a pajama pants and bunny slippers Friday night kind of gal. But apparently just writing checks for causes is frowned upon. You have to be *seen* writing the check. Price of privilege and all that. So, here I am sneaking some PB and J because I know these bozos aren’t serving up a twenty-grand-worthy veal parm. You want?”

She pulled half a sandwich out of her clutch. I liked her immensely.

I shook my head. “No, thank you. I’m holding out for a milkshake afterward.”

She bit and chewed. “Good call. Love the hair by the way. Very badass babe.”

I patted the back of my head. “Thanks. Courtesy of the very pretty man.”

“He looks like that, and he does hair? Oh, honey, you grab him with both hands and hang on for dear life.”

We laughed a little too sincerely, drawing curious glances.

“Looks like your guy is looking for you,” Franchesca observed.

Derek was indeed scanning the crowd. And when he spotted me, I felt a frisson of energy shimmer over me. He didn’t look delighted. He looked... hungry. As hungry as I felt. Was there anything sexier than those long looks across a

crowded room where everyone else just melted into the wallpaper?

“Yowsa,” Franchesca mused behind me.

I wanted him. Even if it didn’t make sense. Even if it was a bad decision. I wanted Derek Price in my bed.

“Son of a bitch!”

Breaking Derek’s gaze, I turned back to Franchesca, who was dabbing at a glob of jelly on her cleavage.

I grinned. “Do you need a napkin?”

“Nah. Aide’ll get it later,” she said with a wicked wiggle of her eyebrow.

“I’d better get back out there,” I said, feeling a pang of regret.

“Go get ’em, tiger,” she said, taking another bite of peanut butter and jelly. “I’ll hold down the fort here for any other escapees.”

“It was nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said, her mouth full.

I met Derek in the center of the ballroom. The heavy wooden beams of the ceiling spoked outward above our heads. He ran his hands down my bare arms from bicep to wrist. An intimate, friendly gesture. I’d seen the man naked, but physically we’d remained squarely in our own space except for that kiss. We’d shared secrets. He’d styled my hair and bought me a dress that fit me like skin, yet I didn’t know his birthday or favorite baseball team or what he’d gone to college for.

It was an odd kind of intimacy.

“How’s the schmoozing?” I asked.

“Not quite as delightful as your company,” he told me, bringing my hand to his lips.

“So smooth,” I commented. “Have you lightened anyone’s pockets yet?”

The quirk of his lips quickened my pulse. “I’ve heeded your request and kept my hands to myself.”

Things in my core were heating up. Switches thrown. Buttons pushed. I felt good old-fashioned desire rev to life. He was picking up on it. I could tell by the spark in those unfairly blue eyes.

“Say the word, love, and my hands will roam wherever you let them.”

That pretty picture had a volcano erupting between my legs. What was it about this man that made me feel things?

“Derek?”

He leaned forward until my breasts brushed the crisp elegance of his jacket. My nipples tightened instinctively.

“Yes, Emily?”

“How do you feel about milkshakes?” I asked.

Those blue eyes cranked up the icy fire a degree or two. “Love them.”

“Would you like one after...”

“After what?” Derek asked. The question was practically a whisper. A quiet breath usually reserved for silky sheets and moonlight.

The hum of pleasure was a full-blown jet engine in my ears. It was simple biology. I had been bred to find a man in a tuxedo beddable. But tastefully so. With candles, a non-disclosure agreement, and a hotel suite. Not the kind of panty-ripping, half-clothed, dark alley fuck I was envisioning starring Derek Price.

“What goes on in that head?” he asked, cupping my chin.

“Surprise!”

My brother’s voice had never been more unwelcome in my life. That included the time he’d drunkenly fallen through the window into my bedroom when I’d been entertaining my prom date.

EMILY

“Trey?” It was too hard to shift gears between being unreasonably turned on and being blindsided by an unexpected brother. That’s when I remembered that my brother dearest’s absence was the reason I’d been forced to attend tonight’s event. “What are you doing here? I thought you were putting together some music festival?”

“Musicians are fickle bitches. It’s a cluster. Have you met Theolonia? She’s famous on the ’gram.” Trey pushed a large breasted beauty at me. She was chewing gum and texting. Mom would *love* her.

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” I said.

“Sup?” Theolonia said with a surprising baby-soft squeak. She hadn’t looked up from her phone yet. Though, to be fair, her phone case was an eye-catching glittery pink disco ball design with frolicking unicorns.

Behind me, Derek covered a soft laugh with a cough.

“Trey, this is Derek Price,” I said, dragging him up to face off against the cleavage that was considering an explosive escape from Theolonia’s candy pink gown.

“Ah, right. The fixer. This is probably an easy job for you since Em’s so squeaky clean,” my brother said, flashing his not-found-in-nature white teeth.

“Your sister is proving to be a fascinating challenge,” Derek said, eyeing me.

Trey threw his arm around his date's shoulders. "Yeah, right," he laughed.

My lifestyle of working hard, working out, and then going home and working some more was as abhorrent to Trey as his lifestyle was to me. We were baffled by each other.

Even now, both dressed to the nines, our differences were as pronounced as ever. He was cabana boy tan. His bow tie was unknotted and hanging loosely against the open collar of his shirt. His hair, a sun-kissed dirty blond, was long at the collar. He had our father's jaw and our mother's obsession with image. As far as I knew, he had never held down a job. His paycheck came in the form of regular payouts from the trust fund that he'd already "accidentally" drained twice. He was wearing the Rolex I'd given him for his twenty-fifth birthday.

Instead of the thank you I'd expected, he'd winced. "This isn't the one I wanted." Every time I saw that watch on his wrist, I wanted to punch something.

"Has Mom seen you yet?" I asked.

"Nope. Surprising all of you just like those soldier homecoming vids," he chirped. My brother really did believe him popping into the country, a big-breasted social media model on his arm, was exactly the same.

Sometimes I wondered why I loved him.

But again, I supposed it was something that had been bred into me. Trying to fight it was futile.

I made a mental note to be in the ladies room when Trey surprised my parents.

"Hey, listen, do you have a sec?" Trey asked, suddenly serious.

I knew exactly what was coming. "Sure," I sighed. "I'll be back shortly," I told Derek.

"I'll get you a drink," he said, eyes skimming to the still-full champagne flute in my hand. "Perhaps something stronger?"

The man was good. Intuitive. Sneaky. Smart. Sexy. *Would it be the worst thing in the world to let the “for the cameras” flirtation transition to behind closed doors?*

Trey led me out of the ballroom and into a hallway. Here the floors were covered in thick, luxurious rugs. The paintings were hung on gold, textured walls and highlighted under brass lamps.

“I need to talk to you about a job.” The man’s resilient hope, his ability to ignore reality in favor of the pretty picture he painted himself, reminded me of a golden retriever who expected his food dish to be magically refilled every hour on the hour.

“You’re getting a job?” I asked, feigning enthusiasm.

“I want to work with you,” he said, shooting me that Instagram-worthy smile. “I’m ready to settle down and join the family business.”

I set my glass down with a hard clink on the marble sideboard under a painting of a bare-breasted woman being wooed by a man with a harp.

“The family business,” I repeated, hoping I’d misheard him.

“Yeah. Flawless. I wasn’t ready before. But I am now. I want to work with you and Dad.”

My throat burned with the need to let loose a battle cry. But I tamped it down. Like I always did.

“Trey, Flawless is mine. It’s not a family business.”

“Yeah, but Dad—”

“Is on the board of directors. Yes. But I own the company. Flawless is mine, and no family connections will guarantee anyone a job there.” I still needed to scream.

Trey smirked. “Bet Lita wouldn’t like to hear you say that.”

The thing about brothers is they always knew exactly which buttons to push.

“This isn’t about Lita. This is about you.”

“It’s about us, Ems,” he said, slinging an arm around my shoulder. He pointed off down the hallway at some far-off vision only he could see. “Come on, the two Stanton brats working together. Making the world more beautiful one wrinkled-ass face at a time.”

Trey was buying what he was selling.

“And that right there is exactly why I’m not giving you a job,” I said, shrugging out from under his arm. “You have no idea what I do. What my company does. Go work for Dad if you’re so ready and willing to be gainfully employed.”

“Oh, come on, Ems,” he groaned. He kicked at the leg of the side table, nicking the wood with his velour loafer. “I can’t work for Dad.”

“Why not?” I had an idea exactly why not.

“Because I asked him already, and he said no. Then he got all high and mighty about earning my way and blah blah blah. What good is having a family fortune and a billionaire sister and not being able to get in on the action?”

I wanted to grab him by his too-long hair and bounce his forehead off the wall. Wouldn’t the cameras and the glittery people inside love that? Instead, I defaulted to my trademark frost.

“Oh, don’t go all ‘Lady Stanton’ on me.” He smirked.

I was going to need to squeeze in another kickboxing class this weekend or find some other way to blow off steam.

I thought of Derek, naked and hard. My sheets tangled around his legs. *Whoops*.

“Look, Trey,” I said, shifting gears. The man was my brother, after all. We were destined to spend Thanksgivings together forever. That didn’t entitle him to a job, but it did avail him of my vast business knowledge. “I’m not giving you a job. But if you’re serious, I’ll help you find something that suits you. *If you’re serious*,” I repeated.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe.” He gave a jerky shrug. A gesture I knew meant he was already over the conversation. He wasn’t serious. He never was. And I’d just given him the one thing he couldn’t stand: the word “no.”

“Are you out of money?” I asked.

“Not everything’s about money,” he said scornfully. “Anyway, whatever. I’m going to go talk to Mom.”

He left me standing there next to an artful arrangement of pink roses dripping with crystals and mossy greenery. I still felt like screaming.

Back in the ballroom, I avoided the family table and made a beeline for Derek. Somehow, in a ballroom of a few hundred of the glitziest people Miami had to offer, he still managed to stand out.

“How was your conversation?” Derek asked, handing me a martini.

“Riveting. Life-altering,” I muttered. “Where did our curvy friend go?”

“I babysat her until she said, and I quote, ‘Hashtag do you even ’gram?’” Derek said, in a spot-on impression of the breathy Theolonia. “And then I had to leave before I slapped the phone out of her hand and taught her how to make eye contact with people.”

We laughed until I had to grip his arm to stay upright.

“God, that felt good,” I said, swiping at the corners of my eyes.

“Allow me.” He fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and gently dabbed around my eye makeup. We were close again. Surrounded by people yet somehow all alone in the center of everything.

I felt light. Esther’s text. Meeting a jelly-swilling kindred spirit. Sticking to my guns against my brother. And now watching Derek Price laugh.

The orchestra played a little trill announcing the beginning of the dinner service, and—with a hint of reluctance—we

returned to the family table. My mother was swooning over Trey's surprise appearance. My father was having trouble looking away from Theolonia's chest. Fortunately, she had yet to raise her eyes from her phone and hadn't noticed.

"You're so terrible! Surprising your mother like this," Mom crooned. Two more chairs were produced. Because of course Trey had neglected to RSVP. I wondered who would cough up the \$40,000 for his and his date's dinners. We all squeezed in together. It would have been cozy had it been any other family than our own. We were seated with the hospital dean of medicine and her wife as well as Bethenny and her boyfriend, Ed, a country music producer who wore cowboy boots with his tux.

My mother wiggled a finger at a passing waiter and pointed at her empty glass.

My knee was pressed up against Derek's under the table, and damn if it didn't feel like an anchor.

"You would not believe what those ridiculous society blogs are saying now," Mom announced breathily. "Our Emily is quite the news item," she explained in an aside to the dean.

"Yeah, so popular with her most recent arrest," Trey said. He tapped his shot glass to Theolonia's. "Cheers, babe."

"Wait! Let me boomerang it," Theolonia whined.

Derek leaned back in his chair and caught the arm of one of the waitstaff. "We're going to need a very large bottle of tequila and several glasses," he whispered. "It's an emergency."

The waiter glanced over Derek in the direction of where Trey and his date were making out while taking selfies. "Right away," he promised.

"We're not getting shit-faced," I hissed at Derek.

"It's not for us," he said. "It's for the rest of the table."

"As I was saying, it seems the reporters think our Emily and Derek are scandalously dating," my mother piped up,

disappointed that attention had waned. “Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?”

Derek’s hand moved from the table to the back of my chair. Possessively, as if a challenge had been issued.

“What’s so ridiculous about it?” still-pissed Trey asked. “She had to pay off the cops to get out of a drug bust. You think nailing the help is beneath her?”

“Dean Winters,” Derek said, addressing the dean of medicine. “What will the funds raised tonight be used for?”

Dean Winters, a statuesque woman in a glittery blue pantsuit, looked relieved. Her wife twisted in the seat to block out the rest of the table.

The waiter returned with a bottle of tequila on a silver platter and a ring of glasses.

While the polite conversation was taken care of, I leaned in. “Both of your opinions are unwelcome and entirely unnecessary,” I said. My tone was so cold I swore the flowers in the centerpiece wilted at the edges.

“Oh, darling. Don’t be so dramatic,” my mother said, waving her hand dismissively. “I was only saying that these tabloids are just desperate to link you to *anyone* at all.”

That was *not* at all what she’d been saying.

“Why you refuse to find a respectable man and settle down is simply beyond me.” My mother was airing dirty family laundry in front of Bethenny while what was definitely *not* her second vodka tonic arrived.

Oh, she would have many, many regrets tomorrow.

“Venice, she’s running an empire. You can’t be serious that you want Emily to just shift her focus to finding a man,” Bethenny scoffed.

I could always count on my father’s ex-wife to get me in a way that my own mother couldn’t.

The first course arrived and was ignored by everyone.

“Why can’t she do both?” Mom demanded, accepting the refilled shot glass that Derek slid in her direction. “Weigh in here, dear.” She elbowed my father in the gut. He dropped his phone on the table and tucked his reading glasses back in his pocket.

“What are we talking about?” he grumbled.

“The new pediatric ICU wing,” Derek said.

“Your daughter getting married and starting a family,” Mom insisted with an inelegant snort. She was used to Dad not listening to her.

“Why the hell would she do that?” he harrumphed. “She’s got billions on the line, and you want her to what? Start internet dating?”

The barely touched salads were cleared efficiently and replaced with bowls of clear broth.

“Exactly,” Bethenny said, grinning at me. “Emily has more important things to do.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mom tittered. “What’s more important than love?”

By love, my mother meant financial security. And by financial security, she meant a man with money. It didn’t matter that I had my own. In Venice Stanton’s mind, a woman was one step away from destitution without a husband with a club membership and deep pockets.

Derek pushed more tequila shots at the dean and Mrs. Winters with a charming smile. *Just ignore the drunken elephant at the table*, it seemed to say.

“So, sis,” Trey began, “How many ounces did you have on you when you got busted?”

My brother had never matured much past fourth grade. And while I admittedly could still enjoy a well-timed fart joke, I had long ago learned the art of not throwing temper tantrums.

I’d told him no, and he was pushing back, completely unconscious of the fact that he was reinforcing my decision.

“Whoa, bro,” Theolonia said, her heavy fake lashes fluttering. “Why are you hashtag hating?”

“Excuse me, Pedialyte,” my father rumbled in her direction. “What the hell did you just say to your sister?” he asked my brother.

My father had no mob connections. I’d checked, hiring a PI when I was a teenager. But he still gave off that scary vibe, and I took the smallest bit of pleasure watching my brother shrivel miserably under his glare.

“Nothing, Dad,” he mumbled. He reached for the tequila.

“You’re damn right nothing. You haven’t earned the right to insult anybody. You’re a fucking sponge, my boy. So until you go out and earn a damn dollar the old-fashioned way, I don’t want to hear you snivel a single word about your sister.”

“Hashtag harsh,” Theolonia said, stroking a hand through her hair.

“Are those extensions?” Mom asked her.

Theolonia blew a bubble and nodded, staring down at her phone.

“When are you going to grow the hell up?” Dad leaned in aggressively. “When are you going to make something out of yourself?”

“He’s just a boy!” My mother argued. “He doesn’t need to rush into a job... or a relationship.” She gave Theolonia a pointed look.

“He’s thirty-three fucking years old, Venice!” my father announced loud enough for the hard of hearing.

The soups vanished, and in their places appeared small plates of chicken and greens. Bethenny and Ed commented loudly about how perfectly wilted the endive was.

The room lighting cast a purple glow, making everyone look a little ill, a little alien.

“Just so you know,” Derek said, his lips brushing my ear. “I’ll now require a burger in addition to that milkshake.”

DEREK

Thanks to the mounting tension of disappointed expectations and the second bottle of tequila, the dinner had taken a turn for the worse. Bethenny and Ed thoughtfully ushered off the dean of medicine and her wife to safer territory while the Stantons circled each other like sharks.

Well, three of the four of them did. Emily, the underwearless genius, sat sphinx-like in the midst, soaking up her family's bad behavior. When voices raised over Byron's tryst with a professional tennis champion, Emily folded her napkin neatly over her untouched veal and turned to me.

"Derek, would you like to dance?"

I'd itched to touch her all night. So much temptation tonight. A man could only hold out for so long.

I wasn't one to turn my back on opportunities. Opportunities opened doors. Opportunities changed lives.

"I'd be delighted." That was a lie. There was nothing delightful, or even reasonably socially acceptable, regarding my feelings toward her. I wanted to tear her dress from her. To shove my hands into her hair, raining down pins. I wanted to destroy every wall she'd ever built until there was nothing between us. I wanted to watch her come. Watch her let go. Be human. I wanted her to let me possess her.

She didn't have a clue about the dirty, annihilating thoughts I was having as she slipped her hand trustingly into

mine. She led the way to the dance floor, and I was content to follow.

There were other couples swaying to the orchestra. Moving in time. Appropriate and sedate. And I had a raging beast under my skin.

I stopped her in the middle of the floor and pulled her into me with a restrained violence. Need had stripped me of my manners. My propriety.

Her breath caught in her throat, and I savored that small noise.

I needed to remember my place. I wasn't here to ravage my client, lovely and irresistible as she was.

“What’s going through that mind of yours?” Emily asked, placing a hand on my chest. Oh, so proper. I could feel the years of etiquette and dance lessons in that delicate, restraining motion.

“Darling, I don’t think you really want to know.”

Her nostrils flared delicately like a doe scenting danger. “I think I really do,” she said quietly.

She wasn't soft or pliable. Emily Stanton was a challenge. A razor-edged, high-walled challenge. And there wasn't anything in this life that I enjoyed more.

“I’m thinking about tearing these to shreds,” I said, running a hand up her back, across her flesh, to finger the off-the-shoulder strap draped over her arm. “Then chasing you into some dark corner and watching your dress fall off those perfect breasts.”

Her eyes narrowed, the glassy blue-gray of them sparkling at me from under her thick lashes. Her lips parted a fraction of an inch, and I could envision them, pearly pink and plump, wrapped around the head of my cock.

I hardened at the speed of light. And I knew if she didn't let me into her bed tonight, I'd end up breaking my rule and spend an hour in the shower jerking off to every fantasy I'd crafted around Ms. Emily Stanton.

We were closer than appropriate. People were looking at us. And for once, I didn't care.

"Are you just trying to sell the story, Price?" she asked, her voice husky.

"I'm trying to get into your bed," I confessed, brushing my lips against her earlobe. Was she this smooth, this soft everywhere? I needed to find out.

"That's against the rules," she reminded me. "You've never taken a client to bed before. Unless, of course, that was a line."

I shook my head, letting my hand on her back skim down to rest on the subtle upper curve of her ass. "No line, love. I haven't before. But I'll live to regret it if you don't let me touch you."

Our grip on each other's hands tightened.

I wanted to pull her against me, to press my hard-on into the flesh of her belly. To show her exactly what it was that she did to me.

The swell of her breasts moved with her breath. "I can't believe dinner with my dysfunctional family didn't turn you off," she said lightly. She was turning it all around in that big brain of hers. Weighing decisions. Measuring data.

I was so hard I was afraid to breathe too deeply. My long-denied orgasm was on a hair trigger. And I realized I wanted to give her a sliver of the love and respect that her family should have been providing for years. The people who were supposed to love her and protect her were the ones inflicting the most damage. I wanted to fix it. To be what she needed.

"You're even more miraculous than I thought," I confessed. "To come from that?" I nodded in the direction of where Byron and Trey were glaring at each other over the second empty bottle.

"I didn't come out unscathed," she assured me with a laugh. "I'm mean. Aggressive. Cold."

"You're fucking terrifying," I agreed.

She laughed, delighted. My cock twitched between us, and I had the pleasure of watching her eyes widen.

“What’s more important to you, Derek? Your rules or your carnal urges?” she asked, her voice a low purr in her throat. I wanted to kiss my way up that slim column and nip at the skin behind her ear. I wanted to sample her, then gorge myself on her. She wasn’t scared or wounded anymore. She was a survivor.

“Having you is what I require to stay alive. A man could die of starvation.”

“Are you pressuring me?”

I shook my head. “I don’t mean to, but yes.”

“Sex isn’t some kind of spontaneous act. Not in my world,” she explained. “Blood tests, birth control, a controlled environment, a non-disclosure agreement for both parties.” She ticked off the items.

“Who knew billions of dollars could ruin the joy of sex?” I mused.

“You tease, but in my position, I have to be more careful than the average woman.”

“You fascinate me.”

“What? No ‘you know you can trust me’ statement?” she asked. She said it teasingly, but there was a heavy history there. One didn’t guard her position that carefully without having been burned before.

“Emily, the only thing I require from you is the permission to make you orgasm as many times as possible in whatever time you’re willing to give me.”

Her pupils dilated, and I felt her breath hot on my chin. I wanted to lean in and devour her whole in the midst of the glitz and glam and propriety.

“Tell me you don’t want me,” I whispered, begging her to lie to me. “Tell me you don’t want to know what it feels like to have me buried inside you, telling you how perfect you are, how good you feel. Tell me you don’t want to let me make you

come until you're boneless and breathless. Tell me you don't want to be worshipped just for being a woman."

"Jesus, Derek," she breathed.

"I want you, Emily. But I don't just want sex. I want to strip you down, layer by layer, and see you. Really see you."

The pulse at the base of her throat fluttered under her skin. The molecules of air between our bodies were charged with electricity. I was aware of every breath she took.

"I don't want to be seen. And I don't know if I want to be fucked into oblivion by you," she said, destroying my world with her words.

"With all due respect, darling, you're a shit liar."

Her grin was devastating.

"I'm not asking for a relationship. For an all-access pass to your life—"

"You already gave yourself that," she complained.

I gave her a wolfish smile. "Can you blame me? I want to be close to you. So close I feel you close around me like a fist while you're calling my name. Will you shout it? Whisper it? What will you look like when you let go?"

The color on her cheeks heightened.

"This is wildly inappropriate," she reminded me.

"This is life, Emily. Two consenting parties who agree that we don't require a fully functioning relationship in order to have a good time together."

"What do we require?" she asked with equal parts interest and suspicion.

"Hours. Uninterrupted. Uninhibited. Unhindered."

Her lips, painted in that glossy, tempting rose, curved.

"I need to think about it," she said softly. Her hand toyed with the hair on my neck, and I reveled at the touch.

"When you figure out exactly what you need from me to make your answer yes, tell me."

“And then?”

“I’ll remove any and all obstacles,” I promised.

A peal of laughter drew our attention. Venice Stanton was hanging on her son as they danced a poorly choreographed tango around their table.

“On that note, I think it’s time to go home. I have some thinking to do,” Emily said.

~

TRAFFIC HAD CLEARED and the limo was waiting for us out front. I slid into the back next to her on the bench seat. Her bare arm brushed the sleeve of my jacket, and I thought about how very close we were, yet, thanks to a few layers of material and all of Emily Stanton’s impressive invisible walls, we were still miles apart.

The slit of her gown parted over her leg as we pulled away from the curb. I admired the long, lean lines. Unable to help myself, I rested my palm on her thigh, just above the knee. Together, we stared down at my hand on her silky length of leg.

As far as touches went, it was practically platonic. Except for the microscopic strokes of my thumb.

She could think all she wanted, but I wanted those thoughts to be clouded with the perfume of lust. The material of her dress heard my darkest wishes and slid open, exposing more flesh.

I tested her, sliding my palm an inch higher. My pinky finger rested indecently on her inner thigh. Even in the dim light, I could see her nipples puckering against the material of her dress. Her breath was short.

“Just so you know, Emily,” I said conversationally, “I’ll be thinking about you tonight. I’ve held off as long as I can.”

She shifted ever so slightly in her seat, and the movement brought my hand higher still. That pinky finger was so close to heaven, I could feel her heat. One move and I’d be able to stroke right through those soft folds.

Was she wet for me? Was she throbbing with need like I was?

My cock had turned to stone during our dance and was showing no signs of transforming back to flesh any time soon.

“What will you do while you think about me?” she asked, gaze still glued to my hand.

My fingers flexed on her thigh.

I glanced toward the privacy glass and back to her. I was leaning into her, drawn to her with a gravitational pull. I could hear a heartbeat and wondered if perhaps it belonged to both of us.

“I’m going to go home, get in the shower, and stroke my cock while I think about spreading your legs and feasting on you.”

Her intake of breath was sharp. The material of her dress dipped low on her breasts. Those golden peaks were mere inches from my mouth.

“I’ll think about this moment, when I’m a breath away from you.” I brushed my lips softly over the curve of her breast millimeters from the nipple straining to escape. “I’ll think about how wet you’d be for my fingers.”

My finger curled back and brushed delicately over the seam of her folds.

Her breasts rose with her breath, begging for more. I traced my tongue along the edge of the dress, dancing over the circle of her areola. I was torturing us both. She had the power.

“And then?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“And then I’m going to come in my own hand wishing it was you.”

I gave her nothing more than the tip of my tongue, my finger. Leaving us both trembling with need. When the car came to a stop in front of her house, we broke apart like guilty teenagers.

I helped her out, discreetly adjusting my cock while she tugged her dress up to better cover the rosy tips that had just started to appear.

The ache was painful, and I knew one shower jerk-off wasn't going to put a dent in my pent-up frustrations.

“Walk me to the door, Price?” she suggested.

I waved off the limo and followed her past my car, up the winding walk, to her front door.

“Sweet dreams, Emily,” I said, fighting the urge to touch her. I'd given her enough. The ball, and my aching dick, were both in her court.

She turned to face me. Close. Too close. “Thank you for tonight, Derek,” she said, skimming her fingers over my lapels. Then they were clamping around the fabric, and she was pulling me in and down.

And her lips. God, those lips were slamming into mine and devouring me.

EMILY

*H*e tasted like sin. Exactly how I'd predicted and yet somehow more. Everything was more. He didn't kiss me back like a gentleman. No, Derek Price slammed my back into the front door. A beast off his leash.

I could stop him. I knew it. One tiny word, and he would walk away. He'd wait for me until I was ready. Until my requirements were met. Until I'd bled the passion out of it with those requirements.

"If you're going to send me home, it has to be now," he growled against my mouth as he ravaged it. "Tell me, Emily. Tell me to go."

I shook my head, sliding my hands under his jacket and digging my nails into his back. "Don't go. Make me come, Derek."

The beast roared. Or maybe it was just the blood in my head. He was done being proper. Shoving one hand in the top of my dress, his other hand dove into the slit of my skirt. He found my breast and slick folds at the same time.

I gave a ladylike gasp, a noise I was sure I'd never made before, as his tongue thrust into my mouth at the same time one thick finger slid into me. His knee parted my legs until I straddled his thigh.

"Fuck," he breathed. "Fuck."

“My sentiments,” I agreed, licking at his tongue as he invaded me everywhere. Hot fingers closed around my nipple and tugged. Hard.

Speaking of hard, the erection rooting against my abdomen was a miracle of nature. I’d been keeping close track of Derek’s dick all night. And by my calculations, the man had been hard for close to two hours now.

The scientist in me couldn’t wait to study the specimen up close. The woman in me was desperate for the pleasure I knew he’d provide.

“Emily, if you don’t open this door, I’m going to fuck you against it, and I’ve had this fantasy about you spread out on those lovely sheets of yours.” He added a second finger to my channel, working its way in with insistence.

“Door. Got it,” I said. Blindly, I punched in the security code with one hand while gripping his spectacular shaft with the other. “I’m on birth control, by the way. And my blood tests are clean.”

I could feel the pulse in his erection.

“God.” He thrust hungrily against my hand. “I’m clean. I can prove it. Download test results. Text them.”

“I trust you.” I wondered if he understood what I was telling him, the permission I was giving him. But then the door I was still pinned to was opening, and we both stumbled inside. He kicked it closed with a resounding thud.

“Thank God,” he breathed, still fucking me with his fingers.

There was a raw finesse there in the way he crooked them inside me, thrusting rhythmically. He was still in control, though just barely. I went for his belt and zipper, and as I did so, my dress gave up the fight, slipping just past my nipples.

The noise was primal as it rose from his throat. “If I start sucking on you now, I won’t be able to stop.” He brushed his thumb over one peak, and it pebbled like an instantaneous chemical reaction, a combustion.

No one had ever spoken to me like that. No one had ever been this raw with me. My body was clearly embracing it.

The house was dark, the only light coming from the moon reflecting off the water outside. I felt something hard at my back. The foyer table. A lovely marble top pedestal with cool lilies, no showy ranunculus this week.

“Turn around,” he said, pulling his fingers out of me and shoving me around. He bent me over the marble, shockingly cold against my breasts.

“What are you—”

But my question was lost as Derek shoved the skirt of my gown up around my waist. I felt him sink down, and then his broad tongue was lapping at my slit from behind.

“Gah!” My hands scrambled against the cool marble. He skimmed his palms up the backs of my thighs, over my ass cheeks, parting them ever so slightly. And then his tongue was spearing into me.

I was exposed. Vulnerable. Completely at his mercy. And so turned on I wasn't sure I'd survive this encounter.

“Derek!”

“Do you like this, love?” he asked between impatient laps.

“God, yes. Take your cock out. I want you stroking yourself,” I ordered.

He bit my ass cheek approvingly. “Oh, Emily. What a surprise you are.”

“Are you touching yourself?” I demanded.

I heard the tightness in his voice. “Yes.” Then his tongue was nudging the folds between my legs again. I could hear the whisper-soft sound of flesh stroking flesh. I could picture him on his knees behind me. Pleasuring me. Pleasuring himself.

This wasn't real. This was a depraved fantasy that I'd somehow wanted my entire life.

He didn't want me because of my last name. Because of my company or my bank account. Derek Price wanted to

conquer my body.

He grunted softly behind me, and my muscles rippled around the tip of his tongue.

“Come, darling,” he said, reading my body like a treasure map. He released his cock and used his hands to spread me wider, affording him a deeper angle.

I couldn't come like this. It was a physical impossibility. And then the orgasm exploded out of nowhere, fluttering around that very talented tongue as it danced and dipped, tasting me.

I slapped my hand against the marble as it rippled through me. It wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed him.

“Derek, please,” I begged.

“You want my cock, love?” he whispered between deft licks.

“Yes,” I hissed.

He eased back from me, the echo of the orgasm still drumming through my system. I straightened from the table and tore at my shoes. He rose, watching me with those ocean blue eyes. His fingers worked his tie free, and he shrugged out of his jacket, tossing it carelessly on the foyer floor. That magnificent cock hung heavily from his open zipper.

I backed away from him, my breasts still exposed, my dress still mostly on.

I saw the spark in his eyes. The desire to chase. And oh, God. I wanted to be chased.

“Where do you think you're going, Emily? I'm just getting started.”

The ache between my legs ratcheted up to pain.

I turned and ran, bare feet slapping as I dashed toward the bedroom. He caught me. Of course he caught me, those long legs eating up the distance between us. His arms banded around me from behind, and I reveled at the feel of his cock at my back. Brutally hard.

Caged within his arms, Derek marched me to the mirror in my bedroom. I wanted to be horrified by my reflection. Disheveled and glassy-eyed. My lips were swollen, lipstick smeared. As I watched, he unzipped my dress. Our eyes caught and held in the mirror. The sound of our breathing and the zipper as he dragged it down was the only noise.

“Watch,” he ordered, placing my palms on the cool glass. He slipped the dress down past my waist, hips, thighs, until it pooled uselessly at my feet. Slowly, decadently, Derek reversed the path with his broad hands. Starting at my ankles, they skated up my calves, thighs, over the curves of my ass and waist and higher until they cupped my breasts.

He leaned over my shoulder, teeth flashing. I gasped at the nip.

“I’m going to devour you, Emily.”

I didn’t doubt him for a minute.

While I watched. While my nails scraped at the smooth surface of the mirror, he tugged on both my nipples. Back and forth. Faster. Harder. I pressed my hips back against him, and he grunted in my ear.

“Who’s in charge here, love?” he asked.

“Let’s fight for it.” I pulled one hand off the mirror and reached around behind me to grip his shaft. Moisture leaked from the tip, dampening my back. Derek closed his eyes in the mirror as I worked my hand down to the root.

“Dammit, woman,” he hissed, bringing a hand up to cup my jaw from behind. We made an erotic tableau together in the mirror. I needed him inside me. Needed him pounding into me, racing me to an orgasm.

I released his cock and gripped my breast with my bare hand.

“Fuck,” he snarled. He whirled me around, his grip bruising. I decided to worry about how much I liked it later. His shirt was open but still on. I shoved it off his shoulders as he backed me toward the bed.

“Pants, Price.”

He maintained a grip on my arm and used his free hand to shove his pants down. His underwear, bold red briefs, were rolled down under the proud jut of his erection. The mattress caught the back of my legs, and Derek was falling with me, covering me.

“I want you in my mouth,” I whispered.

“Not this time, Emily.” He dipped down and latched on to one nipple.

I curled my fingers into the sheets, white-knuckling my grip on the world.

He sucked harder, my hips bowing up off the mattress. I needed to feel him against me. I wanted to guide the blunt crown of his cock through my slit. I wanted so much I was afraid one human being couldn't satisfy the magnitude of need.

“Hold still, love.” His voice was rough and low.

I flexed at the brush of his cock as he lined it up against me. The tip, that glorious blunt tip kissed my core. My breath was coming in pants, and Derek had me skewered with an intense, fiery gaze. It was too late. I knew this wasn't going to be some quick screw to blow off steam or just to get off.

This was something else entirely. Something I wasn't prepared for.

He fed his cock into me inch by luxurious inch. Big. Too big, I realized. But there was something else besides the wicked burn as I struggled to accommodate him. Something so darkly satisfying about feeling every ridge and vein of this thick shaft.

Exquisitely full.

He groaned. Agony. Ecstasy. Both were delicately intertwined in the moment that Derek Price hit bottom inside me.

We trembled while he held there, my knees pinned wide open as his hips settled between my legs.

He was bare. There'd been no condom. And I wanted to regret it. I'd been conditioned to regret it. But this *feeling*. This sleek, wet slide as he slowly dragged himself out of my body was too good to regret.

"It's so good it hurts," I whispered.

"Exactly," he answered, pressing his lips to my throat. "Exactly right."

Slowly, he slid back in, this time lifting my hips and adjusting. I hadn't taken him all before. But this time I did. The pain and inexplicable pleasure married in an experience I knew I'd never forget.

"I can't tell you how good you feel, Emily."

I dug my nails into his bare back, raking his skin. I urged him with my hips, encouraging him to go a little faster. Take me a little farther. Hurt me a little more.

"Show me," I urged him.

I grabbed him by the hair and pulled him down to kiss me, and then we were rolling. Shallow thrusts as we moved from back to side to back. I came out on top, and the sensation of sliding down his cock, of filling myself with him, made my eyes roll back in my head.

It was too much.

Derek reared up and wrapped his arms around me.

He closed his mouth on my breast, and I began to ride. Sweat glistened on our skin. Whispered words and hot breath. Hard mouths. Thirsty tongues met and tangled. I needed this. I needed him. He held my hips, helping me set a new pace, his cock piercing me every time I lowered onto it.

"So fucking good," he groaned.

I dug my fingers into his shoulders and held on for dear life. We were intertwined, connected, united. The feel of his bare cock stretching my inner walls was too much.

"Derek. I'm coming," I warned him.

"Give it over, love. Give it to me."

He whispered dark, dirty promises and prayers in my ear as I rocked my hips into him. I whimpered when he pushed a little deeper, and that was it. That was enough. It exploded inside me.

His guttural grunt made me come harder. And then he was tensing, flexing into me, until he came. My orgasm forced his, taking it hostage. He quaked under me, and I felt the hot slickness of semen as he came inside me. Moaning softer even as his hands gripped my hips harder.

Never. I'd never allowed that to happen in my entire sexual career. I was so glad it was him. That we were sharing this moment of rawness. That we were as close as two people could physically be.

The tremors slowed and gentled, and we were left spent, still connected.

DEREK

For the second morning in a row, I woke in Emily's bed. However, this time I was alone between the sheets. It was still dark outside, and I could dimly make out a figure tiptoeing from the room.

I snapped on the bedside light. "Going somewhere?"

Emily, clutching a pair of trainers to her chest, looked guilty as she attempted to creep out of her own bedroom.

I lifted up on an elbow and shot her a judgmental raise of my eyebrow.

"I work out early," she said, her voice husky even in its defensiveness. She was wearing a pair of running shorts and a tight, cropped tank over a power red sports bra.

"I'll join you," I said, throwing off the covers and getting out of bed. I had a gym bag in my car.

"Oh... Um." Emily appeared to be hypnotized by my naked body. "You don't have to."

That was Emily Stanton code for "I'm feeling entirely too vulnerable right now, and I want to be alone to rebuild my walls."

I wasn't going to let that happen.

"Come now. I thought you'd be used to it by now," I said smugly, gesturing toward my cock, which had decided it too was awake and ready to salute the morning.

“You really don’t have to stay if you don’t want to,” she said, biting on her bare lower lip. Her hair was disheveled, and there was a distinct bite mark on her shoulder. She looked thoroughly ravaged. And conflicted.

I grabbed my pants from the floor and stepped into them.

“I’m staying,” I insisted.

“Fine. Okay. I’ll, uh, meet you...” She waved her hand in the general direction of the gym, still watching me.

I pressed a chaste kiss to the top of her head and headed for my SUV.

Minutes later, dressed in my own gear, I found her in the glassed-in gym. The sky was starting to lighten, and I could make out a pod of dolphins playing—or humping, I wasn’t sure—just offshore.

I opened the door and stepped inside to the thumping beat of a workout playlist. It was a sleek, utilitarian space. The floors were speckled cork and ran under every imaginable piece of fitness equipment. Tucked under a countertop, there was a small glass-doored fridge stocked with water and electrolyte drinks. Towels were neatly rolled and stacked in cubbies. The patio doors opened directly onto the pool area.

Everything was elegantly and efficiently designed. Just like the rest of Emily’s life.

Her long legs under short shorts ate up the belt on one of the treadmills. She was already sweating, her eyes fixed on the water just steps from the windows. I sat on a weight bench and watched her while I laced my shoes.

“That’s not burning any calories, Price,” she called.

“I’m trying to recall if I’ve seen a prettier view first thing in the morning,” I said.

She snorted and shook her head, sending her ponytail swinging.

I chose the rower next to her treadmill and cinched my feet in place.

With a breath, I pushed off and pulled back, feeling the muscles in my back bunch and release with each stroke. We worked in silence, sweating and breathing to the beat of the music. I liked starting my day with a workout. The gym in my condo building was adequate. But it certainly wasn't as well-equipped as this. There was no panoramic bay view. No Emily.

No—

“Are those dolphins—”

“Humping,” Emily supplied with a grin. “They’re pretty frisky.”

“Lucky mammals.”

Sweat beaded on my skin as I powered through each stroke.

Emily’s step never faltered beside me.

When she finally stepped off the treadmill and moved to the free weights, I helped myself to a water and loaded up a bar.

“Wraps and clips are in there,” she said, nodding toward a set of gray metal lockers along one wall.

I helped myself and worked through a set of clean and jerks, pretending not to notice her gaze glued to my ass in the mirror. She could play it as cool as she wanted, but I knew last night had affected her. Just as it had me.

I stripped off my shirt and tossed it in the direction of the door.

Emily bobbed the hand weight, and it fell, knocking over her water bottle.

When our gazes met in the mirror, I winked, and she rolled her eyes.

“Okay. Fine. I feel awkward. Happy now?” she said, trading the weights for a mat.

I grinned. “Ecstatic.”

“I’m not used to... whatever this is.”

“Intimacy?” I prodded.

“Invasion,” she corrected.

I dropped my bar and laid another mat next to hers. She started a set of crunches. I followed suit.

“You could send me on my way,” I told her, puffing out a breath and I contracted my abs.

“I could,” she agreed, switching to V-ups.

I followed her lead. “But you don’t want to?”

“I’m not clear on what I want,” she corrected.

“Do you want more of last night?” My dick went instantly hard in my shorts, reveling in some of the more vivid details of the night before.

She collapsed back onto the mat. “I don’t know if I can survive more of last night,” she laughed weakly.

“I’m up for trying,” I offered heroically.

She slapped me playfully in the gut, making my cock twitch.

“It was good,” she said.

“Very good,” I agreed, rolling onto my side.

Those blue-gray eyes studied mine seriously. “I want more,” she admitted. “But I can’t tell if it’s a catastrophic idea or just very, very bad.”

“And won’t it be fun finding out?” Testing, I leaned over and brushed my lips against hers. Gentle. Teasing. When I pulled back, she sucked her lower lip into her mouth.

“I don’t have time for fun,” she admitted.

“You forget. I run your calendar. I’m happy to pencil in sex, naps, perhaps some naked happy hours.”

Her smile was slow as she trailed her fingers down over my chest to my stomach. “Your shirtlessness makes a compelling argument.”

“Let me take my shorts off,” I volunteered.

She laughed. A real laugh, and I felt a brightness in my chest.

“You should do that more often,” I told her.

“What? Sweat all over the floor?”

“Laugh.” I kissed her again, enjoying the salt and softness. She was spectacular.

“Steve,” she said, putting her hand on my chest.

“No. Derek.”

“No,” she laughed. “Steve. I have to feed Steve. He doesn’t like it when I’m late.”

~

STEVE WAS eight feet of hissing alligator at the end of a long lagoon dock marked “Steve’s House” in the center of the enclave.

“So that’s really an alligator with a prosthetic leg,” I asked, observing the reptile as it opened its massive jaws.

“It is. One of the residents had his lab print a 3-D stump for him. Poor guy lost it to a boat propeller and kept swimming in circles. He couldn’t be released into the wild, so we let him stay,” Emily explained. “Ready, big guy?”

She held a rotisserie chicken over the railing. I pulled my phone out of the pocket of my gym shorts and snapped a picture.

“Has he ever eaten any residents?” I asked.

Steve hissed as if offended, and Emily tossed him the chicken.

He snapped it up with one prehistoric lunge. I got him mid-jump.

“We have a deal. He gets fed every day as long as he doesn’t snack on any Bluewater pets. He’s pretty chill.”

“I’ll have a mai tai, sweetheart!”

I whirled around at the flash of color, and feathers alighted on the dock's railing.

"Hi, Frank," Emily said wryly.

"Nice tattoo, shithead," the fat parrot said.

"Am I hallucinating right now?" I asked, fascinated.

"I'm afraid not," she told me. "Frank is our free-range jerk. His previous owner was an asshole. As you might have guessed."

"And now he lives here in Bluewater?"

"His previous owner died—bar fight, surprise surprise—and Frank here escaped the animal rescue that came for him. Bit the animal control officer in the ear and took off. He ended up here when the landscaping started going in."

"And you let him stay?"

"What are you lookin' at, dickhead?" Frank asked Steve, bobbing his colorful head.

The alligator hissed his response.

"We haven't figured out how to get rid of him," she confessed.

"Nice tits!" Frank squawked before buzzing Steve and flying off toward the beach.

"You know, I'm never bored around you, love," I told her.

She bumped my shoulder, and together we strolled down the meandering path that led back to her house. The greenery was lush in the early morning sun. Established palms created a natural canopy above us. Oleander, bougainvillea, and other glossy green plants formed a lush, jungle-like underbrush that made everything feel secluded. Despite the multi-million-dollar mansions tucked behind greenery and gates, Bluewater felt like a deserted paradise.

Alone in some tropical paradise. As far as trysts went, this one was going down in my history books. Though I wished Emily would give me some clue as to how she felt about last night.

Our romantic seclusion was interrupted by a pink jogging-suited senior holding hand weights and puffing hard as she speed-walked toward us. There was a significantly younger, muscled man following her in a golf cart, shouting instructions through a bullhorn.

“Morning, Mrs. Esteban,” Emily said.

“Looks like *someone* had a good night,” the woman said with a knowing smirk. She had a flower bandana tied over her pewter curls. Ten-karat diamond studs bobbed in her ears.

Emily gave her neighbor a guilty smile. Mrs. Esteban peered over her bifocal sunglasses and gave me a saucy wink.

“Less flirting. More walking,” the tanned trainer shouted.

She picked up the pace, and the golf cart whirred past us.

“You live in a very strange neighborhood,” I said.

Emily laughed. We were quiet for a few minutes as we wandered in the direction of her home. My muscles were warm, and my body felt deliciously loose and well-used.

“About last night,” she began.

Finally. My patience had run its course, and I'd been thirty seconds away from demanding to have a “let's label this thing” conversation. “Yes?”

Emily stopped on the path and tentatively wound her arms around my neck. “It was good. Great.”

And or but. I couldn't tell which way she was leaning.

“And?” I prodded, hopefully.

“And I think I'm onboard with revisiting it.”

I picked her up, lifting her feet off the path. Relief was a bright beacon of light in my chest. “I'll pencil you in,” I teased.

“You do that, Price,” she said with a laugh.

“What are we doing today?”

She bit her lip. “I think I can afford to be a little late to the office this morning.”

“Working on a Saturday, love?” I tsked. “I seem to recall insisting that you take your health more seriously.”

“Thanks to you, I’ve had two of the best nights’ sleep in recent memory. And I’m willing to allow you to feed me breakfast,” she said magnanimously.

I kissed her. Less gently this time. More demanding. Letting her body skim mine, I set her back on her feet.

“Last night,” she began. “When you said I dazzled you?”

“Yes?” I kissed her again.

“Well, the feeling’s mutual,” she confessed.

“Does that mean you’d be open to labeling this... thing?” I asked, skimming her jawline with my thumbs.

“Always negotiating,” she sighed.

“This is something special, Emily.”

“Neither one of us has time for special,” she reminded me.

“We’re idiots if we don’t make time,” I warned.

“Oh, hey there, Emily,” a voice sing-songed.

“Shit,” Emily hissed.

Luna and Cam, in pajamas holding what appeared to be mimosas, sat in a tricked-out golf cart. They were grinning maniacally.

“Uh, hey, guys,” Emily said lamely. “Everyone knows Derek, right?”

“Hi, Derek,” the girls purred.

“Ladies,” I said, refusing to allow Emily to escape my grasp.

“Fancy running into you here, Emily,” Luna said with a wicked grin. “Cam and I were just talking, and we’re calling an emergency DQB tomorrow.”

“Be there,” Cam insisted.

Emily winced. “Yeah, that should be fine.”

“Great! Toodles!” Luna said, whipping the wheel of the golf cart and spinning around.

“Your friends certainly know how to make an entrance. What’s a DQB?”

“Drag Queen Brunch.”

EMILY

*T*his was a mistake, I thought as I watched Luna and Cam tool off in the golf cart. But, at the very least, it was one that I was intentionally making. This wasn't an accidental misstep. This was an on-purpose disaster. And I planned to enjoy every moment of it, I decided, as Derek laced his fingers through mine.

I was taking an early morning stroll through Bluewater with the man who had delivered so many orgasms to me last night I'd lost count in a fog of boneless satiation.

The board would be furious. My mother would be appalled. My friends would demand details. And I just wasn't nearly as worried about all of it as I should be.

"How did our little 'not-so-faking it for the cameras' charade play last night?" I asked him. Not keen on exposing myself to the sharp troll talons, I'd yet to look at my phone. I also didn't want to deal with my mother's morning-after debriefing. If there was a god, the woman was still dead asleep and would wake up with a raging hangover that would render her unable to call me.

He freed his phone from his pocket again and thumbed over the screen while we walked.

I liked him like this. Casual gym clothes, messy hair, irresistible stubble. Yes, there was shower sex in my immediate future.

"Very flattering," he mused, squinting at the screen.

He turned the phone to me.

Emily Stanton steps out with babysitter date

Billionaire babysitter Derek Price

Stanton and Price stun at gala

The photos were flattering. My hair and dress made quite the statement. I looked badass. And Derek in his tux and broody good looks was the perfect complement.

“We look like some kind of cologne ad,” I laughed.

“Painting a picture, darling. Now, what wasn’t mentioned in any of those little headlines?”

“No salacious mention of drugs or arrests and collapses,” I noted, impressed. “You didn’t sleep with me just to add authenticity to your rumors, did you?”

He smacked me on the butt. “Very funny.”

“My hair,” I said, still studying the photos. “I loved it.”

“It was very you,” he said, tucking his phone back into his shorts and slinging an arm around my shoulders.

In this moment, we were just two regular people enjoying a lazy Saturday morning together.

“I don’t suppose your hair talent extends to cuts,” I mused, tugging the end of my still-damp ponytail.

He gave me—or, more accurately, my hair—a contemplative look. “What do you have in mind?”

“Something short and badass.”

He stopped me on the path and cupped my jaw, moving my head this way and that. “I might have an idea,” he said with a slow, sexy grin.

He started walking again, pulling me along behind him.

“Wait! You didn’t confirm whether or not you were able to operate scissors responsibly!”

~

“YOU’RE SURE YOU TRUST ME?” Derek asked, snipping the scissors in my face. I was perched on a barstool on my patio. A pool towel draped around my shoulders. Nerves in the form of my mother’s disapproving voice had my pulse hammering.

Did I?

The man routinely broke into my house. He picked pockets as a hobby. Professionally, he manipulated public opinion. And yet...

I nodded. “I trust you... with my hair,” I said, feeling the need to add the caveat.

“Well, it’s a start.”

He finger-combed my hair, still damp from our—ahem—post-workout shower. The man was a biological marvel. My body responded to him like it was starved for him. I slammed my eyes closed as a good four inches of tasteful blonde hair fluttered to the terrace.

“Do you often cut your lovers’ hair?” I asked, feeling the flutter of nerves and excitement in my stomach. Fortunately, the nerves didn’t run deeper, and my intestines stayed unknotted. To most, it was simply a haircut. To me, it was a long overdue statement.

“My styling skills are exclusive to my mother’s hair,” he said, snipping away cheerfully.

“You get to cut the hair of the hair stylist? That’s the highest industry praise.”

He moved in front of me, eyes still on my hair. He lifted my chin and clamped a comb in his teeth.

I loved the feel of his hands in my hair. So competent. Confident. Intimate.

I did trust him. And it didn’t make sense. But not much in my life did at this point.

“She got sick a few years ago,” he explained around the comb.

Snip. Snip. Snip. He took the comb out of his mouth and ran it through my hair.

“Cancer. Chemo. I cut her hair for her. Then shaved it when it was time. She refused to let any of us shave our heads in solidarity, though,” he said fondly. “Hair, especially other peoples’, is very important to my mother.”

“How is she now?” I asked.

“Healthy as a thoroughbred horse,” he said with pride.

Snip. Snip.

He paused and squirted some product into his hand. Rubbing his palms together, he studied me. Cocky now. “Yes. This will work,” he decided, shoving those hands into my hair and massaging at the roots.

“Your family sounds close,” I ventured.

“We are,” he agreed. “We’ve always been on the same team. My mother demands complete loyalty. You’ll see when you meet her.”

“I’m not meeting your mother,” I scoffed.

“I’ve already met your parents. It’s only fair. Besides, you’ll like mine.”

“We’ve spent exactly one night together. That is *not* meet-the-parents territory.”

He ran his fingers through my much, much shorter hair again. “Relax, love. I’m not trying to declare my undying love for you. I’m trying to find a way to show off this incredible cut to my mother,” he said, handing me a mirror.

My hair was still damp, but with the cut and the product, oh, I liked what I saw. Blonde hair came to an abrupt stop at my jaw. From a deep side part, it swooped across my forehead with volume and attitude. It looked confident, sexy. Badass.

“Some texturizer and a little drying time, and you’re set,” Derek said, crossing his arms and admiring his handiwork.

I bit my lip. “It looks good, Derek. Really good.”

“Darling, you could shave your head and tattoo your scalp and you’d still be stunning. But this,” he ruffled my hair, letting it fall over my eye. “This is you.”

I felt my mouth curve in a self-satisfied smile. “It really is, isn’t it?”

“I’m glad you recognize yourself,” he said with a smirk.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, still admiring the cut, the layers, the texture.

“You spend most of your time picking out masks. It’s nice to see you being you for once.”

“I don’t wear masks,” I argued, handing the mirror back to him. I rose and brushed stray hairs off me.

“You have your Office Emily, your Lunch with Mother Emily, your Day in the Lab Emily,” he said, ticking them off on his fingers.

“There are expectations,” I began, sliding off the stool and shaking the towel out.

“The only expectations I’m concerned with are yours.”

“I *expect* my stylists to keep their opinions to themselves,” I shot back.

He grinned dangerously at me. “Why start now? You have a tremendous opportunity here, Emily. You’re starting fresh.”

I stepped back when he made a move toward me, but he was faster. I found myself hauled against his chest.

“You, Emily Stanton, are one-of-a-kind. It would be a damn shame if you waste one more second of pretending to be something you’re not to make someone else more comfortable. Be yourself in all situations. Wear your red lipstick into the lab. Address your board in kickboxing gear. Take a day off. Cut your damn hair when you feel like it. You’re in charge. And you’re going to win.”

I breathed him in. Feeling the sun on my skin. The breeze lifting my new hair. My body warmed at his touch. This all felt

so new. There was an energy here. A momentum. A buzz of excitement for what was next.

The dread that had been my shadowy companion for the past few weeks was dissipating. And for the first time, I felt like I could see the sunshine at the end of a very long tunnel.

“I can’t wait,” I whispered.

“For what?” he asked, brushing indecent kisses down my exposed neck.

“To tell the girls you cut my hair. There will be swooning,” I predicted.

He laughed softly. “Do you like it?”

I shook my head. “I *love* it.”

I thought he’d kiss me then, but those blue eyes rivaling the saltwater behind him fixed on my face.

Slipping my arms around his neck, I tugged at the hairs that curled there. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“Thank you for letting me see you.”

His lips were warm and firm as they moved over mine.

“Want to show the dolphins how it’s done?” I teased.

EMILY

Usually in my personal outings, I opted to go incognito. Normal-sized sunglasses. A bag that didn't scream "I'm very, very expensive." An SUV as opposed to the Porsche or a chauffeured limo. But this was not just any outing.

This was Drag Queen Brunch.

Mordecai's Bistro on Las Palmas Boulevard hosted a weekly brunch with the best drag queen entertainers and servers in the business. The Bluewater Billionaires—or vagillionaires, as Daisy called us—picked one Sunday a month and never missed it.

I made my entrance five minutes late in designer cut-offs, a blousy white top, and red wedge sandals. My sunglasses were enormous. My jewelry tasteful but eye-catching. My hair, short voluminous perfection.

Cam, Luna, and Daisy were huddled in one of the black leather horseshoe-shaped booths along the back wall, no doubt gossiping about my overnight guest.

"Ladies," I said, sliding in next to Cam, who, despite the day of the week, was wearing one of her impeccable suits.

"Your hair!" Luna breathed, fluttering her hands in front of her face like she was short on oxygen. The dozen bracelets on her wrists jingled. "I can't even."

"You motherfucking badass," Daisy screeched. She was wearing a silk pajama romper and what looked like six-

figures' worth of jewelry. In reality, she was the motherfucking badass.

I tucked my sunglasses into my bag, and Cam leaned into my personal space. "What's with the smug face?" she demanded.

"I can't be smug about a haircut?" I asked innocently.

Cam eyed me suspiciously, then sniffed. "I smell Derek Price."

I picked up my menu, the picture of innocence. "Derek cut it for me," I said casually. "Oh, look! They brought back the Bloody Mary bar."

Daisy reached across the table and snatched the menu out of my hand.

"A man you are allegedly having a scorching hot affair with gave you this badass cut?" she demanded.

"It's not so alleged anymore," I said.

"I really, really want to hate you right now." Cam sighed, dissolving against the booth cushion.

"You just need to stop working so much and get laid," I said knowledgeably.

"I definitely hate you," Daisy decided.

"What we're all trying to say is that we're so happy to see you finally expressing yourself sexually," Luna said diplomatically.

"I've expressed myself sexually before," I scoffed.

"Babe, you strutted in here with an orgasm count tattooed on your forehead," Daisy said. "That's a freakin' first."

"Tell us everything," Cam insisted. "Be generous with your details."

"I saw the pics from that gala Friday night," Daisy said, emptying her champagne flute. "You looked divine. Everyone was too busy predicting wedding dates and pregnancy

announcements to talk about that Merritt Van Bullshit garbage.”

“Your hair is so fucking fabulous I’m literally going to die.” Lady Raquel was our favorite server at Mordecai’s. She was six-feet-five in her favorite silver sparkle platforms. Today, her hair was Marilyn Monroe platinum with turquoise and purple highlights that perfectly matched the mermaid scale bodysuit and cape. She wore a three-inch thick faux diamond choker and chandelier earrings that weighed as much as barbells.

I fluffed my hair. Compliments on hair or makeup from a drag queen were serious business. “Thank you, Lady Raquel.”

“You didn’t compliment me on my pink extensions, Lady Raquel,” Daisy complained.

“Oh, honey. That’s because they looked like C-list club wear. I expect more from you,” Raquel said, flashing Daisy an imperious look from under her spider leg eyelashes. “Now, who’s ready for a round of drinks?”

We ordered and settled in for the standard catch-up. Even living in the same neighborhood on the same fallopian tube, our schedules were busy enough we sometimes got our news from gossip blogs and headlines.

DQBs were spent dispelling fiction from fact.

Luna filled us in on her latest dating escapades. She was sugary sweet beneath her flawless vegan exterior. But being busy and constantly on brand, she always seemed to attract six-packed, hemp-wearing yoga and surf instructors with names like Kale.

Cam gave us the non-specifics about a new government contract she’d landed. And Daisy told us about the yacht flotilla she was joining for a long weekend in the Bahamas.

“Enough about my fabulous single life,” Daisy said. “Tell us more about Sexy Pants Price.”

Ruby DeeLicious, a petite queen in a rainbow corset and fishnet stockings, led a group of women to the open table next to us.

“They’re here,” Luna hissed in delight.

There were three reasons we liked Mordecai’s. One, the omelets were perfection. Two, Lady Raquel and company were too fabulous for words. Three, the romance novelists.

Three women strolled past the table in the midst of a number of different conversations. The first, in turquoise glasses, was nearly bouncing out of her own skin. “So then, I was like of course a blow job is the answer!” she yelped at two times the appropriate decibel.

The next woman was taller and dressed in pajama pants that were in desperate need of laundering. She was swearing at her phone. “I told the kids that if they didn’t stop farting in each other’s faces I was going to take their Legos. Now they’re texting me sad selfies promising a fart-free weekend.”

“Don’t fall for it,” the third woman advised. She was wearing a Give Me Coffee or Give Me Death t-shirt. “They mean it now, but they’re just going to get hopped up on cereal, and all good judgment goes out the window.”

“How have you survived homeschooling?” The first woman asked.

“My kids are abnormally good. Like we’re actually concerned. Now, back to the blow job...”

They slid into the booth next to us, and we pretended not to eavesdrop on every word.

“Where’s my favorite?” I asked in a low voice. “I hope she’s not on deadline again.”

“Agh! Sorry I’m late. Apparently, I don’t know how clocks work.” Another woman still wearing sunglasses bounded up to the booth. Her sweaty workout tank was on inside out. She was pawing through her bag. “I think I lost my phone again.”

“It’s in your hand,” the first one pointed out.

“I’m so happy right now,” Luna sighed.

“Shh!” Daisy hissed. “I want to find out what happens to Salvio in book five.”

The night after we met six years ago, our hungover foursome had stumbled into Mordecai's seeking sustenance and the hair of the dog. What we'd discovered was a kinship and four romance novelists in the next booth.

At first, we thought we were overhearing a murder plot.

"So then I thought, 'Okay, maybe I can just stab him to death.' You know? Like really violent because he deserves it, right?"

"Totally. He's a dirtbag, and everyone is going to agree with that."

"But then I was like, 'How can there be sex immediately after this super violent stabbing.'"

"Good point. That would be a little sociopathic."

"But if I kill him in a funny, light-hearted way—like say he's run over by a bratwurst truck—then..."

"Blow jobs for everyone!"

Luna and I had wondered if we should call the police.

Daisy was more interested in who they were murdering because he sounded like a guy she dated once, and according to her, he totally deserved to be murdered.

Meanwhile, Cam had snuck a photo of the booth's occupants and ran an image search.

And that's how we discovered they were contemporary romance novelists in the midst of plotting out a project.

Ever since, we'd been occupying the booth next to them, reading their books, and eavesdropping on their conversations.

We'd never shared more than polite nods over menus or in the restroom. I don't think any of us wanted to ruin the mystique. But there was something about eight women, living their best lives, downing pitchers of Bloody Marys, and sharing stories that reassured me that the world could be a very good place.

"Dammit. They're talking about grocery delivery," Daisy sighed. "I need to find out if Salvio is going to freak out when

he finds out his twin brother accidentally married his crush in Vegas.”

“I wish I could write love stories,” Luna sighed.

“It sounds like Emily’s living one,” Cam pointed out.

“We’re not in love. We’re in lust. It’s very healthy and full of boundaries and explicit expectations.”

“Mmm, explicit,” Daisy said, wiggling on the bench seat.

“What’s going to happen with the board?” Cam asked. “They’re not going to be pleased that the fixer they hired is now spending a good amount of his time keeping you in bed.”

I winced. “It was supposed to be a ploy. Give them something shinier and sexier to talk about than a near-arrest. And we got carried away.”

Daisy clapped. “It’s about damn time Emily Stanton got carried away with something besides reams of data and business reports.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m hoping that the ploy part of it deflects from all the rumors surrounding my little fainting spell.”

My friends shared a telling look. I could only imagine the headlines I was avoiding. *Emily Stanton’s overdose. Emily Stanton’s secret baby.* Or worse, the truth: *Emily Stanton too weak to carry the mantle of the company she built.*

But I didn’t need to waste my time worrying about public opinion. That’s what Derek was for. That and aggressive orgasming.

“So let me tell you about Derek’s shower guest and his unprepared ass,” I said, changing the subject before the mood could falter.

“You went up the butt on him?” Cam’s mouth formed a perfect O.

“I don’t care who you are. That’s hot,” Daisy said.

“Anal play can lead to a new level of vulnerability in relationships,” Luna added helpfully.

“Oh, it wasn’t me. It was Brutus.”

Lady Raquel breezed by and dropped another pitcher of Bloody Marys on the table. She gave a glittery wink.

The novelists next-door erupted into giggles over a sex scene gone bad.

Right now, everything was good. And I was going to do everything in my power to keep it that way.

DEREK

*M*y office on a Sunday looked much like my office on a Wednesday. I was going to have to re-institute required weekends off for the team.

It wasn't that I was a whip-cracking, demanding boss. I'd simply hired people who cared very deeply about their jobs.

Which was why I was in the midst of a Chinese-takeout-fueled informal staff meeting on a Sunday afternoon.

Rowena pointed her chopsticks at one of the screens on the wall. Her feet, clad in scarred combat boots with magenta laces, were propped up on the metal top of the conference table. "Okay, screen one," she said around a mouthful of pork lo mein. "These are Emily Stanton's highest performing social media posts in the past month. Pre- and post-kerfuffle."

We didn't like the term "scandal." Created by my very *creative* team, our rating scale of undesirable situations began at Oops and escalated to the top with WTF. WTF was reserved for Code Black, angry mob, nuclear fallout. Emily's situation fit in at kerfuffle on the higher end of challenge but still winnable.

Rowena walked us through the data—no real surprises. A large swing of general attention. A significant uptick in negative perception. Trolls had crawled out of the woodwork to add their worthless two cents.

Even after all these years of "fixing," it surprised me how many people took such vicious pleasure in eviscerating their fellow humans. Often for such infractions that included having

the audacity to star in a movie, write a book, or—God forbid—not be a size eight or smaller. Were I a bigger person, I would feel pity for them. But I wasn't. So I simply wished each one of them a scorching case of herpes and moved on with my day.

“So our beloved data whores coughed up this gem,” Rowena said, clicking to the next slide.

The data whores—or analysts, as they were called for human resource purposes—were Ancarla, a former CIA analyst, and Roger, a world champion gamer/semi-pro hacker, that I had enticed into the corporate world with generous bonuses and flexible schedules. Half the time they didn't even come into the office, and when they did, one of them was invariably in pajama pants. Somehow, I'd ended up with both of them present on a Sunday.

Ancarla chomped on a stem of black licorice, dessert to her beef and broccoli, and then pointed it at the screen.

“You'll see the spike in media mentions here the night of the kerfuffle. It's stayed consistently high since. The smiley face line denotes our measurement of public positivity—likes, nice comments, wardrobe items selling out, etc. The barfing face line represents the trolls, the baddies, the ‘how dare you be a human’ judgies.”

Every time the vomiting faced negative line redrew itself, a fart noise sounded.

I was the only team member over the age of thirty, and sometimes they made me feel like I was over seventy.

“Stanton had a pretty sterling rep prior to this deal,” Roger said, picking up the thread. He had an open energy drink at his elbow and two iPads in front of his sweet and sour soup. “Squeaky clean, kinda boring. Should have called us in before this deal to make her more likable.”

I agreed with that assessment. But most leaders didn't realize they could use some humanizing in the public's perception until it was too late.

“The baddies have a good run for these dates. And then—”

“Along comes Derek Price in a tux with his hand just coasting into inappropriate ass grab territory,” Rowena observed.

The image I’d posted to Emily’s Instagram from last night appeared on the screen.

“Daaaaaaaamn,” Lance said, pretending his glasses had steamed up.

We did make an eye-catching couple, I thought smugly. Emily with her polished platinum looks. And I was certainly no slouch either.

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” I said.

The next slide twirled onto the screen with a digital “woo hoo.”

The smiley faces were the clear victors as of about 7 p.m. last night. Leaving the barf faces meekly descending toward the bottom.

“Derek, I’d like you to consider dating all future clients,” Rowena quipped.

“All in favor,” Roger rumbled.

“Aye.”

“The ayes have it. Sir Derek will prostitute himself for the good of the company henceforth.” Roger was also really into Renaissance fairs.

I sighed.

“I dunno. What if this turns out to be the real thing?” Ancarla asked, reaching for another stick of licorice.

“It’s fake. You can’t build real off of fake,” Lance argued.

“Yeah, but look at D’s face,” Rowena said. “He’s all like glowy and happy.”

“Maybe he just got a facial?” Roger suggested.

One of my team’s favorite hobbies was talking about me as if I weren’t there.

“Maybe he got lucky.”

“With a client?”

“Maybe she’s more than a client.”

“Maybe he’s having a mid-life crisis?”

“Isn’t he too old for that?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and wondered if I could get away with murdering them all. “Don’t make me start locking everyone out on the weekends,” I threatened.

“I don’t know. I think it was all for show and that, once Stanton’s back on top, D will be back to his old ‘I love the single life’ boogie,” Lance guessed.

“What if he likes being in this fake relationship and decides he’s missing out?” Ancarla said.

“Who wouldn’t want to be in a fake relationship with a billionaire?” Roger chimed in.

“Nah, dude’s got happily ever after written all over his face,” Rowena decided. “I think this could be the real deal. From the dossier, Stanton’s pretty great.”

“Thank you. I agree.”

We all swiveled in our chairs toward the conference room door.

Emily leaned against the door frame smiling politely. She’d left the house this morning dressed for brunch with her friends. Now she was back in black cropped pants and a simple tank. She’d swapped out the usual stilettos for black trainers.

“Whoa. Great hair!” Rowena said, reaching for her phone. “Did you post a pic yet?”

“Get her with the windows at her back,” Roger suggested. “Arms crossed like ‘I’m a bad billionaire. You got a problem with that?’”

I scrubbed my hands over my face in irritation. “Take five, kids. Or, better yet, go home.”

Clients were never privy to the behind-the-scenes sausage-making of Alpha Group. And I was especially not thrilled with Emily strolling into a conversation about whether or not I was in love with her.

Unruffled, my team packed up their food and electronics and introduced themselves to Emily on their way out.

Emily closed the door after the last one out.

“The single life boogie?” she asked me, taking the seat Rowena had vacated and crossing her arms. She looked more amused than annoyed. Maybe I wouldn’t have to murder my team.

I peered over her shoulder, making sure the team was at least pretending to not eavesdrop.

“That’s not an appropriate conversation to have with a—”

“A what?” she pressed. “A client? A lover?”

Whatever spell she’d cast on me was in full effect. Just looking at her smugly taking up space at the head of my conference table and I was hard for her.

“What can I do for you, love?” I asked, not finding an adequate answer to her question.

“I thought you might like to take a field trip with me,” she said, drumming her fingers on her upper arms. “Unless you’re busy manipulating the world.”

“My time is all yours,” I promised her.

“Great.” She held up a set of keys and dangled them. “Want to drive?”

DEREK

*A*t my behest, the Porsche accelerated like a damn dream. Emily was directing me north through the city.

She sat next to me, sunglasses on and a smile hovering on those lovely lips as we cruised. A near perfect Sunday in my estimation.

“Take the next left,” she said, nodding toward the traffic light.

The color of South Beach and the bustle of downtown Miami were behind us. Buildings here were less concerned with aesthetics and more concerned with function and durability. Mom and pop convenience stores edged into working-class neighborhoods. Commercial buildings squatted on skinny canals.

“Here,” she said, pointing at a long, low building painted bright white.

DIY AHA, the sign read.

I slid into one of the last remaining parking spaces in the lot next to the building.

“Exactly where have you brought me?” I asked, cutting the engine. “Also, I want this car.”

“You’ll see, and you may not have it,” she said, grinning as she climbed out.

“I could steal it,” I mused.

She snatched the keys from my hand. “And I could have you arrested.”

“What good would that do either one of us? Maybe we could work out a trade?”

She tilted her head haughtily.

The cool queen surveying her subject.

“What kind of trade?”

“Miles for orgasms?” I suggested.

“Hold that thought,” she said with a wink, opening the steel door. “Oh, and no pictures. No documenting the next two hours.”

“You make doing my job very difficult,” I complained.

“Back at you, Price.”

Intrigued, I followed her inside.

Thoughts of orgasms evaporated from my mind immediately at the squeals of pre-teen girls occupying a large lab-like classroom. There were a dozen of them in white lab coats and goggles. There didn’t seem to be nearly enough adults present to contain the unstable, excited energy.

“Emily!” Girls in blue latex gloves waved in delight.

“Hey, ladies! I hope you don’t mind, but I brought a lab partner today. This is Derek.”

“Hi, Derek,” fifteen girls chorused before dissolving into giggles.

“Glad you could come.” A woman in a tie-dye lab coat approached. Her safety glasses were on top of her head acting as a headband to her short bushy gray hair. She was wearing Converse sneakers and a wiener dog t-shirt.

“Me, too,” Emily grinned. “Derek, this is Esther. She’s a biochemist and runs things here at DIY AHA. Esther, this is my friend Derek.”

She stumbled a bit over “friend.” I was selfishly glad she didn’t have an easy label for our relationship.

“A pleasure,” I said, shaking Esther’s proffered hand.

“I don’t suppose there’s time for me to take a peek at the data?” Emily asked her.

“Nope,” Esther said cheerfully. “It’ll keep.” She turned her attention to me. “Let’s get you suited up before these girls eat you alive.”



“AND WHAT’S the most important rule at AHA?” Emily asked from the front of the learning lab. She was wearing a white lab coat and safety glasses. Her hair was pulled back in a short tail. Once again, I found the look to be uncomfortably alluring.

“Follow all safety protocols,” a new generation of budding scientists chorused back at her.

“Good,” she said. “Because we’re going to make fire.”

The girls oohed.

I wondered what kind of liability insurance Emily had and if the policy had a rider concerning twelve-year-olds and pyrotechnics.

I watched from a safe distance as Emily explained step-by-step what she was doing as she poured a small amount of ethanol from a beaker into an empty water cooler jug. She swirled the liquid around and around, coating the inside of the jug.

“Who knows what combustion is?” she asked.

About half the hands in the room shot into the air.

Emily beamed at her attentive students. “Combustion is an ignition. A rapid chemical combination that produces heat and light. Once it starts, you can’t stop it until it flames out.”

Her gaze flitted to me and then away again, and I wondered if she thought that what we had was as simple as a chemical reaction.

The energy in the room was reaching a fevered pitch.

Emily, a showman, held the bottle upside down. The girls gasped with enthusiasm when not a drop of liquid appeared.

“I’ve just created ethanol vapor. Turned a liquid into a gas. Now, I’m going to light it.”

We all watched raptly as she lit a long, thin taper with a lighter. “Arm’s length,” she said.

“Arm’s length,” we repeated.

With another grin, she held the taper to the mouth of the bottle, and everyone in the room except for Emily jumped when chemical flames in blues and oranges shot out and up. It burned fast and bright for a second or two and then vanished.

There was controlled pandemonium in the room. It was a much classier version of the fart lighting experiment my brother and I had performed once or twice in our backyard, and I saw from some of the faces of the parents in the room—mostly fathers—that they were reliving their own gaseous youths.

“But wait,” Emily said, holding up a hand. “The bottle isn’t empty anymore.”

As she held it upside down, the class watched in rapt fascination as a clear liquid dribbled into the beaker.

“We’ve made water from fire,” she announced.

I could hear every girl in the room decide to become a scientist.

“Now it’s your turn,” she said, gesturing at the lab tables. “Set up your slow-motion cameras first so you can capture the reactions. Esther, Lala, and I will assist you one table at a time starting from the back.”

Emily claimed her first table and struck up a conversation with her new, young lab partners. Esther and Lala, a six-foot-tall version of Salma Hayek with a PhD in chemistry, did the same.

I loved it. I itched to document the lab, the experiment, the girls. Emily.

She was resplendent. There was nothing not to be loved.

This was the Emily Stanton that the world needed to see. And she was stubbornly refusing to be revealed.

“Jasmine, hand the beaker to Atlas. Don’t throw it.” The tall, reedy woman clutching an e-reader sighed next to me. She rolled her eyes at me. “Kids.”

“They appear to be having a good time,” I observed. I had nieces and nephews, nearly a dozen of them. I was used to kid-related chaos.

“Isn’t this the best thing ever? A science club for girls,” she continued. “I’m Amal, by the way.”

“Derek,” I said. “This is my first time here.”

“Oh, your girl will love it. They make science so much fun here. The girls have a blast. And when they turn sixteen, they can sign up to use the lab space for their own experiments.”

“Really?” I asked, intrigued. *Damn Emily and her no-publicity decree. This was public relations gold.*

“Jasmine’s cousin was with AHA for three years,” Amal continued. “Now she’s at CalTech in the biological engineering program. It’s a great introduction outside the classroom. The girls get to work with real scientists in a real lab. With programs like this, they’re helping to triple the number of women in STEM fields by 2030.”

It was ingenious and, if I had to guess, entirely Emily’s idea.

The deeper I dug, the more attractive she became to me. I was used to a brief, intense attraction to a woman. But it always burned itself out. Uncomplicated. Easy.

Emily was neither of those things.

I considered her as she leaned over the shoulders of two young scientists. She was beautiful. Yes, in the brains and breeding areas, of course she was attractive. But there was something magnetic about her here. She was nearly giddy, and the girls fed off that excitement.

In the moment, I was sure of two things. One, I was not done with Emily Stanton, and two, it would not end well.

“Which one is yours?” Amal asked, scanning the room.

“The tall blonde with the dizzying intellect,” I said, pointing at Emily.

“Ah. Emily’s boyfriend,” Amal nodded approvingly. “I’m very straight—married to a man and all—but I can appreciate your excellent taste. She’s some kind of biochemist, right?”

“Something like that,” I hedged. Emily’s secret identity was that of a Sunday scientist. Yes, I definitely wasn’t even close to being done with this woman.

“Okay, gang,” Emily said, returning to the front of the lab. “Now, let’s work on documenting our findings.”



HALF AN HOUR LATER, as the future of science filed out of the room, I found the woman who consumed most of my brain power standing before me.

“What did you think?” she asked.

“I think you should have let me take pictures.”

“Not everything should be consumed by the public. It’s nothing personal.”

“On the contrary, it’s very personal,” I countered. “This is the real you. The one the world would have a hard time tearing down. The one the American public can get behind and fork over their hard-earned dollars for a piece of your dream.”

“These girls didn’t sign up for that kind of exposure,” she said. “I’m here because they’re here. Not the other way around.”

“Right,” I said. “Because you’re Emily the biochemist.”

She bit her lip. “I know I can’t keep it secret forever and some of the parents have figured it out. But for now, it works better this way.”

“You own this place, don’t you?” I asked, picking up a pipette.

She nodded. “DIY labs are the wave of the future. They can be more flexible with their protocols than a private lab or one funded by government grants. They can partner with similar labs across the country and tackle massive data sets and—I’m geeking out on you,” she said, grinning self-consciously.

“If everyone could see you like this now, they’d fall head over heels for you,” I said, running my fingers over the buttons of her lab coat.

“Not everyone,” she said, giving me a pointed look.

“Everyone,” I reiterated.

“Last Mini Marie Curie is out the door,” Esther said, ducking her head back into the room. “You ready for some boring ol’ data?”

“Give it to me!” Emily made grabby hands like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Lala, you good with clean up?” Esther called over her shoulder.

Lala gave the thumbs up and blew a bubble with her gum.

We followed Esther across the hall to the second lab. She flipped on the overhead lights and moved to a workstation with two desktop computers. A fat stack of papers sat neatly next to a mousepad picturing the periodic table. It said, *I use this periodically.*

Emily pounced on the report the way a cat attacked a laser pointer.

She pawed through the papers, skimming as she went. Her lips moved as she absorbed what was on the pages.

Esther plopped down on a wheeled stool and waited, a smug smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“It’s there,” Emily said, not looking up from the data.

“It’s there,” Esther agreed, spinning around to pull up some gobbledygook on one of the computer monitors.

Still clutching the papers, Emily peered over Esther’s shoulder.

“We’re geniuses,” Emily breathed.

“Motherfucking geniuses.”

I cleared my throat. “Can a layperson ask what’s there?” I asked.

Emily spun back around, a sparkle in her eyes. They were more gray than blue under the fluorescent lab lights.

“Enzymes,” she said.

“I’m afraid I’m going to need more than that.”

She practically skipped over to a whiteboard and gleefully grabbed a marker, sketching in quick, confident lines.

“Okay, so when someone has a significant cardiac event, we can measure high levels of certain enzymes in their blood that indicate damage to the heart muscles. What Esther and I and a few teams in similar labs around the country have been working on is finding indicators that can predict a cardiac event.”

“And you found one?” I was intrigued by both the hypothesis and Emily’s excitement about it. Her drawing was terrible, but her passion was enthralling.

She beamed. “We found a few. There are currently tests that identify an indication of inflammation, the high-sensitivity C-reactive protein, for example. But we found a specific enzyme that has consistently performed as a measurable predictor of a future significant cardiac event.”

“How far in advance have you been able to predict it?”

She grinned, and I felt a warm glow of desire settle in my chest.

“Six months,” Esther interjected proudly.

“Six months is adequate time for intervention. For diet and exercise and lifestyle changes. For clots and blockages to be identified and treated. This blood test could be the biggest preventative factor in cardiac medicine in almost a decade,” Emily said. “Best of all, we can do it inexpensively. This could become part of the complete blood panel at wellness checks. Doctors offices could require it for high school and college athlete physicals. We’re losing more and more kids to unknown cardiac defects. This could—”

“Save lives,” I filled in.

I hadn’t known Emily Stanton long. I didn’t know her nearly well enough for my liking. But I couldn’t think of another person I’d been prouder of in my entire life.

“Exactly,” she said. Her eyes danced.

“And you’re not going to let me use this either are you?” I sighed.

She crossed to me and playfully hooked her fingers in the waistband of my pants. “Nope.”

“This could really push public opinion in your favor,” I reminded her.

“Derek, this is so much bigger than public opinion. This is bigger than Flawless and the IPO. This is entirely separate. I don’t want to start cross-pollinating CEO me with Lab Rat me. This is the one thing that I have that is entirely mine. I’m not sharing it with a few million social media followers.”

I understood. I didn’t love it. But I understood.

“This is impressive,” I said, watching Esther scroll through spreadsheets of meaningless data.

“We’re just getting started,” Emily said.

Yes. We were.

EMILY

“*W*here are you taking me?” I asked, yawning in the passenger seat as I pulled the tie from my hair. The excitement of more than a dozen pre-teen girls coupled with scientific achievement had left me with an adrenaline crash.

I needed coffee before I could even think about facing my Sunday evening to-do list. A CEO’s job was never done. Some people could build their empires and then hand over the reins and take to the golf course. I was not one of those people.

Derek had won the brief but entertaining wrestling match for the keys to the Porsche. I hadn’t put up much of a fight. I hated to admit it, but I was still not firing on all cylinders. Still tired, it was the price paid for what I’d earned. The work didn’t do itself.

“Dinner,” he said, picking up my hand and bringing it to his lips.

Salsa, wildly romantic, played from the stereo’s speakers.

This moment, with the sun sinking in the spring sky, with the Miami breeze ruffling my very daring haircut, with the debonair Derek Price driving the convertible I’d earned, was perfection.

“Dinner sounds wonderful.” I sighed.

“It will be. My stepfather is grilling.”

It took a few seconds for the words to sink in.

“No. Absolutely not,” I insisted, sitting up straighter. I chose that moment to realize today was the first time I’d ever ridden in the passenger seat.

“I’ve met your family,” he pointed out.

“That was *business*. That wasn’t a cozy family dinner!”

“There’s nothing cozy about this. I have a brother and two sisters, my stepsiblings, and somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty nieces and nephews,” he said conversationally.

“Derek, you can’t introduce me to your family.” I was horrified.

“Why not?”

Why not? There were a few dozen reasons why not. I was his client, *not* his girlfriend. Secondly, to the public, I was the rich bitch who skated on drug charges. And to round out the perfect trifecta of why I shouldn’t be meeting his parents: We. Just. Had. Sex.

Sex. Not conversations about where this was going or what the expected outcomes were. We’d had glorious, glorious sex, and now *I was supposed to shake hands with the man’s mother? I probably still smelled vaguely like her naked son.*

“I mean, *why* are you doing this?” I tried to squash the nerves that were suddenly electrifying my intestines. *Oh, God, did I have my emergency Imodium stash in this bag?*

“I think you’ll find my family more relaxing than some of your regular social situations,” he said. He was too polite to mention the fact that my family was like a reality TV reunion special where someone invariably got punched in the mouth.

“I’m not in ‘meet new people’ form,” I argued.

“This isn’t for a photo op or anything other than a good meal and interesting company,” he promised.

I scrubbed my hands over my face wishing I’d put forth more than the minimum of effort on my makeup this morning. Of course, this morning I’d only been thinking about brunch and the lab. *Not* meeting Derek Price’s parents.

He was putting me in an impossible position. If things went badly, I didn't have an easy exit strategy. I didn't have Jane. Hell, I didn't even have the keys to my own car.

"Emily," he said.

"What?"

"Relax and trust me. I like you, and I think you'll like them. There are no requirements. If you're not comfortable, give me the signal, and I'll drive you home. No questions asked."

The man had gotten into my vagina less than twenty-four hours earlier, and somehow that had granted him an all-access pass to my innermost thoughts?

"Trust me," he urged. He reached into his pocket and produced a small packet. He held it out to me.

"What's this?" I asked, taking it. I flipped it over in my hand. It was a single dose of Imodium.

"Just in case," he said.

"How did you..."

"Do you really want to talk about it?" Derek asked, his eyes on the road.

"God, no!" I was humiliated. Humbled. And something else.

"You can trust me, Emily Stanton, formidable boss, beautiful billionaire, and real live human being."

It wasn't flowers or a love note but *diarrheal medicine* that made my heart do a slow, inevitable flip-flop in my chest.

God help me. God help us both.

I cleared my throat, surprised at the emotion clogging it. "I'll give it fifteen minutes. What's our signal?"

"It should be something subtle like, 'Derek, I need your throbbing cock in my womb right now,'" he said, smoothly shifting gears and accelerating around a graffitied school bus

that was riding the rumble strips in the bike lane. “My family will understand.”

I rolled my eyes so hard it was audible. “Your ego knows no bounds.”

“Confidence, love. Not ego,” he corrected.

“How about a work emergency?” I suggested.


“Hmm, slightly less believable, but I suppose I could sell it. At least with the less sophisticated Prices.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Darling, I’m driving the woman who redefined lovemaking for me in the sexiest car in the world after you revealed a scientific advancement that could change cardiac health forever. *That’s* ridiculous. You’re extraordinary. I’m just very, very ordinary.”

Possessed by Daisy’s spirit, I stroked my hand up his thigh to his crotch. “Darling, there’s nothing ordinary about you,” I purred.

Distracted, he coasted onto the rumble strips on the shoulder of the highway before recovering quickly.



THE PRICE HOUSE was a beige Floridian stucco with a requisite palm in the front yard. There were cars parked on the street and nearly a half-dozen men, beers in hand, sitting in lawn chairs on the scrap of grass between the curb and sidewalk.

“A welcoming committee,” I observed.

“The male members of the family. I may have sent them a picture of your car,” Derek confessed.

“For once you weren’t overselling, Derek,” a man in a pink flamingo button-down called out over the rev of the engine. He had broad shoulders and an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth. He wore a ball cap backward.

“He’s talking about you,” Derek teased me.

I stuffed the diarrhea meds in my bag and hoped for the best.

We got out, and my car was descended upon by a mob of admirers as the testosterone-filled side of Derek's family admired it. Introductions were made between questions about horsepower and original features.

Michael, the stepfather, was pink flamingo and cigar guy. Then came brother Will, stepbrother Alberto—or Berto—and brothers-in-law Pete and Carmine. All had a loudly voiced opinion about my car and a shameless desire to drive it. Derek handed the keys back to me.

"Not on your life, gents," he teased. "Do not let them con you into a ride," he whispered to me.

"Your girl's got good taste in horses, eh?" Pete said, chewing on a piece of gum like it was his last meal.

"She hasn't decided if she's my girl yet," Derek said, slipping his arm around my waist and guiding me toward the house. "I'm hoping you'll help convince her."

"Run away," Will fake-coughed into his hand. His grin was a carbon copy of Derek's, his accent more U.S. than U.K.

"Good luck in there, Em," Michael called after us. "Remember, don't let them smell your fear."

"She deals with a board of directors on a daily basis. I'm sure she can handle the female side of the family," Derek said dryly.

"You hit your head or something recently, D?" Carmine asked with a wink in my direction.

My board of directors had nothing on the ladies of the Price-Perez clan. Derek's sister Tanya—part-time model and full-time mom of three—bounced a sobbing two-year-old on her hip and asked me what my favorite nonprofit organizations were. Liz, with the edgy pixie cut and leather bands up both wrists, gave my haircut an approving nod and asked exactly what my relationship with her brother was. Verita, the bubbly stepsister, pressed a glass of wine into my hand and suggested

that I join them on the patio so we could all be more comfortable for the interrogation.

Derek's mother, Daniella, was warm and welcoming. Along with that welcome came a very subtle vibe that said we could be friends as long as I didn't screw with her family. She was beautiful. Her mink-colored hair was cut in a frothy, chin-length bob. She wore black and white checked shorts and a sleeveless white top. Her feet were bare, but her face was expertly made up.

"I promise I won't abandon you," Derek whispered in my ear as he guided me outside. The kids, ranging in age from teenagers to floaty-wearing preschoolers, were in and out of the pool in what looked like a chaotic amateur diving contest. Dogs, three of them in varying sizes, dashed around the fenced-in backyard, taking turns jumping into the pool and then violently shaking dry to the delight of the kids.

The menfolk had finished drooling over my car and were gathering around the grill, throwing raw meat and fresh beers around.

"I'll be fine," I assured him, though my intestines gave a low rumble of protest. "Go play with your friends." I ruffled his hair, earning his grin, and his sisters "oohed."

"Be nice," he warned them, giving them each a peck on the cheek before crossing the concrete to the Man Zone.

Salsa music played on the wireless speakers, and someone put a plate of fresh cut vegetables and hummus in front of me. Vaguely British and Spanish accents gave the conversations more color and energy.

"So, Emily," Daniella said, picking up her glass of Chardonnay.

I'd learned long ago that the first question a person asked me was usually a spot-on indicator of their character and their expectations of me.

"Tell me what my son is doing for you?" she said, arching a perfect eyebrow.

There was a lot to unpack there. The implied possessiveness of “my son.” The open-endedness of the question and its myriad of possible answers.

Well, there was the scandal spinning. The tucking into bed. The regular meals. The haircut. And then, of course, there were the orgasms. Oh, and he made me laugh.

“My company hired his firm, and we’ve been spending time together,” I said evasively.

The women sat like statues, sphinxes waiting me out.

I smiled benignly and sipped my wine.

Silence reigned for a full minute.

“She’s not cracking,” Tanya stage-whispered out the side of her mouth.

“Stare harder,” Verita whispered back.

“She’s good,” Liz observed. “Scary good.”

Daniella gave a regal nod and lifted her glass in my direction. “I trust my son’s judgment. Dating or not, you’re welcome here.”

“You wouldn’t want to meet my mother and walk her through that hands-off approach to her children’s relationships, would you?” I asked.

~

SOMEWHERE INTO MY second glass of wine, I realized my intestines had given up their empty threats. Now, it was my stomach growling as the smell of grilling hamburgers wafted over the patio.

Derek wandered over while his mother was admiring my haircut.

“Like my handiwork, Mom?” he asked.

“Always,” Daniella said, turning her cheek up to her husband, Michael, as he delivered a kiss and a platter of freshly grilled burgers.

“How has this haircut not broken the internet yet?” Liz asked, handing off a toddler to her husband.

“I haven’t been anywhere but brunch and the lab,” I admitted.

“Derek, give me your phone,” Tanya said, holding out her hand.

He obliged.

“Over by the hedgerow,” Tanya pointed decisively. “You too, brother dearest.”

“Why me?” Derek asked.

“A platonic pose. Something that doesn’t confirm or deny your little ‘are they, aren’t they’ fun,” she decided.

Liz and Verita, with Tanya’s directorial commands, arranged us against the wall of greenery, drinks in hand.

“Is this how all your family cookouts go?” I asked as Verita fluffed my hair.

“With a hairdresser, a cop, a model, and forty-seven kids and dogs, you’d be surprised,” she quipped.

“Okay, look at each other and smile like you have a dirty, dirty secret,” Tanya called.

DEREK

“*H*ome?” I asked Emily over the rumble of the Porsche as we waved goodbye to my family.

“I’d like to see *your* home,” she decided smugly.

“You would, would you?” I did a mental inventory of the state of my condo. The cleaning service had been there yesterday, which minimized the possibility of her facing anything unsavory like week-old takeout containers or six loads of dry cleaning draped over the couch.

“It’s your fault, Price. You introduced me to your family, and now I’m penning an engagement announcement in my head,” she teased. “I’ve seen your office, and now I need to find out what secrets you’re hiding at home before this gets more serious.”

I steered the Porsche in the direction of my building downtown. “Fine, but I’m taking you to my condo, not my creepy dungeon lair. You can see the creepy dungeon lair after the wedding.”

“Baby steps,” she said.

We made the drive to my place in comfortable silence. It was a glossy high-rise in Miami’s skyline. A little soulless, but the proximity to my office and most everything downtown was convenient.

I parked the car in the garage and led her to the elevator, a guiding hand at the small of her back. I’d only recently

discovered just how much I enjoyed touching Emily and had no plans to slow down there.

“Floor?” she asked, her finger hovering over the buttons.

I told her, and she stabbed it triumphantly.

When the doors slid shut, Emily turned to face me. She looped her arms around my neck. “I really liked your family,” she said.

“I’m rather partial to them, too,” I told her.

“You’re all so... on the same team. No one is walking into dinner with an agenda. It was refreshing,” she continued. “Your parents are so proud of you.”

The longing behind her words made my heart ache for her.

“I’m a testament to their hard work to keep me on the straight and narrow,” I told her, brushing the hair back from her eye. I loved looking at her like this. Close, relaxed, soft. She was a complicated woman. And I found that I liked that immensely.

I’d felt something seeing her sitting with my sisters and mother on the patio, a bottle of wine making the rounds. Something... right. I told myself I’d taken her there to show her what a family could be. That there were people out there who could love without designs. At least, that’s what I’d thought.

But now I wondered if I was trying her out in my life. Testing her like a puzzle piece to see where she fit.

The doors opened with a soft ding on the fifteenth floor, and I led the way to my place.

“After you,” I said, opening the front door with a flourish.

I wasn’t a man without opinions. My home reflected this. I’d paid a designer, of course, as one does. But I’d been a micro-managing bastard, weighing in on every piece of furniture, every painting, every throw pillow.

In the end, it was worth it. My home was sleek, functional, and comfortable.

Stained concrete floors. Stainless steel accents. A wall of glass overlooking the city.

But it was softened by the nine-foot-tall bookshelves that framed the requisite manly TV. The furniture was simple but comfortable.

Emily wandered into the living space and studied my collection. “A reader,” she mused aloud. “Interesting.”

“Science fiction and fantasy mostly,” I said as she examined the shelves.

“A geek.” She labeled me with smug satisfaction.

“Coming from a nerd, I’ll accept that as a compliment,” I teased.

I wondered what else she would discover about me here in my home.

“Wine?” I offered.

She shook her head. “Water, please.” She pulled a volume from the shelf, studied it, and returned it.

“Why don’t you change into something more comfortable while I pour?” I suggested.

She glanced down at her outfit and laughed. “I don’t travel with comfy clothes.”

“I have just the thing.” Ducking into the bedroom, I changed into pajama pants and a t-shirt and found something I deemed appropriate for her.

“Boxers?” she asked, taking them from me.

“Boxer briefs,” I corrected. “You will take these, and you will destroy those detestable ones you are so oddly fond of. In exchange, you can have as many pairs of mine as you like.”

She looked down at the underwear, her thumb stroking over the silky gray fabric. Her expression was soft.

“Antidiarrheals and men’s underwear,” she mused. “You give the most interesting gifts, Price.”

“You can buy yourself all the baby-fist-sized diamond pendants in the world, love. I’m wooing you by showing I have your every need covered,” I said, nudging her in the direction of the powder room.

I poured us both waters while she changed. We met in the dining area. She seemed shyer somehow in my underwear and her tank top. One hand gripping the opposite elbow as she admired the Alexandra Ballard painting above the buffet. Stripped down to basics, this Emily was softer, approachable. Another facet in the precious gem that was the woman I couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Lovely,” she said softly, studying the painting.

The fierce wave of possession caught me off guard. What I wanted crystallized for me. Emily Stanton. In my life. My home. My family. I wasn’t playing games anymore. I was playing for keeps.

“It is, isn’t it?” I said lightly. The complex layers of oil paints in a tapestry of blues and grays reminded me of Emily.

She had no idea the only reason I had this bold slash of color here was because of her. The artist had been refreshingly vocal in her refusal to sell to that “dickweasel” Malcolm Ellison.

“Tell me,” she said, accepting the glass of water I handed her. “Have you ever used this table?”

It was a long, wooden table in a driftwood gray that could easily seat ten people.

“Of course I’ve used it. I spread files out on it, store my mail on it. I’ve even wrapped Christmas presents on it.”

“But no actual dining?” Emily clarified.

“I’ve eaten takeout on it.” *Probably.*

“I’ve never used my formal dining room either,” she confessed. “My table seats twenty. It was custom-made by an Amish carpenter in Ohio. When I was building the house, I wanted to make sure I could accommodate my whole family for the holidays.”

“And you’ve never used it?” I asked, taking her hand and leading her to the balcony. My indoor living space was calm, masculine. But on the balcony, it was like a South Beach bar had vomited. Charmingly, of course. Bright turquoise and canary yellow pots cluttered the space with plants kept alive by the kindness of the cleaning service. There was a small teak dining set near the patio doors and a pair of cushioned chairs centered around a low, round table.

“Turns out my family isn’t big on Thanksgiving and Christmas... or family. Trey is never around, and Mom prefers the holidays in New York. She says it feels more festive.”

I thought of the Price family holidays. With dozens of people crammed around folding tables, asses to elbows over turkeys and hams. The birthday cakes. The pitchers of margaritas and pots of chili.

“Do you go to them for Christmas?” I asked.

She shook her head and stepped out onto the concrete and glass balcony. The sun was sinking low, painting the sky a dusky pink. “It’s hard for me to get away,” she said, settling on a blue and white striped chair cushion. A politician’s non-answer.

“But you’d make the time if you wanted to,” I guessed.

“Yes, I would. I envy you for your family,” she admitted. “I hope you appreciate them.”

“My mother wouldn’t allow me not to,” I teased.

Emily sipped her water in silence. A melancholy of unfilled dreams slowly extinguishing the excitement of the day.

“Hey,” I said, taking the chair next to her and nudging her foot with mine.

“Hmm?”

“I’m the first to admit that family doesn’t have anything to do with blood. You can build your own. Choose your own.”

She smiled a little sadly. “I’ve got Jane. And Cam and Daisy and Luna,” she agreed. “But...”

It hung there in the air between us as we watched the sun slip behind the skyline of the city we both loved.

The string lights came on above us.

“Do you want a family?” I asked her.

She sipped thoughtfully and put the glass down on the table in front of us. “Do you want the answer I give my mother or the real answer?”

“What do you think?”

“Flawless is my family,” she said finally. “I was never the little girl swooning over wedding dresses or carrying around baby dolls. I was the kid with the microscope and the college junior excited to spend a Saturday in the lab.”

“Do you regret that?” I pressed.

She wrinkled her nose as she mulled over the question. “No. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want a collection of people that I love in a home I built for them on Christmas morning. Or that a tiny portion of me feels like I might be missing out. I love kids. I really do,” she insisted.

“You don’t have to convince me. I saw you enthral fifteen twelve-year-olds by setting fire to a water jug. You love kids. You love science.”

“I’ve been so focused on my empire that I’ve neglected to put any work into relationships. I’m not a good daughter or friend. I’m busy and distracted. I fear I’d take the same approach to marriage and motherhood. Now that there’s a possibility that I could lose what I’ve built...” She sighed. “I guess I’m just realizing that I don’t have anything else. And yes. I know *exactly* how that sounds from someone with my financial portfolio. Woe is me.”

It was the most honesty I’d gotten out of her in one shot.

“Money doesn’t buy happiness,” I reminded her, fighting the urge to touch her. Any small stimulus might cut off the flow of truth.

“Everyone says that, but few people really get it. Money can buy security. But it’s not going to deliver love.”

“I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that you’re in control,” I said. “You call the shots. You make the decisions. If you want to veer off course, then veer off course. Especially if it’s in my direction.”

“I’m not good at dividing my focus, Derek,” she said, eyeing me. “That’s something we should probably discuss.”

“Ms. Stanton, you aren’t trying to have a ‘where is this going’ conversation with me, are you?” I asked, feigning horror.

She laughed. “I’m trying to have a ‘manage your expectations’ conversation with you.”

I took her hand. “Come here,” I said.

Reluctantly, she rose. I settled her into my lap and wrapped my arms around her. Finally. Touching her, holding her like this slowed everything down. Made everything make sense.

“I just don’t want you to think that I’m magically going to change and become—”

“What? A girlfriend?”

She shrugged. “You know better than anyone how busy I am. If you do win our little wager and the IPO goes through, it’s not going to slow down. If anything, I’ll be even busier. I’ll have shareholders to answer to. Not to mention the forest-slaughtering paperwork required for public companies. I’m going to have to give up my Wednesday nights,” she said wistfully.

“Is it what you want?” I asked neutrally.

“It’s what I’ve been working toward.”

And we were back to the non-answers.

I changed tactics. “Knowing what I know about you, Emily Stanton, I’m surprised you’re taking Flawless public.”

“That’s an indirect way of calling me a control freak.” She laughed.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a control freak. I find it rather attractive,” I said, brushing my mouth over the top of

her head.

“You find just about everything attractive.”

“It’s not my fault you make everything sexy,” I teased. She snuggled closer, and I savored the moment. Terrifying boss Emily was alluring. Competent CEO Emily was charming. Giddy-in-the-lab Emily was delightful. But this softer side was something entirely different. I was powerless against vulnerable Emily.

“What do you really want, Emily?” I asked quietly.

She burrowed her face in my neck, and I felt her lips on me. “You. Now.”

I wanted a bigger picture. I wanted her to step back and really look at the life she was building. To decide if that’s what she wanted or if there was something else. Something more. Something different.

But then she was scraping her teeth over my jaw, and I was going hard.

“You didn’t show me the bedroom yet,” she whispered.

“Let’s rectify that,” I said, standing with her in my arms.

EMILY

“Billionaire breaks internet with sassy new cut”

“Salons city-wide report flood of requests for the Emily cut”

“Hotter before or after? Emily Stanton’s aggressive haircut”

I was off my game today. I’d accidentally spent the night at Derek’s after a few hours of leisurely yet mind-blowing lovemaking. The man was a sex god, and he was at my beck and call. I’d overindulged, woken up twined around him like a vine, and had to do a mad scramble home to shower and change.

Things had changed this weekend. Gears had shifted. I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what had happened, but I felt vaguely anxious and excited.

I blamed it on being too late for coffee. I stormed the offices of Flawless like a warrior charging the enemy. Jane trotted on my heels to keep up.

Derek was at his office, taking care of someone else’s crisis for once. And I was going to take advantage of the babysitter-free time to get some of my actual work done.

“Rosario, can you have two double espressos sent up to my office?” I asked on my way past the front desk.

“Absolutely, Ms. Stanton. Your haircut is killer.”

I’d styled it myself in a rush this morning and had to admit it still looked pretty fantastic.

“Thank you,” I called over my shoulder.

It was the first of many haircut compliments volleyed my way as I headed for my office. *It was just hair, people. Get a grip.*

“I see you played with scissors this weekend.”

Maxim lounged in the salon’s doorway in a purple shirt that appeared to be missing a few buttons and a leather hip holster for his styling tools. His mustache twitched.

“Do you approve?” I asked, fluffing the short layers.

He gave me a long follicular perusal. “I do,” he said finally. “Who is this hair maestro? Tell me their name so I can add them to my mortal enemies list. Miami isn’t big enough for the two of us.”

“I think your reputation is intact,” I said with an eye roll. “Derek isn’t in the hair game professionally.”

“Well, well, well,” Maxim mused. “Mr. Fixer appears to be excellent with his hands.”

Jane snorted, and I elbowed her, earning a wheeze and then her silence.

“Good morning, Ms. Stanton,” my assistants chorused.

“Great hair,” Valerie grinned.

“Love it,” Easton said, not to be one-upped.

“Thanks,” I said dryly, picking up my messages.

Jane and I stepped inside, and I leaned against the door.

“The amount of time and energy people spend on my hair is ridiculous,” I complained to her. “Why are they interested in my hair? Why would they buy a shirt just because I wore it?”

“Because they want to be like you,” Jane said, cracking her gum.

I ditched my bag in its usual place and headed straight for my desk. “Then go to college and study biochemistry and spend every waking minute building a company.”

Jane snorted. “That’s idealistic.”

“Idealistic is thinking that a new shirt or an expensive pair of shoes will make you famous,” I scoffed. “Why can’t everyone just be themselves?”

She flopped down on the couch. “You of all people are asking that question?”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“I’m pointing out that you of all people should understand why, boss. You put on your obedient daughter mask or your terrifying boss mask. They’re putting on their Emily Stanton makeup or doing their Emily Stanton workout in hopes that they can capture part of your essence.”

I blinked at her. “You’ve been hanging around Derek too much.”

“I think you’re right. He’s rubbing off on me. I need to take him to a shooting range or a dirty hook-up bar and Jane him up a little,” she mused.

“You two have gotten pretty close,” I observed.

Jane lolled her head to the side on the back of the couch. “You’re the one having toe-curling sex with Tea and Crumpets.”

“Do you like him, though? I mean, what do you think of him?” I asked.

She propped her boot-clad feet on the coffee table. “You really like him, don’t you?”

I took a breath, let it out. “I do. A lot. And it scares me. I feel like I’m missing some gigantic warning sign.”

“Not everyone is out to get you or to use you,” she said.

“Is that your read on him?”

She gave me a baleful look. “If you’re asking me as a skeptical security hood, the guy manipulates peoples’ feelings and opinions for a living. He picks pockets and paints phony pictures.”

“And if I’m asking you as my friend,” I pressed.

“My read is his feelings for you are real, and they are scaring the shit out of him.”

I sank back in my chair, relief softening the rigidity of my shoulders. As long as we were both scared shitless. As long as we were both in this. As long as this was real and not some challenge or conquest or spin.

Jane’s opinion mattered. I trusted her, and she was telling me I could trust Derek.

“Dammit, now I’m wasting a Derek-free morning analyzing my relationship with him instead of getting actual work done,” I complained

“You’re banging a sex god, and your hair is perfection. I feel zero sympathy for you,” she said.

A moment later, Valerie entered with the espressos and, sensing my impatience, hurried right back out.

“Finally,” I muttered to myself. I sipped my coffee and opened up the slew of files for the product development team meeting this afternoon. I had the new designs from the e-commerce department waiting for my approval and the god-awful IT report on recommended upgrades to our infrastructure. There was a very long Urgent column.

I also needed to touch base with the sales managers. A conference call would do it. But those tended to run very, very long. People in sales loved to talk. And talk. And talk.

There was also my never-ending updates from legal. As of last night, the SEC hadn’t asked for any additional documentation, and I was taking it as a hopeful sign that all of our I’s were dotted and T’s crossed. Given the upswing in public perception, this IPO might just happen after all.

I thought about Esther in the lab, bopping to the Grateful Dead while she waded through the data coming in from the cohort labs. My sigh was mighty.

“You blowing up balloons over there, boss?” Jane mused over her coffee and self-defense magazine.

“Nope. Just loving my job,” I said, skimming the last quarter’s sales on our Nouveau Face cream. It was selling like crack-laced hotcakes in the European market. We were outselling our direct competitor’s product—La Sophia’s Skin Riche—by a two-to-one margin. That was satisfying. La Sophia was a company with a seventy-year history, and Flawless was beating them at their own game. At least internationally. They still edged us out domestically, but their days were numbered. When Flawless’s scar treatment made it to the market, I planned to leverage the attention for brand-wide recognition.

There was a tap on my door, and then Easton poked his head in. “Excuse me, Ms. Stanton?” He stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

“Yes?” I said, without looking up.

“There’s a journalist from *Building Fortunes* here. She says she has an appointment.”

I dropped my highlighter. “Why does she have an appointment?”

Journalists didn’t get appointments with me. They got returned phone calls from my publicist who fed them benign, boring information. *Building Fortunes* was the biggest online business magazine in the country. It was run by a media heiress who had the foresight to shift her family’s print holdings to digital. While newspapers around the country folded or scaled back to skeleton crews, *Building Fortunes* aggressively snapped up readers and advertisers.

Easton looked wary. “Mr. Price made the appointment last week.”

Mr. Price was a dead man.

“Oh, good,” Jane muttered from the couch. “I remembered to charge my stun gun last night.”

“Why is she here?” I asked.

Easton shifted his weight on his feet. “She’s here to do a three-day, in-depth interview. The story will run on the front page of the website next week. All-access.”

In-depth. All-access. I hated all of the words echoing in my head.

There was a brisk knock, and the three of us watched in horror as the door swung open.

“Ms. Stanton, I have three days with you, and I’d like to make the most of my time. May I come in?” She was already in. The dreaded journalist looked less like the grungy paparazzi I expected and more like a disapproving boarding school mistress.

Her pantsuit was prim. Her high-necked blouse buttoned to the base of her throat. She had dark skin and cool, appraising eyes that appeared to have already made several unfavorable assessments about me.

I rose, gritting my teeth. I would rather face a mob of people openly hating me than be followed and judged by a professed-to-be neutral stranger. At least with the mob, I knew where I stood.

“Ms...”

“Geiser. Lona Geiser.” She crossed to my desk and held out her hand.

Geiser. Of course it was. Geiser like the spewing of the personal details of my life she was about to do. She’d made up her mind already, and I didn’t have the time to be shadowed.

We shook hands. My hair slipped over my eye, and I brushed it back. Badass hair. I had a badass haircut because I was a badass. The words flitted through my brain like a fork of lightning. *I was a badass.*

“Lona,” I said, choosing her first name. “I’m Emily, and I’m unprepared for your visit.”

“I don’t require preparation. Just full access to you,” she said blandly. “I’d appreciate it if I could have a copy of your schedule for the next three days. I’ve left my bags with your front desk. Mr. Price assured me that someone would take them to the guest suite he made available for me in Bluewater.”

She was staying in Bluewater? In the only place I was safe from the prying eyes of journalists and the public? A shot with Jane's stun gun was too good for Derek. Yes. I was going to torture him before murdering him.

"Of course," I said with a small, strained smile. "Easton. I need to take care of something. Will you show Lona the offices and make arrangements for her bags?" *Keep her occupied.* I telegraphed the message.

"I'd be happy to. Right this way, Ms. Geiser. How do you take your coffee?" Easton turned up the charm to nine million.

Lona raised a questioning eyebrow at me over her shoulder before Easton firmly shut the door. I snatched my purse from the console table. "Let's go pay Mr. Price a visit," I growled.

"Maybe we should just call him?" Jane suggested. She hated paying for dry cleaning to get blood stains out of her clothing.

"What I have to say is best said in person."

"Oh, boy," she muttered under her breath.

EMILY

“*V*ETO!” I stormed into Derek’s office, the watchful eyes of his entire team on me.

One of the pajama pants-wearing employees was so startled he fell out of his chair.

Derek eyed me from across his desk, the phone tucked between his ear and shoulder. “I’ll have to call you back. Something’s just come up.” He hung up the phone and smiled. “Can I help you, Emily?”

“Can you help me? You can stand up so I can kick you in the balls. A three-day, all-access pass interview? Without telling me? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that this would be an excellent way to use the media to show how brilliant and competent you are. Of course, that was before you karate-chopped your way into my office.”

“*Veto*,” I said, enunciating each letter with venom.

“If I recall correctly, you are out of vetos.”

It was true. I’d used up my three vetoes in record time.

“Don’t you *dare* be smug with me. You went behind my back, again! I can’t believe I trusted you. After this weekend —” I dropped the sentence and the thought. Forget last weekend. He’d wormed his way into my trust, and now it was time to remove the pest.

“It’s in your calendar,” he said blandly. His tone made me want to punch him in the throat.

“I beg your pardon?” I said icily.

“I put the interview in your calendar. Your trust wasn’t misplaced, just your ability to read a calendar and my forgetfulness to mention it to you in person. Which is inexcusable.”

I dug my phone out of my bag and stabbed at the screen.

Son of a bitch.

“You just put this in here, didn’t you?”

“The magazine confirmed on Friday. I added it to your calendar then.”

“I’ve been busy since Friday. You didn’t think to mention it?” I’d been busy having sex with Derek and meeting his family. Wearing his boxers. Opening up to him. Dammit. The bastard was a sneaky, untrustworthy, colossal distraction.

He rose and came around his desk.

I held up a warning finger. “Keep your distance because I’m mad enough to violate your face,” I warned him.

“It’s true,” Jane said from the door. “The boss has been itching to violate someone’s face for years. Be a shame if it was your pretty one.”

He held his hands up in a show of surrender. “It’s one of the biggest online media organizations in the world,” he said. “Their readership is huge, and the only way they would agree to do the article was if you gave them full-access.”

“She’s staying in Bluewater,” I snapped. “Following me to meetings. Is she going to shadow me to the bathroom, too?”

“What are you afraid of?” he asked.

“Oh, boy,” Jane muttered behind me. “That was stupid.”

“I’m *not* afraid,” I spat the words out.

“This is how I’m going to get you your IPO, Emily. I’m sorry I didn’t explicitly explain what was happening. That was

my mistake. A colossal one. But I'm not screwing you over. I'm saving you. So tell me what you're afraid of?"

Of losing the last shred of privacy I had. Of stripping myself of my dignity and begging for approval. Of opening myself up to the judgment of one person who could influence thousands. And what if I came up short? The thoughts tumbled through my head like sopping wet clothes in a dryer. I loathed that he could read me well enough to see that it was fear behind the anger.

"I'm afraid of putting public opinion on the shoulders of one woman who's already decided she doesn't like me," I snapped.

"You're an incredible woman, Emily, and it's time the rest of the world saw beyond that curated facade. This is your chance to show who you are."

"Why didn't you tell me, Derek?"

"I was a little distracted this weekend," he said, sliding a hand around the back of his neck. "A lot distracted. And I forgot."

Was that a line? A lie? Did he naturally spin everything? For all his talk of honesty and vulnerability, was he capable of practicing what he preached?

"And maybe I was a little terrified of how you'd react," he admitted.

That at least rang true.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Truly. Deeply. I wanted to bring it up in the best way—"

"You wanted to manipulate me into saying yes," I corrected him.

He paused and chose his words carefully. "I wanted to present the opportunity in the best light so you would see its merits."

"And you forgot."

It seemed almost involuntary how his eyes, blue and wary, skimmed over my body. Like a lover's caress.

"I forgot. I allowed myself to be distracted by the gala and... everything else. I promise it won't happen again."

"D never forgets," Rowena called helpfully from her workstation outside his door. "And since he did this time, we won't let him again."

People let me down. Always. Sooner or later, everyone would in some way or another. And I'd learned not to let them past my walls. Yet somehow, a man I'd known for only a few weeks, a man who had broken into my house to make a point, a man who'd stolen my father's wallet, had scaled those walls. I was angry. But more at myself.

I knew better than this. I knew better than to put myself in vulnerable, uncontrollable situations. Had I learned nothing since I turned twenty-one?

"Tell me how to make this better," Derek said earnestly. "Tell me how you want me to fix this, and I'll do it."

I wanted him to cancel the interview. To grovel. To leave me the hell alone.

"Give me space," I said coolly. The words had frozen razor edges to them.

He winced. The ice queen claimed another victim. Finally.

"Stop," he said when I turned to leave. He caught me by the arm and spun me around. "Jane, give us a moment and close the door."

Jane waited for my nod before sauntering out of the office and shutting the door behind her.

"Emily," Derek said.

I remained silent. The withdrawal of affection and attention was often more powerful than a temper tantrum.

"Don't you dare freeze me out," he said, frustration lacing his tone. His grip tightened on me.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. I gave you your chance. You disappointed me. Lesson learned.”

“You’re a stubborn idiot if you think that I’m going to let that be the end of this. Of us.” His voice was low, controlled.

No one in my entire life had ever called me an idiot. Stubborn, yes. Cold, of course. Difficult, “that bitch,” whore, holier-than-thou princess. But never an idiot. Never stupid.

Forgetting my favored offense, I let my temper win. I shoved him in the chest. “What did you call me?”

“There you are.” He had a gleam in his eye. *That* gleam.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I snapped. He didn’t have the right to look at me like that. Not anymore.

“I forgot. It was a stupid mistake. I don’t make stupid mistakes. Ever. But you—”

“Of course you’re going to blame me,” I scoffed.

“Emily, how in the hell am I supposed to keep anything in my head when all I can see is you under me, coming on my cock, calling my name?”

He wasn’t being flippant. Derek Price was being deadly serious.

“Speaking of mistakes,” I said blithely.

He looked like he was going to murder me. Those glacial eyes burned with an icy heat. “Don’t you dare use what we shared this weekend against me,” he warned.

I glared back at him.

“Emily, I wanted to tell you in the right way to minimize this. And then I forgot.”

“Oh, you forgot. How does it just fall out of your head that you signed me up for something you knew would piss me off? Three days, Derek. A stranger following my every move for three days!”

He had the good grace to look embarrassed. “This weekend was... eventful.”

“You don’t forget things.”

“There you were Friday night running around your house half-naked and needing me. And I forgot. It fell out of my head in a fog of lust and excitement and the egotistical boost of you *letting me in*. I’m only human, Emily. And the ‘you’ behind those monumental fucking walls is a goddamn miracle. You destroyed me.”

I swallowed hard. He was so fucking good at the spin that even I couldn’t tell if it was a lie, a line.

He released me and ran a hand through his hair, a nervous tic I hadn’t seen before. “Tell me things didn’t change this weekend. Tell me you didn’t feel it,” he challenged.

I crossed my arms over my chest. Things *had* changed. I *had* felt it. “Maybe.” I shrugged. He’d taken that tenuous trust I’d given him and damaged it.

“I’m not letting you walk away, Emily,” he said. He reached for me again, trying to pull me closer. I pushed back harder.

“You don’t get a say in the matter,” I said. My arms were shaking with the effort.

“Check your email,” he said. “Please.”

The please was an afterthought tacked on to a command he knew I wouldn’t follow.

“I don’t think you have the right to tell me what to do anymore.”

“Goddamn it, Emily. Check your email.” The command stood alone this time.

With an extravagant eye roll, I fished my phone out of my bag and opened my email account.

To: Emily Stanton

From: Derek Price

Subject: I’m an unconscionable moron

Emily,

I just tried to call but couldn't get through. I've forgotten to tell you something important that you'll hate. I'm truly sorry, and you can categorically destroy me later. But first let me tell you that a journalist will be in your office any second now. I have a conference call, but I'll be there immediately after...

It had been sent twenty minutes before I stormed into his office. I took my time looking up from the screen.

“Do *not* use this honest mistake as an excuse to stop trusting me,” he said softly. His blue eyes earnest. “I couldn't take it. And I'm guaranteed to do something ridiculous.”

Damn it.

The anger drained out of me as if someone had pulled a plug. No one had ever fought for me like this before. They cracked and splintered like ice chips at my disapproval. Or, in the case of my family, they just didn't care.

“More ridiculous than breaking into my house and taking a bath?” I asked quietly.

Relief and hope warred fiercely on his face, and I felt that shift again. This time I didn't fight him when he pulled me into his arms.

“You scared the hell out of me,” he breathed against my hair.

“You pissed me off.”

“Darling, it's not going to be the last time. So we're going to need to work on some ground rules for fighting.”

“Ground rules? For what?”

“For the future,” he said, stroking his quick, talented hands down my back to cup my ass.

“Derek Price is not discussing the future,” I argued.

“Ah, sweet, stubborn Emily. You haven't come to terms with it yet.” His voice was a caress, and I had trouble remembering why I'd been so furious only moments ago.

“Come to terms with what?” I asked. My heart rate sped up again, but this time it had nothing to do with temper.

“You’re my match, love. Things will never be dull or normal. But I promise you that adventure you deserve.”

“You can’t be serious, Derek. We had sex. We didn’t pledge our undying love to each other!” I felt the licks of panic in my intestinal region. “You know I don’t have time.”

“That’s not an ‘I don’t like you because you’re a hideous beast who makes me want to vomit,’” he pointed out. He brushed my hair back from my forehead.

“We already discussed the ‘we aren’t willing to make time for a relationship’ agenda item,” I reminded him, feeling breathless.

His gaze penetrated me, shooting daggers into my heart. “I will accept whatever you’re willing to give. That’s what you mean to me.”

“Are you drunk?” I demanded.

“Are you scared?” he retorted.

Yes! My intestines were tying themselves in knots, and I wasn’t keen on the idea of not having access to a private restroom.

“I’m not scared,” I lied. “I’m appalled. We had one weekend together, and you’re changing everything.”

“This weekend changed everything,” he corrected. “I’m just trying to keep up. Tell me you don’t want more. Tell me you don’t want more nights like last. Tell me you don’t want more dinners with a man who not just tolerates your drive but worships it.”

“You’re spinning me,” I accused.

He didn’t even look guilty. “I’m painting a picture. I want more of you, Emily. Let me earn you.”

My digestive system let out a mournful gurgle.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, amused.

“Not exactly,” I said evasively.

“Are you still angry?”

We were standing in the middle of his glass-walled office wrapped around each other in full view of Jane and the entire Alpha Group staff.

“Not exactly.”

“I know how difficult it is for you to trust,” he said quietly. “I don’t take that lightly. This was an honest mistake, and I’m sincerely sorry.”

“So I get a veto?”

His smile was lethal. “Not on your life, love. This is the whipped cream and cherry on top of a full week of positive press. I’m afraid you’re going to have to kiss your dreams of owning half my firm goodbye.”

Derek traced his fingertips down the line of my jaw.

“We’ll see about that,” I said lightly. The tide turned quickly, and who knew what an all-access interview would do? It could instigate a tsunami. “You’re awfully confident that the real me is likable.”

“You’re more than likable, darling. You’re admirable. Formidable. Fascinating. Real.”

“I’m afraid.” Admitting it out loud made some of the weight on my chest lighten.

“Of what?” he asked gently.

“Of letting someone into my life so they can judge me or hate me or use me. So they can find out I’m not perfect.”

“Perfect is boring and unlikable. You’re far from it,” he said.

I tried to take a step back, but he held me closer. My mother would argue that the illusion of perfection was the only thing that mattered.

“You’re better than perfect. You’re intimidatingly brilliant and frustratingly dedicated. This is our chance to show the real

you to the world. And I'm very sorry I sprung it on you like this."

I sighed out a breath. "I'll forgive you on one condition."

"Anything. Name it."

"I want burgers for dinner."

"I will get you burgers for dinner," he promised. "Are you all right?"

Was I?

I did a scan. Mentally: Steeled. Physically: Hungry. Emotionally: A little rocky.

"I'm fine," I decided.

"Good. Then let's take our journalist friend out for lunch."

"May I use your bathroom first?"

DEREK

Lona Geiser was a formidable interviewer. I'd chosen Tia's, a cozy Cuban cafe with bohemian flair, because of the friendly atmosphere. However, my lunch guests were squaring off, bowls of innocent fresh-baked tortilla chips and salsa between them.

I wanted some salsa, but I was afraid to reach in lest I get bitten.

"What do you see your duty as a business leader when it comes to setting an example for young girls?" Lona asked. Her digital recorder was pointed in Emily's direction like a gun.

"Do you ask your male CEO interviewees that question?" Emily shot back.

I should have ordered tequila.

"Men aren't often held to the same exacting standards as women in power," Lona recited, her gaze skimming to me.

I felt unfairly judged.

"It's not my job to explore the unfairness of existing double standards," she continued. "It's my job to paint an accurate picture of the woman who barely a month ago narrowly avoided arrest in connection to a drug stop."

I leaned forward, ready to interject a defense. Lona Geiser was known to be tough but fair. However, my source at *Building Fortunes* had failed to mention that much more of the interview energy trended toward tough.

Emily's very sharp stiletto met my foot under the table.

"Some may see a woman who wasn't arrested because she had done nothing wrong," Emily corrected smoothly. "When I get up in the morning, I'm a CEO who has hundreds of employees and their families counting on me to make good decisions. I have millions of customers worldwide who hold me accountable when it comes to the products I develop and sell. I take that very seriously. More seriously than baseless accusations and gossip-mongering. If you're not in the arena with me, I don't have time to listen to your criticisms. Metaphorically, of course."

"Of course," Lona said with what could be an approving nod.

"Lona, let's get this out of the way," Emily said, liberating her utensils from the napkin as two servers approached with our meals. "I don't need you to like me."

"I'm not required to like you," Lona responded calmly.

She reminded me of my implacable seventh grade English teacher, a woman I'd thought hated me until the last day of school when she coolly told me I had potential if I were smart enough not to ruin it.

"You're also not required to paint a pretty picture of me. I'm not nice. I'm not a friendly boss. I'm tough. I'm smart. I'm busy. But I am also very, very fair. And I care deeply for my employees and my customers. Not every billionaire, female or otherwise, can say that. I've earned my place here, and I'm not going to allow anyone to question my accomplishments."

"Your company has certainly revolutionized wrinkle treatment," Lona said. I detected a distinct jab. The implication was clear: Wrinkles weren't cancer.

Emily smiled dangerously, and I debated texting Jane to be ready for a hasty departure with a shovel and a tarp.

"My company has donated tens of millions of dollars to girls' STEM programs, university science departments, and environmental sustainability programs. Our new scar treatment

will give tens of thousands of people—including wounded veterans and domestic violence survivors—a chance to be seen for something other than their past.”

“Some would wonder if that’s enough,” Lona said, ignoring the steak fajitas that sizzled in front of her. “Especially with an initial public offering that could earn you even more money.”

Emily folded her hands neatly in front of her plate. “Some don’t get to have opinions on how I spend my money and what causes I support. Your purpose for being here—”

“Is to write an unbiased profile on the woman who single-handedly built an empire and didn’t allow a scandal to slow her down, much less knock her off course,” Lona said, picking up her fork. A genuine smile hovered over her lips.

“Then we have an understanding,” Emily said, smiling over her *arroz con camerones*.

I sat back in my chair, certain that I’d missed a vital piece of the conversation. I flagged down a member of the waitstaff. “Yes, I’d like to order three tequilas please.”

Emily’s eyebrows shot up. “Did you learn nothing from last time?”

I held up my hands. “I’m not sure what just happened, but I feel like it requires tequila.”

“Let’s talk about your college years,” Lona said, consulting her notebook. “You were a biology and chemistry dual major at Johns Hopkins University, and that’s where you met your chief marketing officer, Lita Smith.”

“I was practically a lab rat. We met in a biophysics class,” Emily recalled fondly. “Lita is responsible for dragging me out of the lab every once in a while.”

“Do you still enjoy spending time in the lab?” Lona asked.

“Every chance I get.”

I sipped tequila while they discussed education and the early discoveries that led to the humble beginnings of Flawless. With the terrifying female posturing over, Emily

seemed relaxed. At least until Lona surprised us both by snapping a photo from her phone. “For the article,” she explained. “It will be a combination of candid photos and, of course, the photo shoot.”

“Photo shoot?” Emily repeated. Her heel dug into the Italian leather of my loafer. My shoe guy was going to have a hell of a time buffing that out. I sat still and took my medicine.

“I get the impression that this interview was sprung on you,” Lona guessed.

I cleared my throat. “There was a slight miscommunication with Emily’s calendar,” I said.

“Which is why, after this lovely lunch is over, you’ll both be joining me for five hours of rescheduled meetings and conference calls,” Emily said pleasantly.

My punishment for dropping the ball: Spending more time with Emily. I found it completely acceptable.

We ate in silence for a few moments. And then Lona flipped to the next page in her notebook.

“Let’s talk about the speculation surrounding your relationship with Mr. Price,” she said, spearing a piece of steak with her fork. The fixer in me wanted to mediate the question. The man in me wanted Emily’s brutal honesty.

“Derek was hired by my board to help manage the press surrounding my recent situation,” Emily said.

Lona and I both waited expectantly.

“As it turns out, he’s not only a consummate professional and as dedicated to his work as I am to mine, but he’s also rather...” Those blue-gray eyes skimmed me, warming significantly. “Irresistible.”

“Hmm,” Lona mused.

“As a rule, I don’t comment on my personal life,” Emily explained. “Those I share my life with shouldn’t be required to make the same privacy sacrifices that I have.”

“Irresistible. Personal life. Privacy. Got it,” Lona said, weighing the non-confession. “Off the record, I’d question your intelligence if you two weren’t enjoying your off hours together. On the record, my research for this article freshened up my knowledge of chemistry, and you two have enough of it for a significant laboratory accident.”

“Off the record, we keep eyewash handy at all times,” Emily quipped and picked up her tequila.



Verita: Soooo, have we waited long enough before we demand wedding bells from Derek?

*Liz: *checks watch* It's been more than twelve hours. Let the demands begin!*

Will: Lock that girl down, bro. She's got great taste in wheels and mediocre taste in men. BURN!

Berto: Unrelated, if you two crazy kids get married, does that mean you get a set of spare keys?

Me: Very funny, family. None of you are invited to the wedding.

Tanya: I KNEW IT! YOU TWO WERE SO SMOLDERY! When can I get a peek in her closet? Her taste is perfection.

Dad: Guys, have some chill will you? So Mr. Bachelor is all heart eyes over a beautiful genius with truly excellent taste in cars. Big deal. This happens all the time.

Mom: Michael! I told you sarcasm doesn't translate in text!

Mom: Derek, if you don't make a serious move on that woman I will be deeply disappointed in you.

Me: I'd like to point out that none of this is any of your business.

Verita: It's adorable that Derek thinks his love life is off-limits.

Dad: Are you new here, Derek?

Berto: Back to the Porsche...

Tanya: Back to the closet...

Liz: I vote we start picking out engagement rings and texting them to Derek. #helpful

Mom: What do you all think of this one? The emerald cut is very dignified.

Will: Mom, that's a clown GIF.

Mom: What's a GIF?

Dad: Jesus H. Christ! You know I hate clowns!

Me: I'm disowning all of you.

Mom: Fine. But we're taking a family vote and we're keeping Emily.

Berto: And her Porsche.

Dad: Good luck, Orphan Derek.

EMILY

Mom: What have you done to your beautiful hair???
You look so aggressive.

I'd dragged both Derek and my new journalist shadow through my afternoon from one conference room to the next. One call to the next. I'd instituted thirty minutes of quiet time in my office just so all three of us could catch up on email.

Somewhere in between a manager's passive-aggressive complaint about next week's market update meeting and a timeline of events "should the IPO go forward," my phone signaled a text.

Derek: She likes you.

I glanced up and found him frowning over his phone and laptop on the couch. Lona was typing away like a machine in one of the armchairs.

Me: Is this the executive equivalent of passing notes in class?

His lips quirked.

Derek: You were magnificent today.

Me: You're not flattering me to get out of buying me burgers tonight, are you?

Derek: Darling, I'm not buying you burgers. I'm making you burgers. Jane is shopping for ingredients as we speak.

Me: I approve.

Me: Your butt looks great in those pants, by the way.

His shoulders shook with quiet laughter.

Derek: It's time to go. I'd like to see you in an inappropriately small bikini while I fire up your behemoth grill that I suspect has never been used.

Me: Not true. Cristoff grills tuna steaks.

Derek: I need to give you my oral apology, and I'd like to do so by your pool.

I dropped my phone with a clatter on the desktop.

Lona looked up and plucked her earbuds from her ears.

I still had a good hour's worth of catch-up to play here at the office. But...

It was a beautiful day. Normal people would have left work early today. Normal people would be meeting for beers on Ocean Drive.

"I think I have the beginnings of a sinus headache," I lied. "Let's call it a day."



AN HOUR LATER, Lona was tucked away in one of the guest condos on the other side of the enclave with a comped dinner and a front desk ready to do her bidding. And I was lounging

on my bayfront terrace between the sugar white sand and the lip of my saltwater pool while my lover grilled burgers.

Jane and the housekeeping team had been joyfully dismissed from their duties for the night. It was just me and Derek. And Brutus who had wandered over to critique Derek's grilling.

I'd changed into a scandalously small red bikini and oversized sunglasses, then enjoyed Derek's undivided attention when I strolled across the patio to my favorite lounge chair.

I had a sci-fi novel I'd borrowed from him open. My phone—the lifeline to my empire—was in the house somewhere. Miraculously, I wasn't exhibiting any withdrawal symptoms yet.

Somehow, my life had taken a very drastic turn in just a few short weeks. In moments like this, it was hard to be angry with Merritt Van What's His Name. Because had he not been an idiot, Derek Price would not be studying me over his Ray-Bans with a look that suggested I was the next course.

Of course, I only had another hour carved out for this relaxation. Then it was back to work.

"I can hear your wheels turning," Derek said, dropping down on my lounger. He ran his hands up my bare legs.

Irresistible. The word still applied to him.

He'd stripped out of the suit and gone for swim trunks and a short-sleeved button-down in dark blue. He hadn't bothered with the buttons.

"Just contemplating the surface tension of anti-aging cream," I teased.

"I'm not sure you realize how attractive I find you. Not just for your born-to-wear-that-bikini body, but for the annals of your mind," Derek said.

I glanced at the visible erection in his shorts. "I think I can make some safe assumptions."

Gently, he lowered himself over me and pressed a soft, silky kiss to my mouth.

The shrubs parted, and Brutus grumbled his way across the patio to the grill.

“Your sous chef is demanding your attention,” I said, stroking my hand over his jaw.

“How are you?” he asked, brushing my hair off my forehead. “Are you tired?”

I thought about it. “Yes. But in a good way. Not an edge-of-physical exhaustion way,” I promised.

“A lot happened today,” he reminded me.

I could feel the nudge of his hard-on against my leg. “I have a feeling there’s more to come.”

He removed his sunglasses and pushed mine up so we were eye to eye.

It was a long, loaded look.

“You terrify me,” he admitted finally.

“What are you talking about?” I scoffed.

“You don’t need me. You don’t need anyone.”

He was so serious, so broody.

“There’s more to a relationship than necessity, Price.”

“How would you know? It’s been two years since you’ve dated someone.”

A nugget from his dossier on me, I supposed. I wished I had one on him. I wondered if Jane did. “How long has it been since you’ve dated someone monogamously for longer than a month?”

He pressed his crotch into my hand and toyed with the string of my top. “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

I reached between us and cupped his shaft. He hissed in a breath at the contact. “Would you rather be needed or wanted?”

“I’d rather be whatever keeps me near you,” he confessed. “And that also scares the daylights out of me.”

I’d confessed a fear to him today, and he was returning the favor. A vulnerability for a vulnerability.

Brutus gave a short warning rumble. Flames were rising from the grill.

“I like my burgers medium rare, not meteorite.”



THE SECOND ROUND of burgers were perfection, and we managed to squeeze in a quick swim before Derek insisted on cleaning up. I returned to my lounge for a few more minutes of relaxation. The lowering sun baked me into a blissful oblivion. I was almost asleep when I felt the tug at my bikini cup.

“Mmm,” I murmured as a warm mouth closed around the tip.

I opened one eye and watched Derek’s cheeks hollow. Impatiently, he brushed the other cup down and played his fingers over that nipple.

It felt so good. So decadent. The late sun. The steady thrum of the surf. The pull of Derek’s mouth on me.

His erection was barely contained by his swim trunks.

“Someone might see us,” I chastised, my voice breathy.

“What a pity.”

He stroked his tongue over my nipple and then leaned across me, latching on to the other one. It felt like fire spiraling through my body. My core pulsed emptily around nothing, and I squeezed my knees together, trying to find some relief from the building pressure.

“You taste so good,” he said, pausing mid-suck.

The man was a wizard. Five seconds of playing with my breasts, and I was ready to come.

The crown of his cock peeked out of the waistband of his trunks. I reached for him, but he grabbed my wrist.

“I’ve thought about this one for a while,” he said, nuzzling at my breast.

He gave my wrist a squeeze and released it. Brushing his stubble across my nipple, he tugged the strings on my bikini bottom loose.

I opened my knees to the sides.

“And how does this one go?” I teased, opening my knees wide to the sides.

Too lightly for the friction I needed, he skimmed his hand under the fabric and over my mound. Back and forth, making me shiver.

“Well, since you asked,” he said, rising on his knees and settling between my legs. He untied the strings on the other side, folding my bikini down, baring me to the fading daylight and his gaze. “I’ll suck on these rosy nipples,” he said, pinching one between his fingers.

“And?” I prodded.

He leaned over me, his cock not close enough for me to brush against.

“And you’ll touch yourself.”

“And?” I squeaked.

“And I’ll touch myself.”

I was dizzy with the idea.

“And we’ll come together?” I told him.

He nodded, head already lowering to my breast. “We’ll come together,” he promised.

It was my last coherent thought as those brutal lips closed over the peak of my breast. My nipples worshipped him, vying for attention.

The rays from the sun warmed my bare skin, and it felt natural for me to slide one hand between my legs to tease

between the folds that were already so desperately wet.

Derek growled his approval against my breast.

I watched in fascination as he took his cock out of his swim trunks. So powerfully masculine. Veined and rigid. The head was nearly purple. He stroked down to the root and held there, squeezing with a thin edge of violence.

Oh, yes.

“I fantasized about finding you out here like this. Napping in the sun,” he said, moving back to the other nipple. He stroked the flat of his tongue over it and watched it harden and strain toward him.

Dazzled and needy, I slipped two fingers inside myself.

“Such a good girl, Emily,” he said, his voice rough with restraint.

He began to move the hand that clutched his cock. When his fist rimmed the crown, a trickle of moisture appeared, forced out by the power of his grip. It dripped down on my stomach.

We both groaned.

“With you laying there like a goddess, it’s not going to take me long to come,” he warned me. His big hand working his cock. Up and down.

I was nearly there myself. With the aggressive way he loomed over me. His mouth teasing my breasts until they ached. With my own fingers working their magic on my clit. It was a living, breathing fantasy.

He grunted again, and I felt more precum leak onto my skin. I bucked my hips against my own hand, wishing it was his cock plunging into me.

One more masterful pull at my breast, and I felt my muscles begin to quiver around my fingers.

“Derek!”

“Fuck it,” he growled.

And then he was guiding his cock inside me. I came instantly. Closing around his thick shaft like a fist.

“So good,” I cried brokenly. I didn’t care if someone could see us. I didn’t care if there was a cruise ship full of paparazzi live streaming video of Derek making me come. All I cared about was the orgasm that was frying my synapses.

“Ah, fuck. Fuck,” he groaned. I felt the first pulse of his release as he let loose inside me. Then he was pulling out and pumping his dick with his hand. He painted me with his orgasm. Sticky ropes of come laced my folds, my clit, my stomach. I’d never seen anything more erotic in my life than an unrestrained Derek coming on me.

He grunted, pained, and fed his cock inside me again. Still hard enough. Still angled just right. I came again, and this time he stayed buried in me until the ripples of my orgasm slowly disappeared.

When he collapsed next to me on the lounge, I licked my way down his body.

“Emily,” he hissed as my mouth found the head of his dick.

I slicked my mouth over him and felt him buck against me.

“I don’t think it’s physically possible for me to come again so soon,” he gritted out.

“Let’s find out.”

EMILY

The makeup artist reapplied my lipstick with tiny bird-like brushstrokes.

There were ten of us set up in the lab at AHA instead of the high-security Flawless environment. The educational lab across the hall was swarming with a junior high field trip. Ninth graders were poring over microscopes and the water samples they'd collected from around their homes and neighborhoods.

Lona's photographers, stylists, lighting technicians, and hair and makeup artists had commandeered the other lab and turned the room into what looked like a high-end fashion shoot.

Except the "fashion" was a lab coat.

I'd kept my connection to the building loose, saying only that the DIY lab movement and hands-on science educational initiatives were causes I was proud to support.

But Lona was smart and more than a little sneaky.

Her interview style was rapid-fire with several easy questions back to back lulling the interviewee into a relaxed complacency. And then she'd strike.

"Why do you own two laboratory facilities?" she said after I told her my favorite place for late night sushi in South Beach.

"Dammit, Lona," I said, trying not to move my lips. "Not everything is up for public consumption."

“Off the record then. Call me curious.”

The makeup artist finished his touch-up and hustled off to peer over the photographer and shoot director’s shoulders while they reviewed images from the first hour.

I had a newfound respect for supermodels and how incredibly boring their job was. Hold still. Move a fraction of an inch this way. Now the other way. Look attractive and interesting. I wished I were across the hall looking for lead and microorganisms.

My phone vibrated in the pocket of my coat, and I glanced at the screen. Trey. I ignored the call and leaned against the work table.

“I like science, okay? I don’t get to play in the Flawless lab. So I come here.”

“You own the company that owns this building. That’s quite an investment for a hobby,” Lona prodded.

“I can afford it,” I quipped.

“Hmm,” she hummed noncommittally. “Do you work on new products here before you bring them to Flawless?”

“Of course not. Across the hall is our educational lab. It’s mainly for getting kids—especially girls—excited about STEM. We do field trips, science clubs, that kind of thing. And with our equipment, they can run more complex and interesting experiments than what most high school labs are capable of.”

On cue, a chorus of cheers erupted across the hall.

“That usually means someone found a parasite or something gross,” I told Lona.

“What about this space?” she asked, undeterred.

“Off the record,” I repeated. “This particular space is a DIY lab. Scientists or those with scientific interests can sign up to use the space and share communal equipment. We’re linked to similar cohorts around the country so each lab can be working on its own data sets and sharing them.”

“This feels like a passion project,” she insisted, not put off by my flippancy. “You’re happier here than you are in your office.”

Why did people feel the need to keep pointing that out?

Of course being hands-on in a lab surrounded by other nerds was more exciting than my ass going numb in a meeting about other people’s work. But I was a CEO. I steered the ship, not stoked the engines. I maintained the vision.

“I enjoy dabbling,” I said carefully. Off the record or not, this was a piece of my life that I kept quiet. “But I’m not the focus here.”

“Said the woman on hour two of her photo shoot,” she reminded me.

“What I mean,” I said dryly. “Is the focus here is on education and process. Not who owns what and what her hair looks like today. I opened these doors so kids who want to learn and so fellow nerds who don’t have access to their own state-of-the-art lab space can have a place to experiment and grow.”

“Okay. Fine. Tell me something I can use on the record about DIY labs,” she said.

“Big things are coming out of DIY labs every day. They don’t need grants and funding and can specialize in areas that private companies and Big Pharma aren’t interested in. DIY labs are the future of disease eradication because they can take the business out of science. They can develop a cheap malaria vaccine or study antibiotic resistance because there’s no large corporation behind them making decisions based on profits and losses.”

“So what’s this DIY lab working on?” she pressed.

“Ms. Stanton, we’re ready for you,” the assistant director called from the gray backdrop they’d erected.

“That’s need to know,” I told her, starting for the front of the room. “And it’s pretty freaking cool.”

“Tease.”

My phone signaled again in my pocket. Trey again.

“I just need a second,” I told the assistant and ducked out into the hallway. “Trey, what’s up? I’m in the middle of something.”

“Hey, listen. Is that offer for some cash still good?”

We hadn’t spoken since the gala. More specifically, since his hissy fit at the gala. And I hadn’t actually offered him cash then. But that was just like Trey.

I thought about Derek, his family, about Jane and Cam and Luna and Daisy. I shoved my hand through my hair and remembered. I was a badass.

“Actually, Trey. I’m busy, and there was no offer. There won’t be an offer. It’s time for you to figure your own shit out.”

“Whoa, someone gets herself an edgy haircut and suddenly thinks she’s above it all. Real dick move, Ems.”

My brother was so used to getting what he wanted, he wasn’t even capable of asking nicely. It was sad, disgusting.

“You would know,” I said, keeping my voice low. “You don’t think of me as a sister. You think of me as a blank check. You don’t even know what family is supposed to be.”

“Let’s be real. None of us do. Not our fault. Listen, I’m in trouble, Em. The festival fell through, and there’s not enough money for refunds. Lawyers are involved.”

I closed my eyes. Took a breath. My adult brother was not my responsibility. I couldn’t fix him. My money, my help couldn’t make him a better brother, a better son, and a better person. The only chance he had was suffering the consequences of his actions.

“It’s your mess to clean up.”

He sputtered into my ear. “You don’t get it. This is serious shit. They’re talking fraud charges.”

My heart clenched in my chest.

I could probably make this go away. I could save him. But it would cost me. And not just money. And in the end, it would cost Trey even more.

“I can’t help you, Trey. But you can handle this.”

The silence was deafening. In it, I heard the cracks that had always existed in our relationship splinter wide open.

“So you’re picking your money over your only brother?” His laugh was mirthless. “That’s heartless, even for you. You’ve got enough to spare.”

“What’s mine is not yours. You haven’t earned anything except trouble. Take your lumps. Get through it. And come out a better person.”

“God. What is your problem?” he snapped, all casual joviality vanished. “You’re my fucking sister. I need help. I need cash. I need lawyers. I need you to wire me the fucking money. A couple hundred thousand. I need you to take care of this!” He sounded desperate yet still so sure that the help was coming.

“Not this time, Trey. Not anymore. I’m done with the bailouts. Call me when you want an actual relationship.”

I wanted to hang up on him, to cut him off mid-tirade. But I also needed to hear him. Hear the names, the threats. Really hear it this time. Because as of this moment, I didn’t have room for my brother in my life. Not as anything more than a casual acquaintance across the dinner table once or twice a year. He was toxic, and I was too busy to be disrespected.

He hung up on a bitter “Fuck you!”

I leaned against the wall, hands falling to my sides. All alone in the middle of two worlds. Ninth graders gleefully sketched out superbugs on whiteboards to my left. To my right, a dozen people were waiting to take pictures of me.

I felt a strange anxiety creeping its way through my system. My reputation was repairing itself. The IPO seemed to be back on track. Everything I’d worked for was coming to fruition. To top it off, I’d finally stood up to one of the most disrespectful people in my life.

And yet I felt that niggling of doubt. Something was off. Wrong.

Had I made a mistake? Another misstep?

I wished Derek were here. His trademark bluntness would snap me out of this funk. No one felt sorry for an empire-building CEO who was about to add more zeros to her portfolio.

I peered into the educational lab again. It was a picture of chaotic energy. Interest.

But it felt like there was more than just a wall and window standing between me and that vibe. Because my two greatest assets right now were my brand and my bank account. Not my brain. Not my ideas. Not my leadership. Not my contributions to fucking science. Not my ability to maneuver around a lab and wade through data.

There was no one to blame but me.

But this was necessary. This was the cost of business, of progress, of growth. Sometimes you had to take a step back from what you loved so you could do what needed to be done.

My phone rang again. It was my mother. I sent the call straight to voicemail. There were only so many confrontations I could handle in a morning.

“Ms. Stanton, we’re ready for you,” the assistant called from the doorway.

They were going to have to redo the lipstick since I’d eaten half of it off.



Emily, it's your mother. I was in an appointment with a tarot reader and had a message from Trey. The poor thing's gotten himself into a bit of trouble. I need you to reach out to him and make arrangements with your legal team. Your father is being ridiculously stubborn and pretending like he's not going to pay. So of course, you'll need to cover the cost until he sees the error in

his ways. Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into that man. He acts like family doesn't deserve—Hang on. Trey is calling me back.



Emily! How could you turn your back on your brother like that? I'm appalled. He needs our help. I don't know what's gotten into you, but it isn't attractive. You cut off all your beautiful hair, start dating a questionable man, and suddenly decide that you're too busy to help your family? Call your brother and fix this. Immediately. You know he'd be there for you in a heartbeat if you ever needed anything. I'm just sick over this. You need to fix this.

DEREK

Ducking out of the briefing with Flawless's publicist and the legal team, I dialed Emily's number to check in. The IPO was officially back on track. As long as nothing else went catastrophically wrong.

Given my profession, I was acutely aware of the hundreds of disasters that could still befall Emily, and I vowed to do whatever it took to protect her.

The call went straight to voicemail. She was probably fake smiling her way through what she'd see as an unnecessarily time-consuming photo shoot.

It was quite ironic that I'd fallen for a woman who couldn't be bothered to care enough about image.

"Just calling to tell you not to add yourself to Alpha Group's letterhead yet. It sounds like the IPO is officially a go," I said into the phone. "I'm thinking about you. Dinner tonight?"

I hung up and started to dial the office.

"What's a handsome man like you doing wandering these halls?" Lita's smokey voice caught me off guard. She wore white flared trousers and a cunning, curve-hugging cashmere shell. I wondered if she'd purposely appropriated an iconic Emily Stanton look in a bid to wear it better.

I made a quick decision. "I'm escaping yet another meeting. I don't know how you and Emily can spend so much time in conference rooms."

She sauntered closer and tucked her arm through mine. “I’ll tell you our secret,” she said coyly. “Very long lunches. With very dry martinis.”

“Tell me more about this secret coping mechanism,” I mused, turning up the charm.

“I’d rather show you.”

Valerie, Emily’s second assistant, skirted past us in the hallway. The look she shot me was straight up “Do not fuck with my boss.”

“Are you free for lunch now?” I asked Lita after Valerie disappeared down the hallway. No point in pissing off the boss unnecessarily.

I was doing this for her.



FLIRTATION WAS a weapon that Lita and I took turns wielding. I had to admit, she was winning. I was bound, metaphorically, from unleashing my full powers. Every time I searched for something to say to Lita, Emily’s face appeared in my head.

Be worthy of me, Price.

Lita stirred her second martini with her skewer of olives and eyed me expectantly. “It looks like you’ve got the magic touch. You’ve put Lady Stanton back on her pedestal.” She raised her glass in a salute that felt mocking.

I lifted my own glass. “Now you two are back on course. The IPO can proceed, and Flawless can grow,” I said.

Her dark nails danced against the stem of the glass. “Yet another win.”

“You should be used to it by now,” I pointed out. “Flawless is unstoppable.”

“Mmm,” Lita mused. She took a sip of her drink and waited until I was watching before slowly licking her top lip.

Unbidden, I recalled that praying mantis females decapitated their male lovers.

I knew I was walking a fine line here between getting the information that I needed and not upsetting a woman who had quite literally swept my legs out from under me.

“However will you celebrate?” I asked, tugging at my tie and reassuring myself that my head was indeed still attached.

Flirtatious again, she fanned her fingers over her mouth and pretended to ponder. “Perhaps I’ll take a new lover.”

Careful, Price. Do not stray too close to the fire.

I wanted to return to Emily’s bed unsullied... and also with a head.

“How very European of you,” I teased.

“You really are impressive, Derek,” she said, laying her hand on mine. She flipped our hands so mine was on top.

Mayday! Mayday! Pull up! I smelled a setup, but I couldn’t figure out the game.

“Am I?” I slid my hand off hers and picked up my drink.

“Not many people could have gotten Emily out of that situation. You single-handedly saved her. You’re quite the hero,” she said, plucking an olive from her drink and sucking it between her lips.

I cleared my throat. “I aim to please.” I couldn’t play this game. Not in good conscience.

“I didn’t think anyone would be able to clean up that mess,” she mused.

“I’m very good at what I do.”

She gave me a long, warm look. “I’m sure you are,” she purred. I felt her foot slide its way up my shin, and every muscle in my body went tense.

Danger! Danger! I couldn’t afford to keep playing. The price was too high. I’d have to go the direct route.

“Lita, I have very strong feelings for Emily,” I confessed, sliding my leg away from her exploratory foot.

“Don’t we all?” Her tone was light, but there was a hard edge of annoyance. I saw it in her eyes. That shocking flash of hatred.

“How did you know Merritt Van Winston was going to be arrested that night?” I asked.

She leaned in close, looking smug. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Derek.” Her fingers climbed my tie until they got to the knot. She gave an uncomfortable tug. “But before you go accusing me of anything, remember that Emily and I have a very long history. She trusts me. And if it comes down to choosing sides, you won’t fare well.”

“You’re awfully confident,” I said, gripping her hand and hoping I wouldn’t need to physically defend myself from a beautiful woman in a very public restaurant.

“I know her better than anyone.”

“Is that how you manipulated her into that date?” I pressed. I wanted her to say the words.

Lita’s phone buzzed quietly on the crisp white tablecloth. I frowned at the name I saw on the screen just before she picked it up and flipped it over.

“I hate to cut this short, but I need to go.” She polished off the last of her drink and stood. “If you change your mind about... things, you know where to find me.”

I grabbed her arm as she started to walk away. “Don’t fuck with her, Lita,” I warned.

She leaned in, eyes sparkling. “Don’t fuck with *me*, Derek.”



I WATCHED her leave and then made my way to the bar, loosening my tie as I went. There was a seat next to a great ox of a man. No one got too close to Jude Ellis. Not when he had his work face on.

“Still worried?” he asked, nudging a fresh beer in my direction.

“Now I’m fucking terrified,” I admitted.

“Good, because I think she’s dirty,” he said. “Her dumb as shit assistant bought the ‘IT problem excuse’ and let me into her office.”

“Find anything interesting?”

“She’s careful. Better than good security on her desktop. Got a script on her computer that encodes all incoming and outgoing emails. I didn’t have enough time to crack it, but I found a few footprints. Some contact with a few people at La Sophia, Flawless’s rival. Couldn’t get any text from the messages, but a lot of back and forth.”

“Job shopping?” I mused.

Jude nodded. “Possible.”

“It fits,” I muttered. “She’s tired of living in Emily’s shadow.”

“Tired enough to try to destroy her?”

I thought of the name on the screen of her phone. “Yeah. And she didn’t succeed with Van Winston.”

“I fucking hate backstabbing. Why can’t everyone settle their differences civilly in the ring?” Jude complained.

“Then you and I would be out of jobs,” I said, slapping him on the shoulder.

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Do me a favor,” I said. “Before you start planning your retirement, run this name through whatever appalling database you’ve got access to.” I scrawled the name on a bar napkin and handed it over.

Jude’s eyebrows winged up. “Seriously?”

“I’m afraid so. Something’s going down, and we need to get ahead of it.” I had a very bad feeling.

“You going to give Dragon Lady a heads up?” Jude asked, tucking the napkin into his pocket.

Lita’s words echoed in my head. “I need proof first.”

EMILY

I closed my eyes and enjoyed being completely alone for the first time all day. I kicked off my shoes and squished my abused toes in the thick carpet under my desk. Derek, who had been cryptically “busy” last night, was taking care of something in his own office. Lona, my constant shadow, was checking in with her office. And Jane was off either eating a burrito or flirting with a man.

My cell phone and desk phones rang simultaneously. Derek was calling my cell.

“Hey, how are you?” I asked.

“Emily.” The tension in his voice on that one word, my name.

“What is it?”

Jane burst through my office door, Valerie and Easton were hot on her heels. She looked pissed. My assistants looked nauseated.

“I’m emailing you an article,” Derek said tersely.

Subject: Emergency.

With dread oozing into my intestines, I opened the message.

Flawless ‘miracle’ scar treatment a flawed disaster.

“What the hell is this?” I asked, skimming the article.
Nina.

“There are others,” he said.

“Where is this coming from? Why is my subject from the trial telling the press she was scarred by the treatment?” I demanded. I was a volcano nearing eruption. Nina, the bubbly girl who’d taken two dozen selfies after the biobandages came off, was now saying my scar treatment had permanently disfigured her.

“I’m going to find that out,” Derek said.

“Who do you want me to stun gun?” Jane asked.

“Call me as soon as you know something,” I told Derek.

“I will. She’s not going to win, Emily,” he promised.

I didn’t have time to ask what he meant by that because my desk phone was ringing.

I disconnected with Derek. “Get me Nina, now,” I told the hovering assistants.

“Already dialing,” Valerie assured me as she hustled out of the room.

“Hey, Luna. I’m in the middle of a crisis—” I began.

“La Sophia has your formula,” she said breathlessly into the phone.

“What? What formula?” I clutched my phone tighter.

“I’ve got a distributor who works with my line and a La Sophia line. He let it slip that La Sophia was rushing a scar treatment through to market,” Luna said, the words spilling out of her mouth in a torrent. “So of course I got curious. No one keeps a secret that well in this business. I knew about their CC cream when it was just days into development back in 2016. They just launched it last fall.”

I held onto my sanity by my fingernails. Luna’s storytelling was often ethereal and disjointed.

“*Anyway*, I have a friendly source in their marketing department that I’ve been trying to woo onto my team. I’m totally digressing, but I’m so pissed off that I can’t think straight.”

“What are you saying, Moon?” I asked, feeling something prickle at the back of my neck.

“Bottom line is someone came to them with your formula and offered to sell it to them. I don’t know if the deal is done or not.”

Damn it. The patent. Where were we with it? Could I fight this?

It didn’t matter. I *would* fight this. This was corporate espionage.

Anger woke in me like a sleeping dragon.

Someone had stolen from me, from my team, my staff. From the families of my employees, and I would make them pay.

“Who was it?” I asked, my voice low and controlled while my anger set off fireworks in my head.

“My girl didn’t know, but she was so ethically horrified she put in her two weeks and is coming on board with Wild Heart next month. So yay for me. She heard through the rumor mill that they’re making room for some big executive. It’s not a done deal, but there’ve been a bunch of hush-hush meetings.”

Something rang mystically on her end of the call.

“Is that a gong?” I asked, surprised my brain had room for anything other than white hot anger.

“Yes, I’m shopping for a new one for my living room.”

Of course she was. Because Luna was the type who had a gong in her living room and the type who wore out the gongs in her living room.

“I need to go, Luna,” I said. The anger was clawing its way up my throat looking for a way out. “Thank you for letting me

know.”

“I’ll chant for you tonight,” she promised.

She would, and in some weird way, I’d probably feel the good vibes.

“Thanks, Moon.”

The phone was still in my hand when my door burst open. Lita whirled in like a hurricane. “Emily, I feel sick about this. I can explain everything.”

“Hang on,” I said wearily. “Valerie? Any luck?”

“The number we had for her on file is disconnected. I’ll see if I can find her home address,” she called back from her desk.

“Jane, help her,” I said.

Jane eyed Lita before leaving the room.

“Emily, this is... I just don’t know how to say this.” Lita wrung her hands. “So I’m just going to say it. You and I have something that no man could ever come between.”

“Lita, what are you talking about? Easton, get Jenny from legal on the line now. I need to know where we are with that patent,” I yelled.

“Derek,” Lita said expectantly.

“What about Derek?”

Her hands fluttered to her mouth. “Oh, God. You don’t know. You haven’t seen it.” Her bottom lip, painted a flawless red, quivered.

“Seen what? I’m a little busy trying to squash some corporate espionage.” It was harsh. I was harsh. But I didn’t have time for her dramatics.

“Derek came on to me. At lunch yesterday. I thought it was just harmless flirting, but... God.” She crossed to the couch and sank down gracefully, covering her face with her hands. “He suggested that we go back to his place to *strategize*.”

My stomach turned to ice. My intestines tied themselves into Christmas light knots.

“To strategize?” I asked hoarsely.

Lita nodded and blinked back tears. “Emily, he wanted to talk about my position in the company once you’re gone. I swear nothing happened. I told him to go to hell and left him at the restaurant. But someone saw us. There are pictures.”

“Pictures,” I repeated.

“They make it look... intimate,” Lita said. “I’m so sorry. I should have told you. I just didn’t want to see you get hurt. Oh, God.” She brought her fingers to her mouth once again. “You don’t think Derek is behind that girl claiming we scarred her, do you? What could he possibly gain from that? What would he gain from any of this?”

She was rambling. The words were spewing forth like runoff into a storm drain, and I just needed her to shut up.

“You don’t hold me responsible, do you? Oh, I couldn’t stand it if you thought I had some part of all this. I would die inside. We’re a team, Emily.”

“Ms. Stanton, I have your father on the line for you,” Easton said from the doorway.

“I need to take this,” I said. My throat ached from the scream that wanted to be released.

“Of course.” Lita rose and crossed to me. She laid a hand over mine that was fisted on the desk. “If you need anything from me, you know I’m there for you. I’m always here for you. I always have been.”

“Thanks, Lita,” I said flatly.

On impulse, she leaned in and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “You’ll be okay. You always are.”

Numbly, I picked up the phone. *Derek*. The name echoed over and over in my head.

“Dad?”

“What in the hell is going on?” he demanded. “I’ve got board members calling me. Reporters calling me. Between you and your brother, your mother sent me fifty-four text messages this morning.”

“Dad, someone stole my formula. They’re shopping it to La Sophia. I need to find the girl who’s making the claim and figure out what’s going on.”

I trusted the wrong man.

My father’s sigh was heavy. “No, you don’t.”

“I have legal pulling the patent paperwork. I’m going to throw everything I have at them. I’m not going to tolerate espionage. I’ll track Nina down. I’m checking in with the other subjects. I’ll prove this is a lie, and then I’ll sue every fucking media outlet that dares say otherwise.”

Jane jogged back into the office looking angrier than I’d ever seen her. She handed me a printout. It was a gossip blog post.

Chief Marketing Officer Lita Smith and public relations guru Derek Price got cozy over a quiet lunch. Emily Stanton, friend to Smith and alleged girlfriend of Price, was nowhere to be found.

The pictures.

Derek was leaning in chin resting on his hand and staring into Lita’s eyes as if she were the most fascinating woman on the planet. Her head was inclined in a question. His hand rested suggestively on hers. It wasn’t a kiss. It wasn’t a sex tape. But the intimacy I saw in that photo cut me to the quick. The next was worse. Derek holding Lita’s hand at his tie, looking smoldery.

I was going to be sick. I just wasn’t sure from which end.

Tight-lipped, Jane shuffled that printout to the bottom and tapped the next. It was a collection of headlines.

College classmates recall Stanton's hard-partying ways that cost a friend his life.

Cristal Crisis: Beleaguered heiress's drunken college nights end in wrongful death.

Is the CEO under the influence behind the wheel? Stanton connected to fatal accident.

There was another picture. This one from my twenty-first birthday. I was passed out on my bed in my apartment. My dress, a gold, flashy one Lita had picked for me, was hiked up around my hips showing off ripped stockings and red underwear. I was clutching an empty bottle of Cristal.

I remembered the circumstances vividly. *You need to get out of the lab once in a while before you turn into one of the rats. It's your birthday. This should be the greatest night of your life.*

It hadn't been. In fact, it very nearly turned out to be the worst.

"Emily, the board is in agreement," my father said gruffly.

My heart rate ticked higher. Abdominal cramps turned my insides into a twisted mess. "In agreement about what?" I asked through gritted teeth. I couldn't focus on what he was saying. I shuffled the papers to look at Derek and Lita again. Intimate. Intimate. Intimate. That wasn't a casual lunch between business associates.

"They want your resignation by nine a.m. tomorrow."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," I exploded.

"Look, kid, you had a good run. You made a lot of money. But you can't keep fucking up like this. If you want that IPO to go through, if you want job security for all those employees of yours, the board needs your head on a platter."

I was seething.

"Fuck. That."

“So you won’t be CEO, big deal. They can’t take your shares from you. You’ll still make money as a shareholder.”

“It’s not about the money!”

“No need to scream. I can hear you just fine, slugger. Ah, Jesus H. Christ. Your mother’s calling me again. Nine a.m. tomorrow. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

He disconnected, leaving me shaking with rage.

“How bad?” Jane asked. “Road-side tacos with a side of salmonella bad?”

I shook my head as my stomach lurched. “No food could ever fix this.” I whispered it so I wouldn’t shout.

My cell phone rang again. *Derek.*

I stabbed Ignore.

It immediately began ringing again. I picked the phone up and hurled it across the room. It bounced off the wall and splintered on the floor.

Everyone froze.

Implacable Jane pulled a piece of gum from her pants pocket and unwrapped it. My assistants stood, mouths agape, in the doorway.

Lona, because *of course* a journalist was here to witness my humiliating demise, stood silently behind them.

“I got Jenny,” Easton said. “She’s on her way over.”

“I’ve got an address for Nina,” Valerie said, her gaze sliding to the corpse of my phone and the dent in the drywall. I could practically hear her add “*call maintenance*” to her to-do list.

“I’ll go,” Jane decided, shooting me a look that said clearly I couldn’t be trusted.

“Call Lita and ask her to come back, will you, Valerie?” I asked calmly.

“Absolutely.” Her head bobbed on her neck.

“Can we do anything else?” Easton asked, his voice barely a squeak.

“Get me a copy of my contract,” I said and headed to the bathroom.



Executives at the French cosmetic company weighed in on the shocking results of competitor Flawless' new scar treatment. "It's unfortunate that Ms. Stanton and Flawless rushed their product into testing. We at La Sophia believe that there is nothing more precious than your skin and treat our product testing accordingly. We've been working on a special formula that shows great promise and will bring it to market this fall..."

DEREK

“Emily Stanton’s 21st birthday ended with one dead”

“Billionaire CEO under fire for past indiscretions”

“Is this the end of Flawless’s IPO and CEO?”

“We’re under attack,” Rowena said, her lips clamped around the stick of a lollypop she’d chewed to pieces an hour ago. “These stories are everywhere.”

“Goddammit, I want to talk to your city editor now,” I snapped into my cell phone at the unsympathetic customer service rep. I wrestled my tie open. “Then tell him it’s about a pending defamation lawsuit.” Grating hold music did nothing to soothe my temper.

I picked up the desk phone and dialed Emily’s number again. No answer.

The stories were everywhere. Someone had orchestrated a media blitz, doling out old college photos and new accusations faster than I could threaten lawsuits.

Emily was being attacked on all fronts, and I was fucking helpless to stop it.

“Fuck.” I hung up both phones and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Okay, gang. This is what’s going to happen. Rowena, you’re going to call Jenny Langosta on Flawless’s legal team. Get her here. I don’t care what it takes.”

“On it,” she said, popping a new lollypop into her mouth. “I always wanted to abduct someone.”

“Ancarla!” I shouted.

She swiveled away from her workstation. “D?”

“Run down the college sources from those goddamn articles and get me everything on them. Then get me Nina Nowak on the phone.”

“Yup.”

“Jude?” I said in the general direction of the phone. “Where is she?”

Jude’s voice filled the conference room from the speaker. “On the move. Just walked out. Big, cat full of canary feathers smile on her face. I’m following.”

“Stay on her.” I dialed Emily’s number again. It went straight to voicemail. I hung up and fired off a text.

Me: Trust me. Please.

There was no response.

It killed me. Emily needed me now more than ever. But she wouldn’t let me near her. And I couldn’t blame her. I’d let her down. I’d failed her. Spectacularly.

“Fucking Lita, you know?” Ancarla complained, hitting redial with a restrained violence. “She set this whole thing up just to tear her BFF down. Who does that?”

Fucking Lita was right.

I dialed her number.

“Well, well, well,” Lita purred. “How are you going to fix this one, Derek?”

“I’m going to tell the world that you’re behind this. Let them rip you to shreds.”

“Oh, too bad. I was expecting something a little more creative from you. Besides, I already told Emily this is all your

fault. You came on to me. I bravely resisted. Because I'm the loyal friend. You stole the formula from the lab. You do have sticky fingers, don't you? Once a thief. Always a thief. And Emily and I have history. We've been together since the beginning."

"You've been biding your time and waiting for your opportunity to destroy her since the beginning."

"And look how patience pays off. I have my choice, either be CFO of La Sophia's American market or, as of half an hour ago, the Flawless board members wisely offered me CEO. Isn't that a conundrum?"

She'd choose Flawless. Just to sit in Emily's chair.

"It sounds like you're getting just what you deserve."

"It does, doesn't it?" She gave a girlish giggle.

"That was sarcasm, you abominable twat."

"My first act of business will be dissolving your contract with Flawless. Your services are no longer needed seeing as how I've destroyed your girlfriend who probably isn't taking your calls after those pictures of us surfaced. You certainly are photogenic."

"What's she saying?" Roger hissed from the opposite end of the table.

"He called her an abominable twat," Rowena whispered back. "I don't think it's going well."

"You won't get away with this, Lita."

"Did you know that reporter who's been following her around like a puppy was there when the news broke? There's no way you can fix this. No way to spin it. Emily is going down finally. You should have accepted my offer, Derek. I'd let you be on top."

I should have decked her in that restaurant.

"If you wanted to be CEO, why did you tank the stock offering? More money in your pocket," I asked.

She laughed mirthlessly. “I didn’t want CEO. At least, not specifically. I wanted her to fail. The IPO will be pushed back. After the requisite investigation, I’ll be the one finally reaping the rewards. And there’s no way for you to fix this.”

“You haven’t earned any of this, Lita.”

“I’ve been there since the beginning. Flawless is mine.”

I disconnected the call and dialed Emily again. No answer.

I needed to think. I needed to fix this. I needed Emily.

“What in the fucking fuck did you do, Price?” Jane stormed into the office with her hand on her stun gun.

“Oh, shit,” Roger whispered.

“Jane, I don’t have time to fight with you right now. You can stun gun me later.”

“How fucking stupid are you?” she demanded, ignoring my belated stun gunning offer. “You had to know Lita was up to something!”

“I didn’t know it was stealing formulas and staging affairs,” I yelled back. Frustration and anger and, worse, helplessness warred inside me. I should have known or at least suspected. I’d underestimated her to be just another greedy, jealous viper. “Did you?”

“Of course not,” she shouted. “I would have stuffed her in a trunk and fed her to Steve if I realized what she was up to. You need to fix this!”

I didn’t know if I could. I could spin things and threaten lawsuits. But how could I ever win back Emily’s trust? It was such a delicate, tenuous thing. And I’d walked right into the trap.

“What are you doing here?” I asked wearily.

“I have Nina Nowak’s address. Thought you might want to tag along and see why she suddenly decided to destroy the woman who fixed her face. Maybe if I don’t like what she says, I could mess it up again.”

At least there was something I could do for her. Something I could fix. And something I could prevent Jane from going to jail for.

“Rowena, when the attorney gets here, give her access to anything that will help make this all go away.”

“On it! Where are you going?”

“I’m going to fix this.”

“Don’t get arrested! We don’t have enough in petty cash for bail.”

I followed Jane out the door.

“Where is Emily?” I demanded.

“She went home early because she has until nine a.m. tomorrow to resign from Flawless.”

My fist left a sizable and satisfying hole in the drywall.

EMILY

Betrayal weighed heavily. Much more so than the familiar density of expectation and responsibility. Betrayal left me feeling helpless, hopeless, listless. I wanted to find that life-affirming anger and rouse it back to life.

Angry was better than devastated.

“Here, my beautiful friend.” Luna danced over to me, barefoot and charming in a flowy skirt and crop top. She pressed a goblet of some thick, dark purple liquid into my hands.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s a serenity blend with herbs and fruit juices. The collagen in it will do amazing things for your skin.”

My skin felt too tight. Everything had changed. In just one day, I’d lost everything, and even my body seemed a stranger.

Plus, I’d spent so much time in the bathroom this afternoon that I was dehydrated.

We’d gathered at Luna’s. It hadn’t been spoken aloud, but due to the fact that Derek was so adept at breaking into my own house, I didn’t feel safe there. I couldn’t see him. I would break and either shatter into a thousand pieces or murder him. Daisy would have helped me with the body, but she was on her yacht in the Bahamas.

Luna’s home looked as though her soul had exploded triumphantly over every square foot. We were on her covered

terrace listening to the thrum of waves. Colorful lanterns and dazzling strings of lights hung from the ceiling in no particular pattern. The furniture was low and cushioned in purples, reds, and golds. It reminded me of an oceanfront meditation studio on steroids.

Her fountain bubbled happily on the flagstone terrace. Beyond it, the pool glowed softly under moonlight. Tealights floated on its surface.

I took a sip of serenity and made a face when Luna wasn't looking. The woman was heavy-handed with turmeric.

"Moon, how do you work this stereo thing?" Cam demanded from one side of the outdoor fireplace.

"I got it," Luna said, dancing over to her.

Cam joined me on the low wooden couch with cushions the color of pomegranates. "Here," she said, handing me a very large glass of wine. "Don't pour your serenity directly into the plants or they'll wither up and die. Dig a little hole in the sand."

"Thanks," I said.

"We're worried about you," she said, taking a gulp from her own glass of wine.

"I'm worried about me, too," I said dryly. "It's been a day."

The music came on from hidden speakers above us. It was chanting monks.

Cam snickered into her wine. "God love her."

"Let's go through it beat by beat," Luna suggested, returning to us and plopping down on a rattan ottoman. "It's important to let yourself feel the trauma, or it can take root in your body."

"The vegan beauty Instagram influencer speaks the truth," Cam teased.

"You guys don't really want to hear this," I sighed.

"Yes. We do," Luna said firmly. "Start at the beginning."

So I hit them with it. All of it. Starting with my revelation in the hallway at AHA and then moving on to Trey's phone call, my mother's demands, the media shitstorm. And then Derek. Or, more precisely, Derek and Lita.

They listened without interrupting until the end.

"And to top it off, my father calls me and tells me the board is expecting my resignation from Flawless by tomorrow at nine."

"That's fucking bullshit," Cam snapped.

"And how does that make you feel?" Luna asked, resting her chin on her hand.

"How does that make me feel? Really fucking shitty, Moon."

I felt wrung out and defeated. And perhaps just slightly, marginally better for at least releasing the words from the body.

"Great. That's exactly how you should feel," Luna said approvingly. The monks above us hit a particularly monotonous note.

"I'd like to point out that Ems here seems to be way more upset over that British sex god than about Flawless," Cam said.

"I'm not," I argued.

"Babe, you are," Luna said gently. "He hurt you."

Deeply. Irreparably. Scarringly.

Cam raised a finger. "Listen, this is not coming from a disloyal place, but you don't actually believe that he screwed around with Lita, do you?"

"You saw the pictures," I said.

"Technically, that's not an answer," Luna pointed out. "We've all seen the pictures, and I'm still inclined to agree with the beautiful Cam here."

I heaved a sigh and thought about Lita's superpower ability to seduce a man. Derek's flirtatious charm. "Look, even if they didn't have sex, those pictures made it very clear that something beyond business was happening." My stomach rolled again. Dear God, did I even have any liquid left in my body? "Something that he kept from me after I made it abundantly clear that anything less than complete transparency was a deal-breaker for me."

"Fair enough. He screwed up big time," Cam agreed. "But I'm seeing a well-orchestrated, multi-pronged smear campaign. All of the rest of it is bullshit. So why wouldn't the pictures be bullshit too?"

I hated the vile spark of hope that flared pathetically to life in my chest. I wanted to kill it.

"I don't know. Does it even matter?" He was still doing something wrong, my survival instinct screamed at me.

Cam took the empty wine glass from me and refilled it from the bar cart. There was a bonsai tree next to a bottle of her favorite organic vodka.

Luna shook out her wild hair over her shoulders. "Cam's right. There's no way all of these stories were cooking independently of one another. Someone is out to get you."

"Yeah, and that someone succeeded."

The sound of a small boat engine caught our attention. We saw lights out on the bay. They were speeding in our direction.

"If this is the paparazzi, I'm shooting them with a flare gun," Cam said, gaining her feet.

Together we walked down to the beach, wine glasses wielded as weapons. A glossy wooden dinghy beached itself a few yards from us. Something disco-ball sparkly moved behind the wheel. "All yours, Martin."

Daisy, dressed in a captain's hat, glitzy, silver cocktail dress, and life preserver, climbed over the stern and hopped down into the water.

"Shoes!" she called.

A pair of silver stiletto sandals sailed through the air and landed in the sand at my feet.

“Champagne!” Daisy said again. A steward lugged a case of champagne to shore and dropped it next to the shoes. He gave me, then Daisy, a salute before returning to the dinghy.

“Girl, you sure know how to make an entrance,” Luna said, hugging Daisy in the surf.

“Like I’m not going to leave a flotilla when my friend may need my underworld connections to have a bunch of people disappeared?” she snorted.

“Thanks, Dais,” I said, giving her a hug. The sequins on her dress bit into my skin, but the hug more than made up for the discomfort.

A long gong sounded.

“What the hell is that?” Cam asked.

“Doorbell,” Luna said, bopping cheerfully back toward the house.

“It’s probably the food,” Daisy called, flipping the sopping wet train of her dress over her arm. “I ordered a smorgasbord from the Village. Cuban, sushi, grilled cheese.”

Champagne and comfort food and a ruined six-thousand-dollar cocktail dress. That was Daisy. That was my friend.

“So, who set you up?” Daisy demanded as we trooped back to the terrace. “Was it Derek? He’s got the network for it obviously, but does he have the dastardly soul?”

“Honestly, I don’t have the mental capacity to work it out right now. Let’s just leave it for tomorrow.”

I knew.

That picture had proven a truth that I was unprepared for. It hurt too much to examine. If I could keep it in the dark for a few more hours, maybe then I’d be prepared to face it. Maybe then I would have a plan.

“Sweet Jesus, what the hell is this music?” Daisy complained. “Let me at the stereo.”

“Let me at the champagne. Damn girl, a case of Veuve Clicquot?” Cam swooned.

“Only the best for heartbreak.”

I excused myself and went inside. I needed to splash some cold water on my face, maybe check in with Jane. I hadn't heard from her since she left to track down Nina, the girl who claimed the product I developed had permanently scarred her face.

It was too much. It was all too much.

I heard Luna's voice coming from the front door.

“Listen, Derek. I appreciate the intensity of your emotion right now.”

My insides went to jelly. Derek was here. *Fight or flight?* I desperately wanted to do both. Instead, I ducked behind a pillar like a coward, out of sight but within eavesdropping distance.

“She's not answering her phone, her texts. She's not at her house.” He sounded desperate, and somehow his pain lessened mine just a bit.

“You obviously care deeply for her,” Luna continued. “But this isn't the time to talk to her. You need to leave, and I want you to think about the part you played in all of this. Find out what lessons you can learn from this.”

She was giving Derek Price homework. It would have been laughable had I not been ready to cry or bash my forehead into the marble.

“Luna,” he said her name desperately. “I just need to see her. I need to know she's all right.”

“I understand, but right now, my friends' needs come first, and if you try to step a shiny loafer over this threshold, I'm going to have to junk punch you. And I really dislike violence.”

Luna was the friend that every woman in the world needed.

“Nothing happened. With Lita, I mean,” he said. “No matter what those pictures say, I’m Emily’s.”

I could hear Luna soften. “I know that. And I think deep down Emily does, too. But you can’t rush her through her pain.”

They were both silent for so long, I wanted to peek around the marble to see what was going on.

“You’ll take care of her then?” Derek asked, his voice rough.

“I will. Go take care of yourself.”

“Will you tell her that I... that I’m thinking about her?” he asked.

“Probably not,” she said cheerfully.

I peered around the column. Derek stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped. He hung his head. “I just need to see her,” he said so softly I wasn’t sure those were his words.

He lifted his head, and those blue eyes zeroed in on me.

“Emily,” he rasped.

“Junk punch, Derek,” Luna reminded him, slapping a hand to his chest. “Don’t make me do it. I promise you, I will take care of her. She doesn’t need you right now.”

He was still staring at me. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him. There was so much pain and frustration stirring the air between us.

“Tell me what to do.” He was saying it to me.

It took everything I had to turn my back and walk away.

It hurt. So much more than any of the rest of it. Derek Price held the key to my destruction.

“Here’s what you can do.” Luna’s voice carried. “We’re almost out of ice, and we’re moving on to the chilled champagne and mixed drink portion of the evening. You can leave two bags of ice at the front door. And you can go to

Emily's house since you're so very good at breaking in and pack her an overnight bag. She's staying here tonight," she said firmly.

I stepped into the powder room and shut the door. Sagging against it, I closed my eyes, not sure if I wanted to laugh or cry. Derek looked as gutted as I felt. But was it because he'd lost the game or me?

I took my time washing my face. Letting cold water shock my skin.

When I stepped out of the powder room, Luna was lugging two bags of takeout in the direction of the terrace.

I took one of them from her. "Don't you have a commercial ice maker in the catering kitchen?" I asked.

She feigned innocence. "Hmm, come to think of it, I do. And you already packed an overnight bag, didn't you?"

I had.

"What's your game, puppet master?" I asked, following her in the direction of Bruno Mars and the pop of a champagne cork.

"Just giving him a chance to show you how he feels without you having to face him before you're ready."

"What if he doesn't do anything?" I asked, my intestines still simmering.

"Then you'll know."

What if he did what he was tasked with? At this point, I wasn't sure which was worse.

I wasn't sure of anything other than the fact that I wasn't ready to face him. Not until I was immune to those devastatingly blue eyes.

EMILY

We ate. We drank. We danced to club music and traded stories of broken hearts.

And no one said a word when four bags of ice, a crate with all the ingredients for Bloody Marys, and a Louis Vuitton weekender bag with four fast food burgers stuffed in the pocket appeared at the front door.

I couldn't sleep. Luna's guest room was beautifully appointed in a Zen-yoga studio style complete with white noise machine, aromatherapy diffuser, and a lavender eye pillow. The bedding was soft and plush. The art was soothing, and there was a stack of poetry volumes on the chrome nightstand.

And I couldn't stop thinking.

After overthinking it for an embarrassing amount of time, I opened the bag Derek had packed for me. My favorite pajama set, organic cotton shorts and a long-sleeve tee, were neatly folded on top. He'd included gym clothes and sneakers, a dress and wrap-around strappy sandals, three packets of Imodium, and a bag of my usual makeup and hair products.

The man had packed better for me than I had.

There was a notecard tucked in between the layers of clothing.

Emily.

My name was scrawled across the envelope. *Going forward, did I want my name passing Derek Price's lips?*

I leaned back against the great wall of organic silk-cased pillows and closed my eyes.

What do you want?

Derek's favorite question echoed in my head as I fingered the envelope.

What did I want? Now that my box had exploded open. That there were no walls, no structure. What did I want?

My iPad, another thoughtful addition to the overnight bag, vibrated.

Messages. I assumed there were many.

I debated another long moment because what else did I have to do? Besides write my resignation letter, of course. I pulled it free of the pocket.

I wondered if Derek had done anything all day long besides call and text me. There were dozens of messages from him. I skipped over them. There wasn't a single part of me that was prepared to have any direct contact with the man yet. Not when I was so... damaged. My defenses were down, and I couldn't engage with him until my head was clear.

Ugh. There were more voicemails from my mother. Steeling myself, I clicked on the latest one from an hour ago. It looked as though I wasn't the only one having trouble sleeping tonight.

"Emily. It's your mother. I don't know why you're not returning my calls, but we have a family emergency. Trey needs to leave the country. There's some nonsense about a warrant, and frankly we just need to buy some time until your legal team can get involved. I need you to have the plane ready for him tonight. He says Vietnam doesn't have extradition and has nice beaches. And I'm sure he can get by on a few hundred thousand."

No "Your father told me what happened and I'm so sorry/angry/hurt on your behalf." No "Are you all right? This has to be devastating."

She was incapable of loving me in the way that I needed to be loved. The realization was both painful and a relief.

I used the phone on the nightstand and dialed my mother.

She answered immediately.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Emily, oh thank God! Where have you been? I need your help.”

“Did you talk to Dad?” I asked, interrupting her.

“He is insistent that Trey handles this on his own,” she scoffed as if it were the most ridiculous notion she’d ever heard.

“I mean about me. About Flawless, Mom.”

“What? Oh, he mentioned something about you resigning. You keep the money and don’t have to do any of the work,” she said airily. I could picture her waving it away like a tiny gnat not worthy of her attention. “Emily, this is an emergency. I need you to get your plane ready. Have you talked to your attorneys? I can’t get ours to return my calls. I think your father forbade them from getting involved.”

I was losing family members left and right. Their titles and blood suddenly no longer good enough to earn them a place in my life.

My mom continued her tirade over the injustice of Trey being held accountable. “I wouldn’t be able to show my face in public ever again. Bethenny would positively salivate over a morsel like this.”

“No, she wouldn’t, Mom. Because Bethenny doesn’t give two shits about you and your image. She’s too busy living her life and being happy. You should try it sometime.”

“Emily,” my mother gasped.

But I steamrolled on, fueled by already having lost everything. There was no point to pretending to be the good, dutiful daughter. Not anymore. “I’m not helping Trey. If he

defrauded people, then he deserves whatever punishment is coming his way.”

“How can you say that? He’s your brother! He needs you!”

“This is what happens when you build your life dependent on someone else’s net worth. In the end, you’re powerless. Something I will never be.”

“It’s not that easy for everyone else, Emily,” my mother said icily.

“Easy?” I laughed without a hint of humor. “You think what I’ve done is easy? Do you have any idea the sacrifices I made to build this life? The things I’ve given up to be the good daughter, the strong leader, the unimpeachable Stanton?”

“Don’t be so sensitive,” Venice crooned. “Not everyone wants to build a business. Your brother just isn’t entrepreneurial. It’s hard for him to be happy for you or proud of you because he doesn’t understand you. And quite frankly, darling, I don’t blame him. You’ve made no effort lately to be likable.”

I took that as a compliment. There was no power in being likable.

“What about you, Mom? Are you happy for me? Are you proud of me? Do you even care that my life is falling apart because people who haven’t earned it think they’re entitled to what’s mine?”

“Not everything is about you, Emily! This is a family crisis, and I need you to do what’s necessary to keep your brother out of trouble and the family name out of the mud.”

“I’m losing everything because of something I didn’t do. Trey is going to be punished for something he did do, and you’re more concerned about that.”

And while Trey was her favorite, my mother still couldn’t see him as anything more than a charming pawn.

“Don’t be so dramatic. You’re keeping your shares. Trey is your brother!”

“He’s barely more than a disrespectful stranger to me,” I shot back.

“I do not have time to deal with your issues right now.”

“You never did. So I’m going to make it easy for you. From here on out, you and Trey and I are acquaintances. Nothing more. I’m no longer available for your social climbing or your family manipulations. I’m done.”

“What does that even mean, Emily?” she asked caustically. “You are being beyond selfish. I honestly can’t believe that you’re my daughter.”

“I can’t believe it either. Best of luck, Venice.”

I hung up the phone and pulled the plug from the wall. No need to wake the house with my mother’s incessant middle of the night demands.

Feeling stronger, I returned to the iPad and scrolled through more messages.

There was a text message from Bethenny.

Bethenny: This is complete bullshit. Whatever you need from me and Ed, say the word. I will raise an army of attorneys or hire Ed’s third cousin Louie who may or may not have questionable New Jersey ties. I’m here for you. Whatever you need. P.S. I spoke to your father who didn’t seem concerned enough about the situation for my liking. He’s in the fetal position sobbing on a golf course somewhere now.

I wanted to cry.

My circle was small. So very small. But it was mighty.

Me: That means everything to me. Thank you. Lunch soon.

I put the tablet down, picked up the still unopened note, and crossed to the terrace doors. They were romantic, arched French doors covered in delicate water-colored sheers. I

opened both sets and stood in the doorway, absorbing the humidity that lingered in the dark hours of the night, the steady thrum of the waves on the beach.

I wasn't powerless. And I wasn't stupid.

The picture from my twenty-first birthday was one that Lita had taken of me. "Lady Stanton at her finest," she'd teased while I vomited the poison out of my system. She promised it would never see the light of day. *Friends didn't do that to friends.*

She'd been the one to insist we go out. Insisted on shots. Insisted on getting guys to buy us drinks. "You know who she is, don't you?" she'd whispered conspiratorially in the ear of every bartender.

"You're wasting this great privileged life," she complained. "You should be vacationing on the Mediterranean for spring break. Or renting a compound in Cabo for Christmas. Not studying and hanging out in labs. You're missing out."

I'd believed her and acquiesced to spending my birthday in a more traditional fashion.

I'd nearly gone home with someone. A stranger. I was drunk and flirty. And the guy, a friend of a friend of Lita's, had been... insistent. At the last second, I'd bailed. And he'd died.

Lita had done this. All of it. I'd known it the second I saw the photo.

Derek's pointed questions about trust. Jane's snide comments about Lita. Was I the only one who was surprised by the betrayal?

But what was Derek's role in it all?

I couldn't picture him with her. Couldn't see him falling for her wiles. He had his own, and he'd wielded them on me. Somehow, in a way that made no logical sense, I still didn't doubt his feelings for me.

But he'd gone behind my back. He'd put himself in a situation that forced the doubt. And again had told me nothing.

I'd surrounded myself with too many people who didn't love me, didn't have my best interests at heart. And that was the price I was paying.

But I was finished with that mistake. And now that the purge had begun, I was ready for more. Rock bottom was nothing but a foundation. And I would rebuild. But this time, it would be the life that I wanted.

I tapped the notecard against my palm, debating.

"Screw it," I sighed to the dark. I slipped my thumb under the fold and ripped it open.

Emily,

We still have business. Tell me what you want.

Love,

Derek

Of course, it wasn't an apology or even a plea to explain. That wasn't Derek Price's style. This was a reminder that we weren't done yet.

"Boof." A dark shape lumbered toward me.

"Jesus, Brutus! Don't you ever sleep in your own house?" I asked as the St. Bernard wandered into the room and climbed up on the bed.

I had work to do. I flopped down on the mattress next to the zip-code-sized dog and reached for the phone. It was time to wake some people up.

"Jenny?" I said when my attorney picked up on the second ring.

"Tell me what I can do," she announced briskly.

"How are you even awake right now? It's two in the morning."

"I'm on my seventh cappuccino. I've got nine cease and desists with threatening legalese drafted and ready for business tomorrow. Then I started the defamation filings just for

something to do. I also spent twenty minutes scaring the shit out of that Nina Nowak into spilling everything after Jane and Derek tracked her down. You?” Her words were flying out in an over-caffeinated explosion.

“Yeah. About that. Are you up for a few more legal maneuvers tonight?”

“Fuck yes. I’m ready to legally rearrange some people’s faces. Unleash me!”

“This could be seen as conflict of interest seeing as how I’m being ousted,” I reminded her.

“I’ve been warming up my middle fingers for my departure tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to leave the company just because I do.”

“Emily, I believe in you. Not some name on a letterhead. And certainly not some snively, money-grubbing board of weasels. Where you go, I go.”

“In that case, I’m going to have an in-house counsel position opening up in a new venture if you’re interested—”

“Dibs! Mine! Gimmie!”

“Jenny, maybe you should drink some water or something?”

Two hours later, I tiptoed out of the guest wing into the main living space. Luna’s living room was a shrine to all things shiny, Eastern, and yoga. *Architectural Digest* had been begging for a photo shoot for years. But Luna stood firm in her belief that a home should only be shared with love.

Daisy was snoring on the couch. Her life vest slung over a rattan chair. An empty bottle of cheap pink champagne rested on its side on a cloud-like vegan wool rug.

Love.

Daisy and the rest of the girls had dropped everything. For me. There was no inconvenience. Nothing required in return. Because we loved each other.

Small, strong circles.

I drew an alpaca blanket over her and hastily scrawled a note on Luna's recycled house stationery, leaving it on the coffee maker where someone would be sure to find it.

EMILY

It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be to break into Derek's condo in the middle of the night. The front desk attendant, an unfairly chipper woman at four a.m., greeted me by name as I slunk into the lobby.

"Ms. Stanton, so nice to see you!" Adhering to the propriety code of people who served the scandalous, she politely did not mention my public disgrace.

I appreciated it.

Her name tag said Kimmy, and she shimmied back and forth on her stool like a kid who couldn't sit still.

"Hi, Kimmy," I said, leaning on the desk. "I forgot my key to Mr. Price's place, and he's asleep. I don't want to wake him by pounding on the door or calling. Can you help a girl out?"

Subtext: Are you amenable to help a soon-to-be unemployed billionaire break into her ex-boyfriend's apartment?

"Of *course!*" Kimmy said, probably happy to have something to do besides finish her Sudoku.

I made sure my smile was grateful, not desperate. "Thank you."

"Let me make you a temporary keycard. You just have Mr. Price let me know if you need a new permanent one."

"You're the best, Kimmy."

"Love the hair, by the way. Totally badass."

Minutes later, I faced Derek's front door, fresh keycard hot in my hand. This was *the* choice. I could turn around, leave, and find a way to rebuild my crumbling life. Or...

I swiped the card and stepped inside.

It was dark, but the moon cast enough light for me to see the mess. His briefcase was upended on the floor near the door. His tie next to it. There was a trail of discarded clothing and personal effects leading from the front door into the living room. The coffee table was littered with beer bottles and an empty bottle of scotch.

His laptop was open. His phone was on the floor, the screen cracked.

And there, snoring on the couch, was drunk, unconscious Derek Price. He slept with one arm tucked behind his head, wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung sweatpants and reading glasses, sweetly askew. His hair stood up at all angles as if he'd shoved his hands through it too many times.

For the first time in hours, the desire to smile was overwhelming.

I'd made the right choice.

He gave another soft snore, and I could smell the alcohol fumes as they wafted toward me.

If this was happening, I needed the man awake. And sober.

I pulled a cashmere throw off an armchair and draped it over him. That's when I noticed the shirt tucked under his arm. It was mine. One I'd left here. Any ice left in the cracks of my heart liquefied.

"Damn you, Price," I whispered.

In the kitchen, I fired up his espresso maker. While I waited for the magic of caffeine, I shamelessly snooped through the open files on the counter.

The complete and official Emily Stanton dossier sat, thick and tempting. But it was a red folder open under another empty beer bottle that caught my eye. I moved the bottle and spun the file around.

Lita.

Of course he'd known. Judging from the research, he'd been suspicious from the beginning.

I'd missed it. I'd been blind to her envy, her insidious undermining. She'd never been a friend. And Derek had seen it immediately.

He'd tried to tell me, I remembered. "*Why do you trust Lita?*" And I'd shut him down.

I paged through the file. He'd had his boxing friend Jude follow her. Noted suspicious contact with La Sophia. Dammit. There were notes from his lunches with her.

She attempted seduction under the guise of innocent flirtation. Leaning in. Whispering. Stroking my arm. Even went for the damsel in distress routine. Bottom Line: She wants everything that is E's. That includes me. Hope E gets the opportunity to kick her in the face. Must find way to tell E before L attacks.

I'd seen enough about Lita's betrayal and opened the next folder.

I wasn't prepared for what I found, however.

It seemed that Derek's digging had been more thorough than my own. I sucked in a shaky breath. I wasn't sure what was worse: the betrayal or the fact that I wasn't surprised.

There were more notes here.

I want to personally take care of this one. Or watch Jane use her stun gun. Derek had pushed so hard with the pen the words were carved into the paper.

The smell of fresh espresso permeated my fog of self-pity. I had work to do, and I needed the unconscious man cuddling with my gym shirt to make it happen.

On cue, he groaned.

It was the raspy, gravelly noise of the defeated and dehydrated. I knew it well.

I picked up the cup of espresso and my bag and carried them both into the living room.

“Emily?” he murmured into my t-shirt. I set the cup down with a clink on the coffee table. One of his eyes cracked open. I reached over him and turned on the lamp.

“Wake up, Price.”

“You’re here.” He sat upright, swinging his legs off the couch. His feet swept three bottles to their death.

“Bloody fucking hell,” he groaned, cradling his head in his hands.

“You’re a mess,” I sighed, carting an armload of empties from living room to kitchen.

“Don’t go,” he said.

He was on his feet, swaying.

“Sit down and drink your coffee,” I insisted.

“I think this is a dream,” he muttered to himself.

“Price, sit down. Drink your damn coffee. And sober up because we have work to do.”

He squinted at me from across the room. “You’re bossy like the real Emily.”

The man was beyond frustrating. And, okay, adorable. Also so gorgeous it hurt to look at him.

His pants were untied, hanging off his hips and showing off that cut torso to its best advantage. His silky hair stood up in tufts, and the dark stubble on his jaw gave him a bad boy vibe. My mother insisted that men who didn’t shave were unseemly. The woman didn’t know what she was missing out on.

I ditched the glass in his recycling bin and returned to the living room. I stopped at the end of the couch, not trusting myself to get closer. We had business to attend to, and he was a little too vulnerable and appealing like this.

“Sit,” I said again.

He pinched himself on the flat of his stomach. “Ow.”

“What are you doing?” I pushed him back on the couch. He landed gracelessly and dropped his head back against the cushion. I sat on the opposite end of the couch, keeping a safe distance between the two of us.

“I’m seeing if you’re real.”

“Oh, I’m very real. Now drink your coffee.”

Obediently, he picked up the cup and sipped, still eyeing me.

We sat like that in silence for long minutes.

“Are you here for my apology or yours?” he said, finally breaking the peace.

“Mine?” I scoffed.

“Alright, let’s hear it, then.”

“Are you still drunk?”

“I may be vaguely drunk and very, very hungover, but I still know that we both owe the other an apology.”

And this was why I loved the man.

“Why did you decide to get shit-faced last night?” I asked, changing the subject abruptly.

“Why?” His voice boomed through the space. “My girlfriend was under attack, and she didn’t trust me enough to let me in!”

“I mean, did you get drunk because you lost me or the game?”

His brow furrowed.

“You’re asking quite complex questions when I’ve got more alcohol than blood in my veins.”

“It’s not that complex.”

“It is when you assume they’re independent of one another. I let you down,” he said. “I underestimated the threat. I didn’t protect you from it. And I allowed myself to be put

into a position that made it look as though my loyalty was divided.”

“Lita.” I said the name without any of the emotions I felt.

“Is a manipulative psychopath who is so envious of you she won’t stop until she destroys you. And you believed her over me.”

Maybe the man was due a small apology.

“Do you still?” he asked darkly.

“Still what?”

“Do you believe that I came on to her? That I was the mastermind behind it all? That I never cared for you?”

I wasn’t ready to address all that. There was work to do. Revenge to be had.

“Let’s keep this professional for now,” I told him. I slid the contract to him on the table.

“Professional?” It was his turn to scoff. “You want to talk business?”

“It would seem that you didn’t hold up your end of the bargain, Mr. Price,” I said, uncapping a pen. I laid it on top of the contract. “I have some papers for you to sign.”

DEREK

The woman was a mercenary. And that mercenary was merrily making herself a cup of coffee while I read through her blasphemous contract.

The contract that gave Emily Stanton fifty percent of Alpha Group.

I'd lost the bet. I'd guaranteed her the IPO, and instead she'd be losing everything in another—I glanced at the clock on the console table—four hours.

I'd failed her. She'd lost. And yet...

I watched her wander back in from the kitchen. She sank down on the end of the couch and pulled her feet up under her. I didn't see grief or fear in those eyes that haunted my soul. Denim and platinum.

I saw *fire*.

"Well?" She arched a slim eyebrow.

Wordlessly, I reached for the pen.

This contract would bind me to her and vice versa. There was nothing that would stop me from making that happen. I'd fight my way back into her heart, her bed. And this partnership gave me a foothold. She couldn't just walk away now. The contract was my hope, and she'd handed it to me.

If this was what it took to prove my loyalty, my heart, then she could have everything I owned.

“Wait,” she said, stilling my hand with hers. “There’s something you need to know first. Those headlines about my twenty-first birthday. They’re true.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I rasped.

She pulled back. “It’s important to me that you know the truth first.”

“And it’s important to me that I sign this without knowing the truth. You’re stepping all over my grand gesture here.”

“How can you have a sense of humor at a time like this?”

“It’s part of my considerable charm,” I said, scrawling my signature across the first page.

“Dammit, Derek,” she sighed. “You can’t perform a grand gesture when you don’t know everything. This might make you change your mind.”

A part of her expected it to.

I kept signing. “Tell me your secret,” I said.

“Lita wanted to go out for my twenty-first. She didn’t like that I was planning to stay in. ‘You deserve to have a little fun, Lady Stanton.’”

I winced, recognizing the button pushed.

“‘He’s cute,’ she told me. ‘Go be a normal human being. Get drunk. Have a one-night stand with a stranger.’ I was young. Drunk. And entirely too easily influenced by my friend.” Emily said the word bitterly.

“I didn’t do that sort of thing. And for good reason. But that night, I felt more like being a Lita Smith than an Emily Stanton. And for good reason. I was getting into his car when a female bartender had hauled me back out of it. ‘Trust me, sweetie, you won’t like yourself when you wake up in the morning.’”

She scrubbed her palms over her knees.

“The bartender tried to talk him into taking a cab home. There was a struggle for keys, but in the end, he drove off. I found Lita inside. She’d seemed almost angry that I hadn’t

gone with him. ‘You’re just too good for your own good,’ she’d complained. I felt like I’d let her down, so I bought her another round. That’s how I usually made things up to Lita. I bought her things. She liked presents. And I liked having a friend.”

My heart broke a little more for the lonely girl in the lab coat.

“By the time I was home throwing up while Lita watched, I couldn’t even remember what he looked like. To my mother’s horror, a few pictures had ended up in gossip rags. The worst of which showed me dancing on a bar at a drag club in South Beach. But the bigger scandal never became public knowledge. Until now,” she said, leveling me with her gaze.

“I didn’t find out until days later that the guy I didn’t go home with died. He’d driven through a DUI checkpoint, led police on a chase, and lost control of his car. He crashed into a concrete embankment and died on impact.”

“Jesus, Emily. You could have been with him,” I breathed.

“That’s what Lita said. Only now, with hindsight, I know she said it wistfully. She showed me the article. I didn’t even recognize his name at first. She knew him. And I think she arranged for us to meet. Maybe she was playing this game even back then.”

Lita had been. I was sure of it. I hated her. I hated her hatred and jealousy and greed. I hated that she’d hurt the woman I loved.

“But she never told anyone. She kept that secret. I thought it meant that I could trust her.”

“Instead, it meant she was waiting for the right time to use it,” I guessed. “You’re not responsible, you know. For what happened to him.”

“I know now. Maybe for the first time,” Emily whispered. “So now you know.”

“Do you see me running for the door?”

“You’re too hungover to run.”

She slid closer until our legs brushed. I had to fist my hands at my side to not touch her. Setting her coffee down, she took the pen from me and repeated the signature process. She had shadows under her eyes. Given that it was five in the morning, I assumed she hadn't slept at all.

But there was an energy crackling off her, and I needed to reach out and touch it. Touch her.

Desire lanced through me like a lightning bolt. She was what I wanted, and I just needed to know the game we were playing so I could devise a way to win.

“Excellent,” she said primly. “Now, on to the next one.”

Another contract? Was it a restraining order? A buyout offer? A prenup?

Everything I needed to know about our future would be coldly sketched out in legalese.

She handed me the papers and then rubbed her palms on her knees again.

I frowned at the first page, wondering if I needed a stronger glasses prescription.

“What...” But the question never fully materialized.

“Sign it.” Emily gripped my wrist firmly.

“I can't sign this,” I argued.

“Why the hell not? You just gave me half of your company.”

“Jesus, Emily. I thought—” I grabbed her instead and hauled her into my lap. I buried my face in her chest and locked my arms around her waist.

I could hear the soft rumble of her laughter, and then she was kissing the top of my head and hugging me back. The pieces of my stupid, shattered heart melded back together at the touch. Not wanting to be left out, my cock stirred to life.

“I thought you stupidly thought you could get away with breaking up with me and stealing my company,” I said, holding her tighter to me.

She laughed again. “I stupidly thought about it for about ten seconds. But I’m a very smart woman, Derek. You weren’t at fault for anything besides stupidly keeping me in the dark *again*.”

“Go back to the part where you know I wasn’t at fault.”

She laughed again, and the sound of it was lighter than it should have been given the circumstances. “What about Flawless? What about the board and the IPO?”

“It ends today. This is what I want.”

“I know it is,” I said.

“Shut up. You do not,” she argued, playfully slapping me in the chest.

I caught her hand in mine and pressed a kiss to her fingers.

“You’re a bloody brilliant genius,” I told her.

“Did you know you say ‘bloody’ when you’re drunk?” she pointed out.

“I’m hungover now, not drunk, darling.”

“So what do you say?” she asked, bringing her hands to rest on my shoulders.

“Partners?” I pressed.

“All the way around.” Her fingers toyed with the ends of my hair.

“I know it’s not exactly worth much right now,” she said. “And it might not seem like an even trade or even a good investment. But I promise you—”

“Shut up, love. You’re Emily Fucking Stanton, and that’s all I want.”

She cupped my face in her hands tenderly. “I was hoping you’d say that.” Her lips danced over mine softly. But I couldn’t take soft or tender. Not with relief and hope burning so bright.

I took over the kiss, demanding her surrender. But Emily never surrendered without a fight.

It was aggressive and wild. No holds barred. Just the way I loved her.

Her tongue swept into my mouth. It tangled with mine, making me forget about the hangover and the heartache.

I loved this woman fiercely. And I'd do anything she asked.

"You should have told me about Lita."

"I should have tried harder to tell you about Lita," I countered.

"You can't protect me from things by keeping me in the dark," she said.

When I made a move to speak, she pressed her palm to my mouth. "Let's skip the part where you remind me that I wasn't open to any critical truths and focus on how to get even."

I tugged her hand away from my mouth.

"I need you to know that nothing happened between Lita and me. I know how those photos look. But they were staged. I didn't... I wouldn't..."

The realization hit me. If Emily believed that I'd come on to Lita, she'd have kicked me in the balls and kneed me in the face. There wouldn't be any early morning break-in and coffee.

"You already believe me," I said.

She made a "duh" face. "Of course I believe you. I had to fight my way through the initial mad. But you've made it very clear how you feel about me."

"I have?" I kissed her again.

"Tell me again anyway," she said, pulling back.

"I find your mind endlessly fascinating," I said, nipping at her neck.

"Mmm."

"Your body is my perfection, my playground," I breathed, darting my tongue under the scoop neck of her shirt to taste

the curve of her breast.

“Gah.”

“As for your time, I’m not willing to settle for anything less than all the days of your life.” I slid my hand up under the hem of her shirt, coasting my palm over her warm, flat stomach and higher until my fingers brushed the edge of her bra.

“Is there anything else you want?” she asked breathlessly.

“I want to feed Steve.”

“Only residents feed Steve,” she whispered with the ghost of a smile playing on her swollen lips.

“That doesn’t sound like a problem to me. Wouldn’t Cristoff enjoy cooking for two?”

“Are you sure?” she asked, her eyes hopeful.

“Positive.”

Contorting herself, she bowed back and snatched the second contract off the table and slapped it to my chest. “Then sign this.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I asked. She’d built it. She’d continue to build it, and we both knew Emily Stanton didn’t do anything half-assed.

“I want you to have fifty percent of AHA. That includes the building and the equipment, which isn’t really anything right now. But there are future patents. And before you accept, you should know that I have plans for—”

I cut her off and pressed the contract to her breasts, signing with a flourish of the pen. It needed to be signed now before I heard whatever brilliant plan she had for her new path in life. She needed to know that I trusted her implicitly. That I loved her without a fortune or a company.

She was too quiet.

I met her gaze.

“And now we’re partners,” I said quietly.

She nodded and bit her lower lip. “Fifty-fifty.”

“You and me.”

She nodded again.

“How are your intestines holding up?”

She shook her head and laughed ruefully. “Nothing gets past you.”

“Nothing.”

“Surprisingly well for a woman about to lose her billion-dollar company and the last fifteen years of her every waking minute.”

“Eh. Win some, lose some.”

She threw her head back and laughed. The motion had her sliding down my thighs to settle against me.

“You should do that every day for the rest of your life,” I told her, stroking my hands up her waist under her shoulder.

“What? Laugh? Or this?” She rolled her hips against my groin.

I gritted my teeth as my dick throbbed.

“Take your fucking pants off now, Emily, and let’s make a real commitment.”

“Oh, because signing over fifty percent of our companies wasn’t enough?” she teased.

But I was yanking her shirt over her head and pressing my face to her breasts. “Show me how much you want to be with me,” I demanded.

Together, we wrestled her pants off. They landed over the lampshade. Probably a fire hazard, but she was gripping my shaft and freeing it from my sweatpants. And I didn’t care if we burnt down Miami.

I held my breath and her hips as she guided the crown to the apex of her thighs. Wet. Heat. Love.

The sky was getting lighter through the windows. A new day was dawning. Full of possibilities. And then Emily was

taking me inside her on a low moan. I held her to me, my mouth fastening on one pert, pink nipple. This was right. This was terrifying. This was real.

“Show me, Emily. Show me how you feel. What you want.” My voice was broken glass. “Show me while I tell you.”

“Derek,” she gasped as she began to move.

“I love you,” I said. “I love you.”

I told her over and over again as she rode me fast, hard, until we were both lost. Until she came and dragged me over the edge with her. I erupted, my release hollowing me out even as it filled her.

All our broken pieces. They melded together, forming something new. Something unbreakable.

“I love you, Emily,” I whispered again against her breast, damp with sweat.

She was quiet for a long moment. Still trembling with aftershocks from her release. “I know.”

I growled, squeezing her hips hard, and she laughed.

“I love you, Derek.”

DEREK

Every director seated at the table was exhibiting their current dental health. The mouths of all twelve members were wide open.

“I beg your pardon, Ms. Stanton,” said the eighty-three-year-old financier in Hugo Boss. He was the first to break the silence. “What do you mean you’re declining our offer to resign?”

“Exactly that, Warren,” Emily announced. “Flawless is my company. I am the majority owner, and unfortunately for you, you can’t just turn me out, I’m afraid. I would always have a say in company policy.”

“The SEC won’t approve the IPO if you are at the helm,” the carefully coiffed app developer executive said, tapping her manicured nail on the conference table in a staccato beat.

“I am aware,” Emily said with a humorless smile.

“There’s no need to make this ugly, slugger,” Byron boomed over the rumble of confusion.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Emily said. “That’s why I’m making a counteroffer.”

I stood with Jane, each of us flanking the conference room door, and watched badass Emily Stanton eviscerate the board of directors that had turned against her.

“This is how it’s going to go...”

She laid it out for them, and I had the pleasure of watching pasty complexions go ruddy. She had them by the balls, and I couldn't be prouder.

"That is a very big ask," one of the directors said, mopping his forehead and the back of his neck with a handkerchief.

"I'm not asking," Emily said.

"I'm straight, but she's never been more attractive to me than she is right now," Jane whispered.

"Same boat," I agreed under my breath.

She was magnificent, and I couldn't wait to get her home and say just that as I kissed every inch of her body.

"If you want that IPO, and I know you do, this is the only way you'll get it."

"We need time to discuss this," one of the directors began.

"You have five minutes," Emily said.

I was so turned on I was afraid I was going to embarrass myself with a boardroom hard-on.

She glanced over her shoulder at me, and my heart fell out of my chest into my guts. This was love. Whether it was being in her corner and watching proudly as she kicked ass or fighting a battle for her.

"I have one more condition," Emily announced while the board was still reeling.

"What's that?" Imani asked.

"Lita Smith will never again hold a position in this company. Not even at the drugstore makeup counter level."



"So THIS IS what it feels like to not be a billionaire," Emily sighed, linking her arm through mine as we exited the conference room, leaving chaos behind us. Her attorney Jenny was doling out paperwork and pens and snapping orders.

"Do I still have a job, or is this volunteer work now, boss?" Jane asked from behind us.

Emily raised an eyebrow over her shoulder. “I think seven hundred million will still support your salary.”

She’d blackmailed her own board into a buyout. A very attractive one. I was going to marry this woman, I decided. I just wasn’t sure how to con her into it.

“Can I have a raise? And a drink?” Jane asked.

“After this, we’re going for brunch,” Emily decided. “A booze brunch. They didn’t ask for my corporate card back yet, so it will be a farewell gift from Flawless.”

We stopped outside Emily’s office. Valerie and Easton rose as one.

Emily grinned. “Today is my last day.”

Their faces showed varying degrees of shock, confusion, concern.

“Are you shitting me?” Easton demanded.

“I’m afraid I’m not shitting you. The board bought me out, and the company will be under new leadership. And as soon as you two pack up all my things, you can take the rest of the day and the corporate card and go for drinks. Lots of drinks. Your jobs are safe. You’re both getting raises and an extra week’s vacation. And the good news is your next boss might be nicer.”

Valerie, teary-eyed, threw her arms around Emily’s neck. “You are my hero.”

“Wind beneath my wings,” Easton piped up.

“Yeah, yeah.” Emily patted them awkwardly on the back. “Pack up. Go drink.”

She turned to face me and rubbed her palms together. “Ready for round two?”

“Please tell me I finally get to use the stun gun?” Jane whined.

I was rather hopeful on that point, too.

“Let’s do this. I could go for an omelet,” I told her.

Grinning, she raised on tiptoe and kissed me hard on the mouth. “Thank you,” she whispered.

When she tried to pull back, I stopped her. “I love you, Emily.”

“I am aware of this.” She grinned.

I squeezed her butt, relieved the requirements of office propriety were dead. “Go kick some more ass, love.”

“Go make us reservations,” she said with a wink.

EMILY

I propped my feet up on the desk and admired the aggressive point of my shoes. I'd probably be spending more time in Nike than Prada in the future. Or completely naked if Derek had a vote.

A lot of things would be different. And the only thing standing between me and that wide-open future was walking in the door in Givenchy couture. The kind of dress you'd want to be photographed in when you were named CEO.

Lita stopped short when she spotted me behind her desk but recovered quickly.

"Emily? What are you doing here?" she asked, pulling off her oversized sunglasses and scanning the room.

"I'm just here to congratulate my very best friend on her new promotion," I said. "CEO. Are you sure you're ready for it?"

All innocence and feigned confusion evaporated like a snake shedding its skin. "I've been ready for it for years. So has the rest of the company. You have no vision, no drive."

"Oh, and you do?" I laughed. "You work maybe twenty-five hours a week, and that's if I count your 'working' lunches. Your team does all of the heavy lifting. You're lazy. You're entitled. And you have no loyalty."

"That's rich," she laughed mirthlessly.

I felt like I was in some overly dramatic soap opera.

“I’ve done more for this brand than anyone else, including you. You’d still be in the lab playing with pipettes if I hadn’t gotten you out of there.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you’re a *delusional* backstabber? Fun. Tell me, did La Sophia actually expect you to work for them, or were they just buying my formula with a salary and a fake title?”

“They paid outright for the formula. A salary and title were the bonus,” Lita said. She dropped her bag on a console table and rummaged through it, producing a compact. “But that’s peanuts compared to being CEO of Flawless. You really should be going, by the way. I have a meeting with *my* board.”

“Yeah, about that,” I said, offering up a fake wince. I took my feet off her desk and rose. “That meeting is going to go a little differently than you expected.”

She stopped lining her lips long enough to sneer in my direction.

“Now, what little fantasy world are you living in? I know they asked for your resignation. You don’t believe that you’re still in charge, do you?” She pouted. “Boo, so sad.”

“Oh, I’m not in charge anymore, Lita. At least not after this last little task. The board gave me one more thing to do before I leave.”

“What’s that? Pack your things? I’ll take those lovely little chocolates so you don’t have to carry them home.”

“You’re fired, Lita. Flawless no longer requires your ‘services.’”

Her eyes went hard. And for the first time, I saw her. Really saw her. Beneath the extensions, the fake lashes, the makeup. She was plain. That would have grated on her.

“Just for fun. What did you hate me for the most? That I always got the attention when we went out? That I had a trust fund? That I made straight As? Because I know it didn’t start with Flawless. You’ve always hated me.”

Efficiently, she capped her lipstick and tucked it back in her bag.

All masks gone. “You don’t deserve a damn thing,” she hissed. “You think just being born into a trust fund makes you worthy or interesting? It doesn’t.” She took a step toward me, and I crossed my arms so I wouldn’t belt her one.

“You could have had so much more. All you had to do was work for it. Earn it. But you didn’t. I gave you a title and a team, and you still couldn’t do the work. You’re no better than Trey, just expecting a handout everywhere you go. It’s pathetic.”

“Pathetic? Fuck you, Emily. Pathetic is you locking yourself in a lab or an office and living and dying by data. You don’t deserve your fortune. It’s wasted on you.”

“Hard work is never wasted. You barely made it through college. Without my help, you would have failed out. And without my generosity, you certainly wouldn’t be where you are now.”

“Generosity? You reminded me at every turn that you thought you were better than me. I hate you,” she hissed.

“That’s a shame. Because I really cared for you.” I had. And I’d mistaken her consistency in my life for loyalty.

“You don’t care about anyone or anything,” she accused.

“That’s not true. I care about Derek.”

“And I took him away from you,” she said smugly.

“No, you didn’t. You can’t destroy real loyalty, Lita.”

“Do you know what he whispered in my ear when he fucked me?” Lita said, taking another step closer. We were eye-to-eye, and, oh, I wanted to break that surgically straightened nose of hers.

A movement behind her in the door caught my attention. Derek, face full of fury, hovered in the doorway. I shook my head slightly, but he didn’t budge. Then Jane was pulling at his arm. Pushing him. And when that didn’t work, she jumped on his back and clamped an arm around his neck.

I almost laughed. Almost.

“See, Lita. You can’t even be bothered to do your own homework. I know Derek didn’t sleep with you.”

“How can you ever be sure? How can you ever know that he’s not lying to you?”

I leaned in, gleefully. “He doesn’t whisper anything in bed. He’s very vocal. And you’re not his type.”

Lita scoffed. “You just keep telling yourself fairy tales. I’ve taken men away from you before. Why would Derek Price be any different? You saw the pictures.”

“My attorney also had a conversation with the photographer you hired to take those photos. Oh, *and* she spoke with Nina Nowak who had a lot of interesting things to say about you and your ‘generosity.’ Derek’s team tracked down all of those helpful college classmates from the articles. They all had suspicious deposits to their bank accounts. Ten thousand dollars each? Isn’t that a little light for a soon-to-be CEO?”

“Go fuck yourself, Emily,” Lita spat. She was losing her cool, her confidence. And that’s usually when she lashed out.

“And then there’s La Sophia. They have one hour to issue a public apology and abandon their claim to my patent. I imagine they’ll want that payment they gave you back. So what it all comes down to is you have nothing, Lita. Exactly what you deserve.”

“You fucking cunt. At least I stripped you of that title you were so proud of. At least I have that.” She gritted her teeth.

It still wasn’t enough for her. I could see it in her eyes, shiny with rage.

“Funny story. I didn’t actually resign. I orchestrated a buyout. A very generous one. Oh, and Derek and I are partners now. In his firm and my lab,” I said cheerfully. “So it all worked out really well for me. I should get you a thank you card.”

I could hear her teeth grinding.

“I hate you. I’ve always hated you. You should have been in that car. You should have died, too.” Her nostrils flared.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. Did you really want me to die, or was there another game you were playing?”

Her smile was unhinged. “I had cameras set up in his room. I could have gotten a nice payout for a sex tape starring Emily fucking Stanton.”

I was disgusted. This time it was Jane who appeared in the doorway, brandishing a stun gun. Derek hooked her around the waist, but she grabbed on to both sides of the doorway and silently wrestled for freedom.

“Instead, your meal ticket died because a bartender I didn’t know took care of me like a friend should have.”

“You always land on your goddamn feet, and I am so fucking sick of it! When is it my turn?” she raged.

“Never. Because you’re not good enough.”

She slapped me. Hard. The sound of flesh connecting to flesh echoed off the glass.

“Aw, is that the best you can do?” I asked.

On a howl of rage, she charged me, raking her nails down my arm and throwing an elbow in my jaw. I saw stars, but it was enough. I’d finally drawn a line I wouldn’t allow her to cross.

I wound up and plowed my fist into that pretty, pretty nose of hers.

She went down like a bag of hammers.

“Damn, that hurts without gloves,” I muttered, shaking out my hand.

The office flooded with people. Derek and Jane ran in, followed closely by building security.

Derek stepped over Lita and gathered me in his arms.

“Are you hugging me or stopping me from hitting her again?” I asked over the commotion.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “Both. Are you all right?”

He nudged my chin up and looked at the blooming mark on my jaw. His hands slid down my arms, and he frowned fiercely at the bleeding scratches.

“I’m pretty freaking great, Price.”

“In that case, I think we need to schedule a meeting,” he said.

“About what?”

“About the prospect of a joint venture.”

“We’re already fifty-fifty partners.”

He squeezed my arms. “Marriage, Emily. I want to marry you.”

“Did Jane deprive your brain of oxygen too long?”

“Yes.”

I grinned up at him and brushed a kiss over his mouth. “I’m willing to discuss the potential benefits of a... merger sometime in the future. But first, I want the biggest pitcher of Bloody Marys available to mankind.”

“I’m never going to get to use this stun gun,” Jane whined, standing over Lita’s wailing form.

His smile faded. “Emily, there’s something else you need to know. Lita wasn’t working alone.”

I stopped him with a hand to his chest. “I know. I’ll deal with it later.”

The washroom door opened, and Lona, the unflappable journalist, stepped out. “Is it safe to come out?” she asked, eyeing Lita who was screeching about lawsuits through the hands that covered her bleeding face.

“Lona, I’d almost forgotten you were in there,” I said cheerfully. “Oh, and your recorder was on this whole time. How embarrassing.” I handed it to her.

“Florida is two-party consent,” Lita snapped as security hauled her to her feet. Beautiful, big drops of blood dripped onto the white crepe of her dress. “You can’t record me without my knowledge. Miss Goody Two Shoes should have known that,” she said snidely.

“Well, *we* can’t. But the SEC can if they suspect fraud is being committed. Have you met Agent Busto?” I asked.

On cue, one of the men who had entered with security stepped up. He had a shaved head and a neck nearly the same circumference. “Ms. Smith?” he said with all the charm of a grumpy Steve when Frank the macaw refused to shut up. “The SEC has a few questions for you about your dealings with La Sophia.”

DEREK

“*I* think your job here is done,” I said, tucking Emily under my arm as Lita was escorted from the building by the SEC and security.

“Ha. Literally.” Her laugh sounded a little brittle around the edges. “She’s probably not going to get any jail time,” she predicted.

“Maybe not,” I agreed. “But she’s also not going to walk into another cushy seven-figure job either. I’ll make sure of that.”

“What the hell happened to Lita?” Trey Stanton, in pink shorts and flip-flops, stormed up to Emily. “What did you do to her?”

I felt her stiffen under my arm and stepped between them. “You’ve handled enough today,” I told her. “Let me take this one.”

Emily’s gaze slid over me to her brother and then back to me.

“He’s all yours,” she said. “Jane? Help me load up?”

“But, but, but. Stun gun.” Jane pouted.

Emily slung her arm around her friend. “What’s more satisfying, making my brother piss his pants with a stun gun or watching Tea and Crumpets do it with scary faces?”

Jane heaved a sigh. They took the boxes of Emily’s corporate life and headed for the Range Rover outside.

“Emily! You gotta talk to me,” Trey yelled.

Then the idiot made the mistake of trying to go after her.

“Let’s you and I have a chat,” I said, grabbing him by the back of the neck like a pup. He was still wearing his sunglasses indoors, and that made me even angrier.

“Get off me, man. I need to talk to my sister!” He tried to shrug out of my grip, so I squeezed harder. I didn’t get to deck Lita. But Trey was a different story.

“Your sister is busy.”

I steered him toward the building security manager’s office. It was a small room with two desks, a sagging bookcase full of binders, and two shabby visitors’ chairs. I pushed him down into one.

“Where’s Lita going? What’s going on?” he asked, trying to get back up. I pushed him down again and sat on the corner of one of the desks.

“That’s really none of your concern anymore.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face and through his \$300 haircut. “Look, just tell me what’s going on.”

“You conspired with Lita Smith to steal and sell Flawless’s scar treatment formula because your sister wouldn’t bail you out.”

Trey blinked. “That’s not how it went down.”

“You worked with Lita to destroy Emily’s reputation, to get her fired.”

Surly now, he kicked back in the chair. “She needed to be taught a lesson. Family first.”

“How do you put your family first, Trey?”

He smirked, and I couldn’t help myself. I snatched the sunglasses off his face and hurled them against the wall.

“Jesus, man! Those cost four grand!”

“Real men don’t wear sunglasses indoors, and they don’t make other people buy them for them, you stupid sod.”

“What’s your problem?”

“You, you festering moron. What’s your family contribution, Trey? What do you give back to your parents, your sister? No wait, let me guess,” I insisted when he opened his stupid mouth. “Your familial contribution is requiring them to clean up your messes, you pathetic pissant.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m the kid, the baby of the family.”

“You’re thirty-three years old. You stopped being a ‘kid’ fifteen years ago. Legally, at least. Mentally and emotionally, you appear to be about four.”

“Dude. What the hell? You can’t talk to me this way.”

“You set your sister up.” I gripped the lip of the desk so I wouldn’t choke the living shit out him.

“This again. She fucking deserved it. So high and mighty about her money and her work. Jesus. You’d think she was curing cancer or something.”

“Actually, she’s working on heart disease, not that you’d give a damn, you worthless little shit.”

“Dude. Can we not with the insults?”

“Dude. You’re lucky your sister didn’t give me permission to destroy your face,” I shot back.

“Look, man. I’ll clear it up with her. It was a misunderstanding. Just lemme talk to her.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” I asked.

“Get what?” he asked, exasperated.

“You blew it. That was your last interaction with your sister. Ever. There’s no coming back from what you did.”

“So she lost her job. Lita’s gonna give me a title and some pull. Maybe I’ll make a position for Em after she apologizes.”

I laughed. The unbridled idiocy of this moron was making me crazy.

“Have you ever had any IQ tests? Taken your SATs?” I asked.

“My tutor took the SATs for me. My time isn’t best spent in some classroom.” Trey snorted.

“I can see that.” He was a fucking git, and it was all Venice Stanton’s fault. “Let me spell it out for you. You tried to take away the thing that mattered most to Emily. And now you’ll never see her again.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“I wonder how your father will feel? He’s the one who holds the purse strings, isn’t he? He wasn’t too keen on helping you out of this jam before. How’s he going to feel when he finds out you tried to sabotage Flawless? Your sister’s company. He’s on the board of directors here. He’s got a vested interest. So really, you screwed him over, too.”

“Look, it’s not that big of a deal,” Trey insisted. “Emily was being a bitch. Lita and I taught her a little lesson. Whatever.”

“Now it’s my turn to teach *you* a little lesson,” I said amiably. “You saw Lita leaving?”

“Yeah, what the hell happened to her face?”

“You’ll see in a minute or two,” I predicted. “Lita is being questioned by the SEC. Do you know what that is?”

“The better question is, do I care what it is?”

“Oh, I think you will. But some things are better left as a surprise. Your girlfriend Lita—”

“We only screwed a couple of times,” he clarified.

I shook my head to clear it. “Very well, your friend Lita is being investigated for committing fraud.”

“Jesus, what’s with everyone and this fraud bullshit?” Trey demanded.

“The government doesn’t like it when you fuck with people,” I explained.

“You’d think they’d have better things to do.”

“Be sure to make that point when they question you.”

“Me?”

“Lita has been in their custody for—what?” I glanced at my watch. “Five whole minutes now. How much do you want to bet that your name was the first thing out of her mouth? Oh, I forgot. You don’t have money. You can’t bet.”

“She wouldn’t...” But his slow, clunky wheels were starting to turn. I could hear the creak of unused machinery.

I glanced up and spotted the man I’d been waiting for.

“So, to recap, not only are you facing fraud charges for your little non-existent music festival, but you’re also going to be looking at some pretty serious charges from the SEC because you decided to take your sister down a peg or two and helped Lita Smith steal and sell a patented formula.”

“This is bullshit. It’s all bullshit,” Trey said, coming to his feet.

“That true?” Byron Stanton grunted from the doorway.

Trey’s eyes widened with hope. The dumbass.

“Dad. This has all been a misunderstanding.”

“Your fucking life has been a misunderstanding,” Byron shot back. “You’re getting nothing from me, you stupid fuck.”

“Dad! You don’t get it. They want to arrest me! I can’t go to jail!”

The worst thing in the world to Trey Stanton would be being told what to do and when to do it.

“Try using that in your defense,” I suggested, moving toward the door.

Trey picked up the computer monitor from the desk behind him and hurled it in my direction. It hit the wall by my head. My hands flexed into fists.

“A temper tantrum? Really?”

“Christ, this kid,” Byron groaned. A keyboard smashed into the filing cabinet, keys flying in all directions.

“That’s the first problem,” I told him. “He’s not a fucking kid.”

I grabbed Trey by the arm, and he took a swing at me. “He swung first,” I said conversationally. And then I plowed my fist into Trey’s washboard abs and followed it with a swift uppercut to his Instagram-famous jaw.

He crumpled to the carpet, deflated and defeated. Entirely unsatisfying.

“Byron,” I said as I walked past the man.

“Price,” he grunted back.

I walked out without another word.

Jane met me in the hallway. “How did it feel to hit the fucker?”

“Not satisfying enough,” I admitted.

A chair shattered the glass window of the office and came to rest in the hall behind me. Trey was shouting incoherently.

“Calm the fuck down, you fuck,” Byron shouted.

A computer monitor flew through the broken glass next.

“Now can I?” Jane asked.

“Be my guest,” I said, stepping out of her way.

I walked out with the delightful sound of Trey’s shrieks and Jane’s maniacal laughter ringing in my ears.

“How did it go?” Emily asked as I slid into the back seat next to her.

“About as to be expected,” I said cheerfully.

She picked up my hand and compared knuckles. Both our rights were bruised, split.

“Good day,” she whispered.

I lifted her bruised hand to my lips, kissed each knuckle lightly. “A very good day,” I agreed.

“Let’s go get a drink,” Jane said, opening the driver’s door.

“I smell charred flesh,” Emily said.

“Huh. Imagine that,” Jane mused, putting the SUV in gear.

“Here,” I said, digging in my pocket. “I got you something.” I pulled out Trey’s watch and handed it to Emily.

Jane snorted.

EMILY

“*T*o Emily Stanton, badass,” Cam said, holding a Bloody Mary aloft.

“Unemployed badass,” I corrected.

“To Emily Stanton, unemployed badass,” the rest of the table chorused.

My circle—Cam, Luna, Daisy, Jane, and Derek—raised their glasses in the middle of Mordecai’s Bistro. We’d also invited Lona to join us as long as everything stayed off the record.

And since she was sitting on the biggest story of her career, she seemed happy to oblige.

“Wait a minute,” Daisy said. “Since Emily is no longer of the vagillionaire status, can we still be friends with her?”

“Girl, please,” Luna giggled. “Give this woman five minutes, and she’ll have twelve patents, four drug trials, and another billion-dollar company.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Daisy crowed.

“Honey, you sure know how to rock a scandal,” Lady Raquel in a pink sequined romper said, leaning in to air-kiss my cheeks. “Proud of you.”

“Thanks, Lady Raquel. I’m feeling pretty proud of myself, too.”

“All right, kids, let’s take some orders. Who wants something to soak up the alcohol?”

My phone buzzed on the table.

Bethenny: Do you and Derek have dinner plans? Ed and I would love if you came over. We can take the boat out.

I showed Derek the message, and he grinned. “No offense, but I like your father’s ex-wife significantly more than his current one.”

I laughed and, for the first time in my life, didn’t feel like a traitor when I agreed.

Me: That sounds perfect. We’ll bring the wine.

On reflex, I checked my email and found my inbox was disabled. I blew out a breath. I wouldn’t start every single day of my life with the goal of processing the first one hundred emails. I wouldn’t be sitting in board meetings or reviewing sales numbers, okaying marketing campaigns.

Another text message came in.

Esther: Been thinking. If we can ID these proteins that signify damage, why couldn’t we create a synthetic one designed to fix the muscle damage?

I bit my lip to stop the grin. A new challenge. A new direction. A new family.

“So let me tell you guys about getting mugged,” Cam said.

“What did you just say?” Luna asked, bringing my attention back to the table.

“Did you say mugged or muffed?” Daisy interjected.

“Mugged. Attempted mugging actually. A guy tried to grab my purse in the parking garage at work,” Cam said. “I speared his foot with my stiletto.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “You need better security.”

“I know a security guy,” Derek added.

“You’re missing the point,” Cam said, exasperated. “I was fine.”

“We’ll find you a hot security guy,” Daisy promised.

“I don’t want a security guy, hot or not,” Cam protested.

“Derek, is your friend hot?” Daisy asked, ignoring her.

He shrugged. “I hadn’t thought much about it, but yes. If I were into men, I’d shag him.”

Daisy slapped the table. “Problem solved. Hot security guy.”

Cam rolled her eyes. “Not happening, weirdos. I’ll handle this on my own.”

“Oh, because that always works out so well,” I said.

“I am sensing sarcasm,” Cam mused.

“There you are!”

Jenny, her suit ruffled and hair a mess of flyaways, pulled up a chair.

“Ooh! Update time,” Luna said, wiggling her fingers enthusiastically.

“Let me start at the top,” Jenny said, flinging open a binder on the table.

“Pour the woman a drink,” Derek suggested.

“I wouldn’t say no,” Jenny said. “First things first. Your patent isn’t complete, but it’s actionable enough. We can prove that the formula La Sophia is shopping belongs to Flawless and you have all of the data from the beginning. There’s no way they can replicate that in time for the subpoena I’ve arranged. They have forty-eight hours to produce all of their ‘research.’ Once they fail to do so, then we can move forward with legal action, and the SEC can get up their asses.”

She flipped the page with gusto.

“Next item. Did you know that the patent for your wrinkle reducer is in your name, not Flawless’s?” Jenny asked.

I bit my lip, and Derek laughed softly beside me.

“It might have occurred to me,” I admitted.

“In order for Flawless to continue to sell those products, they’ll have to buy the patent from you.”

“What a shame,” Derek said.

“I’d be open to an even trade,” I said. “I give them the wrinkle reducer if they give me the scar treatment.” Derek squeezed my leg in approval under the table.

“Consider it done,” Jenny said. “The SEC is not inclined to allow an IPO at this time. Not with an investigation into Lita pending. The earliest it could be approved is first quarter of next year.”

“Serves those ungrateful shits right,” Daisy said derisively.

“To ungrateful shits!” Luna said, raising her glass. Luna was a lovely lightweight.

“Speaking of investigations, Lita will face charges,” Jenny continued. “A butt-ton of them. In my professional opinion, if she went this far, there are other things we didn’t catch her on. But the SEC might.”

“Butt-ton!” Daisy cheered.

“How about my dear brother?” I asked.

“Well, he tried to convince your father to file a lawsuit against Mr. Price here for, and I quote, ‘rearranging his face’ and Jane for making him ‘piss his pants.’ But your father wasn’t inclined. In fact, he called the police himself and handed Byron Stanton the Third over to uniformed officers and then called a divorce lawyer.”

I choked on my Bloody Mary. It looked as though fresh starts were happening everywhere.

“You do good work, Jenny,” I said, blotting my mouth with a napkin.

“I’m very, very expensive. I’m glad you can still afford me.”

“This calls for champagne,” I said. I kissed Derek on the cheek and slid out of the booth. At the bar, I ordered a few bottles and a cake. I wanted cake today.

“Celebrating something?”

I turned to the woman next to me and nearly slipped off my stool. It was one of the romance novelists.

“Y-yes,” I sputtered.

I’d just had a showdown with a board of directors, a physical altercation with my nemesis, and now I was tonguetied over speaking to a woman in yoga pants and a Tequila Tacos and Naps shirt.

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Congratulations, whatever it is. I love a happy ending,” she said, fingers flying over the keyboard of her laptop.

“Here comes mine, now,” I said as Derek approached.

“Hmm, chiseled jaw covered in stubble. Carelessly worn suit. Ooh. Eyes like the deepest point in the Caribbean.”

“I like to think of them as a glacier blue,” I told her.

“Glacier. Nice.” Her fingers danced over the keyboard.

“I’m standing right here,” Derek said.

“And we’re sitting right here appreciating you,” the novelist said. She knocked back the rest of her drink and signaled for another one. “I’m suddenly feeling inspired.”

“Good luck,” I told her.

“You, too,” she said without looking up from her screen. “You guys got any tacos on the menu?” she asked the bartender.

I took the first open bottle of champagne and slid off the stool.

Derek snaked his arms around me.

“What do you say you and I take that bottle and sneak off to the bathroom?”

“Bathrooms are kind of gross. Maybe try the rooftop terrace since it’s closed until dinner?” the writer suggested.

“Come on, darling,” Derek said, pulling me toward the stairs. “Let’s go find our happy ending.”

Behind us, my friends, my circle, was still toasting.

“To Derek, I’m so glad I didn’t have to junk punch you.”

“To Derek!”

EPILOGUE

EMILY

“*I*’ve got some papers for you to review when you have a moment, love.” The warm affection in Derek’s voice drew my attention away from the microscope I was glued to.

“This is a nice surprise,” I said, lifting my lips for a kiss for my sexy, smart, well-dressed, devastatingly handsome boyfriend. It was a Saturday morning, or at least it had been two hours ago, I winced, noting the time on the clock. A beautiful, hot day outside, and I was happily toiling over a blood sample and new, life-changing data.

“It’s almost quitting time,” he said, dropping a neat stack of legal documents next to me on the stainless steel work table. “I thought I’d pick you up and we could head to the beach bar for a late lunch. Maybe finish the afternoon off with a naked swim and drinks at home?”

The man knew how to woo me away from my work like no other.

“That sounds like perfection,” I said, rising from the stool and slipping my arms around his neck. “What’s wrong?”

He looked... nervous? A nervous Derek was a suspicious Derek.

“What are you up to?” I demanded. “Did you steal the Porsche keys again?”

He laughed, blue eyes twinkling and it gave me a start to know that soon, I might know someone else with his beautiful

eyes.

“You’re a suspicious one, aren’t you?” he said, stroking a hand affectionately over my hair. I’d pulled it back in a short stub to keep it out of my way while I ran tests and chewed over data.

“You’re the one standing there like you’ve got a secret,” I pointed out.

“Maybe my secret is in those documents,” he prodded.

With a sigh, I released my hold on him. “This better not be another speaking engagement contract.”

Six months after I left Flawless and after Lona’s in-depth, behind-the-scenes article came out, I was still swatting away offers for speeches and interviews. But I was far too busy readying AHA’s blood test for its phase one clinical trial.

To me, the past was in the past. The disgraced and under investigation Lita had left town and the last Derek’s research team had told me was busy conning Merritt Van Winston into marriage. My brother, Trey, was getting ready for his fraud trial. His new girlfriend, actress Zoey Grace, was fronting the money for his legal fees because our parents were embroiled in their own divorce proceedings.

“Emily, darling, would I waste your time with that?” Derek asked dryly.

“Yes. You would.”

“It’s not a speaking engagement. It’s a merger. An important one. And there’s one thing missing.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a black velvet box and placed it on top of the papers.

My heart skipped a beat.

Marriage. Marriage to Derek. Another layer of partnership. *Was I ready? Was he? Did he know my lovely little secret? Was that why?*

“Before you overanalyze this to death, read the agreement,” he said, nudging the papers and ring box closer to me.

With shaking, careful fingers, I picked up the jeweler's box and set it carefully on the table top.

"It's not going to bite," he teased me.

"This is big, Derek."

"That's what she said."

"You need to take that back immediately because I am not recounting that to our children when they ask how we got engaged," I warned him.

"You can't say yes already, not without at least reading the agreement."

I skimmed the first few sentences. "Derek, this is a prenup."

Had I finally found the limit to the man's perfection? Was he a solid shoulder to lean on, a best friend to be counted on, a maestro of orgasms, but a horrible proposer of marriage?

He leaned on the work table, the picture of casual confidence in one of the many refined suits that now hung in *our* closet in Bluewater. "It would appear so."

"Are you proposing to me with a prenup? Because if so, I really expected something more stylish."

"You were expecting my proposal?" he asked, eyebrows winging up in innocence.

"I woke up two months ago with you measuring my ring finger."

"Read the agreement, Emily," he insisted.

"You better have something pretty great up that tailored sleeve of yours," I teased. "Or else I'm going to tell everyone that you're only human after all."

Helpfully, he shoved the papers upward until they were an inch from my nose. "Read, please."

I cleared my throat, choosing a section at random.

"Both parties agree that marital disputes will be settled in the ring," I read with a laugh. "The ring?"

“No hitting below the belt, love.” His eyes weren’t just warm, they were scorching. “Keep going.”

With a slightly shakier voice, I pressed on. “Both parties agree to do everything in their power to love, honor, and support the other including but not limited to date nights, enjoying occasional meals during which no work is discussed by either party, counseling or mediation if needed if conflicts aren’t settled in the ring.”

“Derek promises to keep annoying business and social functions to a minimum for Emily.”

“Emily promises to always let Derek cut her hair.”

“Derek promises to fill Emily’s dining room table on holidays,” I read, my voice breaking. I loved this man beyond words.

He took the papers from me. “Emily promises to always tell Derek when she’s stressed and what she needs from him,” he read, with one hand stroking my back.

I blinked back tears.

“Both parties agree to do whatever it takes to stay together and to fulfill each other’s dreams,” he said, his voice raspy now.

“This will never hold up in court,” I said on a choked laugh.

“It’s not for court. It’s for a much stricter judge,” Derek said, drawing me into his arms. “Us.”

“I love you, Derek,” I whispered.

“And I love you, Emily. You continue to dazzle me every day. Now, would you like to see your signing bonus?”

He plucked the box from the table.

“Wait,” I said. “I have a signing bonus of my own.”

“What’s that, love?”

“How do you feel about being a father?”

“I’ll be thoroughly excited when the time comes,” he promised. “I want a family with you, Emily. I want to raise a new generation of pick-pocketing scientists.”

“Good, because we’re going to get our first crack at parenthood in about thirty-six weeks.”

He blinked.

“What?”

“That’s what I was doing in here today,” I said, gesturing toward the microscope.

His brow furrowed. “Good God. You didn’t make us some sort of test tube clone baby, did you?”

I laughed. “Don’t be an incredibly handsome idiot. I just ran the blood test myself.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” His fingers tightened on my arms. “We’re having a baby?”

I nodded, tears still clouding my vision.

“I think I need to sit down.”

I pushed him into the stool I’d vacated. “Are you all right?” I asked.

He nodded, then kept nodding, stars in his eyes. “What an adventure we’ll have together,” he said. “Of course, we’ll have to sell your Porsche and get a bulletproof minivan.”

“Oh, of course,” I agreed.

He slid his hands inside my lab coat and reverently placed his palms over my stomach. “How do you feel?”

“Elated. Terrified. Surprised. Hungry.”

“How are the intestines?” he asked.

“No troubles since the day we walked out of Flawless,” I said smugly.

“My parents are going to be over the moon to meet this little one,” he said, gaze lifting to meet mine.

“At least we can count on a positive reaction from one set of parents,” I quipped. I had a tenuous truce with my mother that no longer required me to bend to her whims and revoked her right to criticize me. We still didn’t spend holidays together. But that was just fine with me.

“Maybe your mother will welcome our impending nuptials and baby news as a distraction from trying to rake your father over the coals in divorce court.”

“Unlikely. But Bethenny and Ed will commission a nursery designer,” I predicted.

“And Jane will buy him or her a teeny tiny stun gun,” Derek said, a smile spreading across his handsome face.

“And Cam, Luna, and Daisy will be weird and wonderful aunts,” I said.

“Our baby will know nothing but love, Emily,” he promised me, his voice breaking on the word baby.

“Are you happy, Price?” I asked him.

“Dazzled.” He opened the jewelry box and then I was the dazzled one.

In the facets and shine of precious gem and metal, I saw our future. Our life together would sparkle.

“That is a big one,” I breathed.

“Hush, love. Not in front of the baby,” he teased, sliding the ring on my finger. “I’m of course assuming your answer is a yes.”

I glanced from ring to papers and back again. “Do you have a pen?”

WANT MORE FROM EMILY AND DEREK?

Not ready to be done with Derek and Emily yet? Me neither!
Check out Derek's swoony grand gesture after ten years of
marriage, kids, and mogul-ing.

TAP HERE: [Gimmie This Scene Now Please!](#)

Need more Bluewater Billionaires in your life? Turn the page!

UP NEXT

EMILY'S BFFS GET THEIR OWN HAPPILY EVER AFTERS!

Cameron is reluctantly saddled with an overprotective bodyguard in Claire Kingsley's The Mogul and the Muscle.

Luna loses the public's adoration after a corporate scandal and there's only one man—a big, bearded, dog-rescuing biker—who can help her save it all in Kathryn Nolan's Wild Open Hearts.

Nightlife-loving Daisy is forced into the mom life when she inherits a baby... and the baby's other broody, serious, sexy guardian in Pippa Grant's Crazy for Loving You.

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Bluewater where the women are billionaires, the alligators are prosthetically-enhanced, and the men are... well, what can I say about Derek? *swoons onto couch*

This project was born over a year ago in a Facebook chat when Pippa Grant said, "I'm so tired of all the billionaires being men." And here we are. Now, you have three more lady billionaire stories to look forward to! Kathryn Nolan, Claire Kingsley, Pippa Grant, and I had a really entertaining time bringing this world and these women to life. So much so that we had to put ourselves into the stories. Hehe.

If you loved Emily and Derek's story, please feel free to shout your love to all your bookworm friends about it. Or you could review it on your favorite platform! Ready for more Bluewater? Get ready to get billionaire busy!

- The Mogul and the Muscle by Claire Kingsley
- Wild Open Hearts by Kathryn Nolan
- Crazy for Loving You by Pippa Grant

Xoxo,

Lucy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Score is a *Wall Street Journal* and #1 Amazon bestselling author. She grew up in a literary family who insisted that the dinner table was for reading and earned a degree in journalism. She writes full-time from the Pennsylvania home she and Mr.

Lucy share with their obnoxious cat, Cleo. When not spending hours crafting heartbreaker heroes and kick-ass heroines, Lucy can be found on the couch, in the kitchen, or at the gym. She hopes to someday write from a sailboat, or oceanfront condo, or tropical island with reliable Wi-Fi.

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- Salsa and guacamole for being the perfect taco accessories.
- Michelle and Karen from The Inn BoonsBoro for being the best BFFs a gal could ask for!

LUCY'S TITLES

Standalone Titles

Undercover Love

Ashley is given the keys to revenge on her cheating fiancé when she teams up with billionaire Jason Baine to bring him and his mistress down.

Pretend You're Mine

Harper starts her life over again with a fake relationship with real-life hero Luke. But fake and real and hidden truths soon turn into one unforgettable love story.

Finally Mine

Wounded veteran Aldo wishes for his old life, while Gloria tries to build a new one. Between scars and second chances, these two collide. Will they help each other heal or do more harm?

Mr. Fixer Upper

Gannon King's on-set clashes with his field producer Paige drag them both further into the spotlight. And as the network pushes for more drama, things heat up behind closed doors.

The Christmas Fix

Cat King arrives in Merry with a camera crew, a big budget, and the intent to put the town back together again after a devastating hurricane. Christmas is just around the corner. Can she convince the surly city manager to trust her?

Heart of Hope

Single mom Bristol begins to fight through her grief with the help of sexy stranger Beau. But Beau has a secret that will affect her entire family.

The Worst Best Man

Business mogul Aiden has never met a woman who can hold his attention for longer than a month or two. Until Franchesca, a smart mouth girl with a big Brooklyn attitude. Can he conquer the unconquerable?

Rock Bottom Girl

What if you peaked in high school and high school sucked? Marley Cicero is 38, broke, and her parents' new roommate in the town she couldn't wait to leave after graduation.

The Price of Scandal

CEO Emily Stanton has her hands full with a corporate scandal, a billion-dollar deal hanging in the balance, and a suave crisis management expert who might manage her right into his bed.

The Blue Moon Small Town Romance Series

Where It All Began

Find out where Blue Moon got its start in this prequel. John Pierce is a farmer enjoying his solitude until the grad student he reluctantly agreed to take on turns out to be a woman.

No More Secrets

Carter Pierce is a gorgeous veteran who doesn't mind getting his hands dirty tending the family farm, but he's not in the mood to be shadowed by a big city journalist.

Fall into Temptation

Beckett Pierce is the charming mayor of Blue Moon with a soft spot for women who are trouble, especially when they live in his guesthouse.

The Last Second Chance

Jackson Pierce is the returning prodigal son. With a successful career as a Hollywood screenwriter, he has everything. Everything but the girl he left behind.

Not Part of the Plan

Emma's got her whole life planned out. And that plan doesn't include a detour with hunky fashion photographer and notorious ladies' man, Nikolai Vulkov.

Holding on to Chaos

Sheriff Donovan Cardona has his hands full when his town loses its collective mind, not to mention the red-headed disaster who's keeping secrets and accidentally flashing him every five seconds.

The Fine Art of Faking It

Can two enemies fake a relationship long enough to take down the meddling Beautification Committee? Find out in this new chapter in the Blue Moon small town romance series.

Bootleg Springs Series

Whiskey Chaser

Scarlett is a hell-raising tomboy with a tool belt. She's only being neighborly when she makes her sexy next-door neighbor her new pet project.

Sidecar Crush

Leah Mae Larkin, crash lands in her hometown of Bootleg Springs to lay low while a scandal threatens her modeling career. There she reconnects with childhood friend Jameson Bodine, a sexy metal working artist in the midst of his own family mess.

Moonshine Kiss

Cassidy is the girl-next-door turned small town deputy investigating Bowie's father despite their friendly history. Spoiler Alert: She is *NOT* just like a sister to him.

Bourbon Bliss

When June Tucker's fantasy football receiver turns into her real life boyfriend she's not sure she can handle the reality. While George woos her, June does her best to make sense of the latest developments in the Callie Kendall case.

Gin Fling

When personal trainer Jonah and nerdy Shelby are forced to share a cottage for the summer, he has to decide if he's ready for a steamy fling. But the past and its secrets are about to make things interesting.

Sinner and Saint

Crossing the Line

It's hate at first sight when Xavier, a by-the-book bodyguard, meets starlet Waverly who is desperate to leave the sparkle and danger of Hollywood behind her.

Breaking the Rules

A dangerous game brings Xavier back into Waverly's life. He's the only one who can get her out alive, but will she ever trust him again?