

ONE *Bossy*  
DATE

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE SNOW

# **ONE BOSSY DATE**

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AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Never sweat the small stuff, they say.

How about when you wake up with a giant stranger showering in your hotel room?

There's *nothing* tiny about Brock Winthrope.

He even roars like a lion when he sees me. I scream back. And after narrowly avoiding a murder scene, we've got trouble.

He says he'll fix our reservation blunder since he's the manager (he's not).

He thinks I'll smack his resort with the rotten egg review from hell (I might).

I've never seen a man so grumpy groveling his heart out to wow me (it's working).

Oh, but it gets better.

Brock whisks me away on an amazing “date” and things get *heated*.

I'm still dreaming about obnoxiously hot kisses under the stars months later when fate strikes.

I wasn't supposed to see him again.

Not at this dumpster fire marketing job I desperately need.

Not when I crash into him—literally.

Definitely not when I find out he's the crankyface billionaire CEO signing my checks.

Cue the freaking out.

The stormy glares.

The tension thicker than quicksand.

The hopeless promises to “just do my job” without choking on Mr. Grumpmuffin's attitude.

What's worse than one messy date with your radioactive boss?

*One more.*



## DO NOT DISTURB (PIPER)



**S**o, this is heaven.

The salt-scented air is toasty, but there's just enough ocean breeze to keep it cool. I set my glass down on the table with a *clink* and pick up my phone.

It's hard to tear my eyes away from the palm trees swaying in the trade winds and the picturesque ocean view beyond them.

Lanai is something, all right.

Like pure magic scooped out of a dream and left to melt in the hot sun of mundane life.

Even with the usual worries, it's hard not to bask in Hawaiian wonder.

**How's Dad?** I text Maisy.

**Maisy: Dude. You're in Hawaii and you're texting about Dad? How's paradise? Send photos!** She adds a nervous emoji at the end.

That's so Maisy. I roll my eyes as I type a reply.

**Piper: Dreamy. I didn't want to make you jealous, okay?**

**Maisy: Send more photos!**

I frown because she hasn't answered my question.

**But Dad's okay?** I send.

The phone buzzes against my palm before I can put it down for another sip of this godlike mai tai.

**Maisy: Same old grumpy-grump he always is. He basically pushed me out the door this evening for the weekly chowder run. Y'know, the yoozh.**

I smile and settle back in my chair.

**Piper: You're still making sure he takes all his pills and eats vegetables? The potatoes in the salmon chowder don't count.**

**Maisy: Yes, Mother.** She throws me an emoji with its tongue hanging out.

**Piper: Is he at least trying to exercise? They say that slows his condition down...**

**Maisy: Pippa, stop. Go have fun. Let me worry about Papa Bear.**

I nod at my screen, despite knowing she can't see me.

Such a sweet kid.

And she's right about being perfectly capable and mature for her age. I'm insanely lucky to have a seventeen-year-old like her caring for Dad while I jet off to bathe in luxury for the next few days.

**I know you'll manage. I just feel bad leaving you there to handle everything alone,** I admit.

And I do it too often, every time I take one of these trips.

**Maisy: Pippy, I'm proud of you. It's so cool to live your dreams. This is just the start.**

Her text catches me off guard and I take a shaky sip of mai tai.

Geez. She really is the best little sister a girl could ask for.

**We'll see,** I send back. **I only got this gig because Jenn works her butt off in marketing. Winthrope Lanai is so exclusive it wouldn't have been an option without her hooking me up.**

That part is true. They don't call it billionaire island for nothing.

**Maisy: Ugh. Remind me to get a best friend in marketing!**

I laugh, knowing I need to bring her along on my next review excursion. We'll find someone to check in on Dad, cost be damned.

A loud yawn rattles out of me as I type a reply.

**I'm still shaking off some jet lag so I'll check in later.**

I finish my drink and slowly amble up to the unbelievable presidential suite Winthrope comped me with, hoping for a glowing review.

The room—the whole freaking penthouse-sized suite, really—is beautiful. The air smells like sandalwood and fresh orchids.

A four-poster king-sized bed dominates the center, but there's a huge sitting area and kitchenette just outside. And past the bed, my favorite part

—double glass doors that open up to a massive patio soaring above the ocean.

For the second time since I've laid eyes on it, my mouth drops.

*God, how did I get so lucky?*

I owe Jenn big-time for the view alone.

The least I can do for now is snap a few pics and send them over. I've barely kicked off my shoes and sat on the plush outdoor chaise before my phone chimes.

***Jenn: How's Lanai treating you? World's sexiest room aside, I mean.***

***Piper: It's magical. Thank you so much again!***

***Jenn: LOL. If my overworked ass had the PTO, I'd be there with you. But at least I can live through your photos...***

***Piper: You're definitely coming on the next trip.***

***Jenn: Like I'll be able to leave the office for a week anytime this century. But go have a drink on the balcony and Instagram the proof so I can pretend I'm there in spirit.***

***Piper: Yes, ma'am.***

Oh, I do plan to enjoy this balcony, but the jet lag from the seven-hour connecting flights makes my legs feel like lead.

After another twenty minutes pass by watching the glowing sun slip toward the ocean, I head inside and collapse on that cloud of a bed, hugging a puffy white body pillow as I drift off to sleep.

I'm out cold for a few hours.

I vaguely remember waking up from snuggling into the thick, lush white duvet and noticing I'm still completely dressed.

It's night now. The brightest stars ever replace the sun through the glass, suspended over the ocean and pristine beach like glinting diamonds.

I throw my pants off and change into a t-shirt before rearranging myself in my nest.

As soon as I close my eyes, I'm out again.



I'M FLOATING on a small boat.

It's just like the kind of weathered fishing workhorses Dad used to bring us on years ago when he was in his prime. His laugh was so infectious every time he'd haul a new batch of fish up on the deck, their silvery scales reflecting like tinsel.

Except it's not the cool, grey Washington coast that's so familiar.

No laughing Dad or squealing little sister or floppy fish about to be someone's supper.

I smile.

It's sunny and warm here. I want to soak up every bit of tropical sun beaming down from above. I just hope I've brought enough sunscreen and start looking for my purse when—

*Thud!*

Heart, meet throat.

*What the heck was that?*

It sounded like something big hitting the bottom of my boat. My eyes dart around frantically, checking to see if I've sprung a leak, but—

*Thud!*

Again, I'm clutching my chest.

It's coming from the tiny bathroom in the cabin, I think. Maybe there's a problem with the plumbing. I start closing in for a better look.

Just as I step inside, it happens.

*Thud, thud, thud!*

The noise hurts my ears and the whole world spins with a hiss like rushing water.

Yep, we're sinking, and all I can do is scream but I never get the chance.

Instead, I bolt upright, my brow drenched in sweat.

It's dark as hell when my eyes open.

Where am I again?

Oh, right.

No sinking ship, but this giant marshmallow of a bed.

I reach for my phone, tapping the screen for light. Using the glow, I scan the room slowly, letting my brain catch up to my surroundings.

"Just a dream. Jesus." I sigh, wiping my brow. That jet lag slammed me harder than I thought.

I'm still in this beautiful hotel room and I probably have a few more precious hours before my alarm goes off to start the day.

I grin at my own stupidity.

No one ever said I lacked imagination.

My throat feels dry, though. I swing my legs over the bed to grab a drink of water and—

*Thud!*

Again?

What the actual hell?

Am I still dreaming? I pinch my thigh to find out and wince.

Ouch. Okay, it's real.

*Thud!*

Definitely real.

And I'm wide awake now with the awful realization that banging isn't just in my head.

There's someone moving around in my suite.

*Who? Why? What the hell?*

I hold my breath and wait.

The banging stops, but there are smaller noises. They're muffled, like someone moving heavy stuff around and trying to be very quiet.

*Not good.*

Who'd be intruding in the middle of the night in a premier room? *And how?*

I always lock the door and I'm sure I didn't miss it this time...right?

I swallow the nervous lump in my throat.

*If you're traveling, you always make sure your door is locked.* Dad drilled that into me from the time I was twelve and going on my first skiing trip.

It must be someone who works here with a messed up maintenance schedule—or a deranged serial killer.

No other options.

With my breath shaking, I imagine a ring of bright funeral flowers in a halo around my Instagram profile picture and three pink bubble words. *Rest In Peace.*

Good God.

It's just my luck that I'd snag the best room in Lanai, only to wind up hacked into stew meat.

My eyes flit through the darkness, better adjusted now.

Well, if this guy wants a piece of me, I'm not going down easy. Mr. Psycho Intruder will at least have to look me in the eye before he paints the room with my blood.

Still as a statue, I stand up and stop, focusing on where the noise is coming from.

The bathroom?

Maybe it's housekeeping after all?

But why in all that's holy would housekeeping be cleaning my flipping bathroom at—I glance at my phone to check the time—2:37 a.m.?

I feel the blood drain from my face.

We're back at the serial killer theory because it's the only thing that makes sense.

If I'm quiet, maybe I can get the jump on him before he notices I'm here. I need to take my best shot while I can—or at least make some racket so maybe someone on another floor calls the front desk.

Yeah, no, my dad didn't raise a total chicken.

I'm getting him the hell out of my room, or I'll die trying.

*Let's go, Mr. Psychoface. You chose the wrong girl to mess with today.*

My thoughts are braver than the rest of me, though.

My heart strains like an angry dog on a leash with every step toward the bathroom, the source of that scuffing sound.

In front of the half-closed door, I freeze—it's definitely not the way I left it.

Welp.

Since I'm probably doomed, I might as well surprise my would-be killer.

But I shouldn't do it empty-handed, I realize at the last second.

I've binge-watched too many bad '90s slasher flicks with Maisy to be the dumb throwaway chick who winds up as someone's dinner.

I survey the room, looking for something—*anything*—I can use as a weapon.

It's a hotel room, though, even if it's a fabulous one.

There's not much here besides a couple lamps and a few pieces of decorative art.

The ceramic green fish statue on the table could totally split some skulls—but it's probably way too hefty to maneuver well.

I could grab a bottle of wine from the mini fridge—except they're so small I can't imagine it'd make a dent in anyone.

Then there's the kitchenette. I guess I could grab a chair, but they're solid wood, too bulky and hard to carry, let alone swing at someone.

Ugh.

If I live through this, I'm packing something sharp for next time.

My eyes search desperately and finally fall on the bedside table.

"There," I mouth.

A crystal lamp stands tall and proud.

I grab it and march toward the bathroom.

Only, I didn't think of unplugging it first. My movement stretches the brown cord and yanks me backward.

"Shit!"

Pulling makes it worse. I just manage to tangle it around a leg of the monkeywood table.

*Smooth, Pippa*, I think, watching the table wobble.

I try to rush over to free it, but it's wound around that leg tighter than I realize and—the whole table goes crashing to the ground with a deafening rattle.

*Big yikes.*

*I am dead.*

Gasping, I pinch my eyes shut, praying my intruder isn't about to come barreling toward me.

There's no way he could've missed that elephant stampede. My serial killer knows I'm coming.

Whatever.

Steeling my nerves, I clasp the lamp with both hands, ready to club him in the head. When nobody comes rushing over, though, I slow down and finish freeing the lamp from the wall.

Then I creep toward the bathroom again, each step absolute torture.

This is a bad idea, but it's my only move.

And is the bathroom door fully closed now? It's down to a small sliver of light, just enough to peek inside.

But why bother?

It's past time to fling this door open and pray, but I can't.

Not when I imagine what's on the other side.

*Don't go in swinging. What if it's housekeeping or maintenance after all? Maybe a pipe sprang a leak...*

I wish so badly that made any sense at all.

I push my face to that crack of light, trembling.

There's definitely a low hissing sound like water. The shower, I think, thousands of little rainfall droplets splashing against a hard surface.

Could it really be a maintenance guy who skipped on giving notice?

Could it be that easy?

But at three o'clock in the flipping morning without any notice?

It could be a burst pipe or a malfunction, though.

My toes scrunch. I place my hand on the door, ready to throw it open and accept my fate.

I wind up cracking it another couple inches.

The shower roars louder.

At first, I can't see through the glassy part of the stall.

But when the silhouette moves in the steaming fog—

*Holy shit.*

Okay. Deep breath.

So, the staff wouldn't be showering in my bathroom. We can rule out innocent mistakes.

A minute ago, I was determined to be Miss Danger incarnate, but all the adrenaline that moved me this close to certain death evaporates.

The lamp in my clammy hand feels like it weighs a ton.

I really, really don't want to do this.

But what's the other option?

Just up and wait for Mr. Shower Psycho to come slaughter me in bed? Or run for the front door screaming and pray he doesn't catch up while I wait for the private elevator to this floor?

Yeah, no.

I'm out of time and options. It's go time.

So I throw the door open, clasp the lamp like a bat.

I played softball years ago. I've got this.

If only anything on Earth could prepare me for what I find.

*...are hot serial killers a thing?*

Because this guy is a certified GQ model.



A six-foot-plus wall of muscle surrounded by steam. He must like his showers scorching hot.

It takes a few seconds to peer through the haze, and I can't make out much more until he moves.

Believe me, I see enough.

His whole body is toned and tight and chiseled by a mad sculptor dead set on crafting the perfect man.

His large hands lather foam over biceps bigger than my head.

I have to unglue my eyes as he stands beneath the spraying water with his eyes closed, smiling like he enjoys his own touch a little too much.

With a body like that, I'm sure the narcissism comes naturally.

My gaze slides down his broad chest, diamond-cut abs, and sculpted pelvic bone to—

*Oh, no.*

Heat throbs under my cheeks. I hate that I bite my lip, but I've never seen a man who's part stallion before.

*Moby Dick* has nothing on this well-endowed freak.

For a second, my brain rabbits, wondering what it would feel like to wrap my hands around something that enormous—if I could even *close them*.

Let alone do anything else.

Every part of this man is made to punish.

All rough strength and hard edges and a literal battering ram jutting out between his legs, half-hard from the steam, I guess.

But back to that whole serial killer thing...is he a convict?

Did Hawaii have a supermax jailbreak recently I didn't hear about?

My body squirms at the thought, still hideously stuck on Goliath and his stupid scary, stupid hot good looks that are making me—what else?—*stupid*.

There's no other word for it when my arm turns to mush and the crystal lamp slips out of my sweaty hands.

It shatters against the floor a second later like someone throwing a box of ornaments.

"Oh, crap," I whisper, totally paralyzed.

Everything happens in slow motion.

Goliath's eyes pop open and his head whips around. He glares at me like a tiger rudely awakened from a nap.

Uh-oh.

With my one and only weapon in pieces on the floor, there's no hoping he doesn't see me now.

Raw instinct takes over.

I scream before I even realize I'm doing it.

I scream so loud my throat hurts, but my voice has no off switch.

I scream for dear life for ten solid seconds until my own ears ring and I'm winded.

Then I stumble backward, doubled over and breathless.

Maybe screaming bloody murder was good.

Maybe, by some miracle, someone will hear me up here and send help.

Except the presidential suite is the only room on this floor, and you have to use a card in the elevator to get up here.

So unless there's an employee diligently working graveyard shift one floor down...

*I'm so screwed.*

Amazingly, Goliath isn't out of the shower yet.

That means I still have time.

I need to run like hell for the elevator while I have a head start.

Sucking in a deep breath, I straighten up, willing my legs to move.

I'm about to turn and run but the shower door swings open so fast it's dizzying.

My lethal Adonis steps out, snapping a towel from the shower rack. He whips it around his waist faster than I can blink.

My gaze follows his movement.

Again, I hate that he's so hot.

I hate that I'm losing time as I spin around for the door, practically leaping for it.

"Stay or it's going to be much worse!" he bellows, his voice rolling thunder.

Oh, God.

I know for a fact he doesn't have a weapon while he's almost naked. Should I run for it while I can? But he's so much taller, so much stronger, I doubt I can outrun him.

Is it time to settle for just not being tortured?

I sigh and freeze in place.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you here to steal my shit?”

*What the holy hell is he talking about?*

I’m already doubting the serial killer thing. Two other theories come my mind.

He’s either smoked or snorted something way too strong or he’s in the middle of a mental breakdown.

“How did you get in here? Tell me now,” he demands.

His scowl threatens to burn me through the floor, but he’s not exactly moving on me in a hostile way. *Yet.*

Maybe the mess of broken glass between us has something to do with that.

The way he hesitates gives me just enough of my wits back to glare at him.

“Um, what? Shouldn’t I be asking *you* that? I used my keycard.”

“Keycard?” he spits back. His brow tightens, a look of utter disgust on his face.

Any empathy I had just disappeared.

Whatevs.

If I’m dead meat, I might as well go out giving him a piece of my mind. I step closer, but my foot slides over a crystal shard.

“Ow!”

“Fuck,” he rumbles, moving forward carefully. “Lady, are you okay?”

I blink bitterly at him, wincing through the pain. “I just— I think I stepped on a piece of lamp. Not that it’s any of your business...”

“You’re replacing that.” His eyes fall to the floor with a huff.

*Is he serious?*

“Like hell! Winthrope’s whole company can take me to court first. I’d love to see that go down. If they hadn’t let some lunatic in my room in the middle of the night, I wouldn’t have grabbed the lamp in the first place! I was scared. Ever heard of self-defense, asshole?”

He meets my eyes and snorts, raking a frustrated hand through his wet sandy-dark hair.

“Sweetheart, you’re redder than a barn. You might be a lot of things, but ‘scared’ isn’t one of them.”

Damn.

He noticed, huh?

My face heats at the realization.

Double damn.

“Still waiting to hear how you got into my room,” he snarls. “What do you want, anyway?”

My mouth drops.

“Your room? Wow. So you’re really going to play it that way? Just how stupid do you think I am?”

He cocks his head.

“You managed to slip past security and made it into the presidential suite somehow. I doubt you’re dumb, but if you don’t ask, you don’t get. First rule of business. So, let’s just make this easy on both of us. Why the fuck are you here, watching me shower? What do you want?”

“Right now, I want you out of *my* room.” My temper flares so hot that cut on my foot throbs, and I wince again before saying, “And FYI, I wasn’t watching you shower. I just had to know who the hell was in my room making noise—”

“Your room?” He laughs, this low sound like a highly amused predator. “You stood there for a solid minute after you saw me, enjoying the show.”

The brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen drill through me. He’s older, maybe in his early thirties.

Then he clasps his hands over his head and flexes.

My jaw drops.

That just makes his cocky smile wider as he raises a brow. “I saw you checking me out in the mirror. Waited for you to make the first move so I could see if you had a weapon—a real one, I mean.”

*Prick.*

Frowning, I purse my lips and glare harder.

“Considering you’re too underdressed to be a foreign agent coming to ransom me, though...” He gestures.

And that’s when I realize I’m standing in front of this near-naked jerkface in nothing but a skimpy old sleeping shirt and panties.

My heart plummets from shame to pure rage in two seconds flat.

“You, sir, are in my hotel room in the middle of the night. If I stood around after catching you in my bathroom, it’s because I was *shocked*. I

have a right to be freaked out after finding a naked giant in my hotel room,” I bite off. “Also, I don’t believe for one second that you thought this was your room. It has a whole floor to itself. You had to *try* to come up here.” My voice cracks at the end.

But at least he isn’t staring me down like tomorrow’s breakfast anymore.

He clears his throat, frustration and confusion lining his face. “You’re damn right. This room is supposed to be mine for the weekend. My key is on the counter next to the sink if that makes you feel better.”

I glance toward the bathroom sink. Sure enough, a sleek silver card with the word *Winthrop* engraved across it in black letters lays beside it.

So he has proof.

*Annoying.*

“I thought you were a serial killer,” I whisper.

“I feel like one now. I just got off an international flight and didn’t expect this shit. All I wanted was a shower and some sleep before I was rudely accosted by a crazy chick in a t-shirt with string beans for arms while I tried to wash Australia away.”

“String beans?” I repeat. “Are you calling me weak?”

He shrugs.

“You dropped the lamp.” He shakes his head, glancing at the mess on the floor. “That was a beauty, too.”

Wait.

He just said international flight and talks like this is *his* room. For real, I mean.

Has he been here? How does he know what the lamp looked like before I blew it to smithereens?

Before I can ask, he interrupts.

“Nobody just waltzes into the presidential suite. Who the hell are you?” His glance almost cuts me in two.

“My name is Piper.” I swallow. “I’m supposed to have a reservation here for the next few days. I checked in at the front desk. They gave me a keycard and what I thought was an amazing upgrade. I had a drink at the poolside bar and came upstairs to crash. You know, everything normal people do when they start a nice trip. It was all going swell until a naked crazy barged in and started threatening me.”

“Threatening? Give me a break,” he says slowly, his eyes falling to my feet. “How are you still standing and running that mouth?”

Oof.

When an underwear model stares at your feet rather than your face, it’s not a compliment. Then I look down and notice the streak of red I’ve left on the tile.

“You should sit,” he growls. “Can you still walk or do I need to carry you?”

“W-what?” I stammer out.

“Your foot. It’s bleeding pretty bad. You’ll want to get your weight off it and check for glass.”

For a second, my breath stalls and I’m just staring.

Don’t tell me this weirdo is a doctor too? Because that would be the final blow.

“No, no, I’m okay,” I whisper, pinching my eyes shut. “Way to change the subject, though. I still don’t understand. What, you’re saying we *both* have reservations for this room? That makes no sense.”

He glowers.

I hope he knows I’m still not sure if I believe his story.

But it could be true.

This is a hard place to get into without the right keycard, after all.

“Some dumbass downstairs obviously made a mistake and overbooked the room. Give me a minute to yell at them.” He strides toward me, this walking mountain.

I take a deep breath, unsure what to do.

“You’re between me and the door. I already asked, are you okay to walk or should I—” He stops mid-sentence and sighs loudly. “Fuck it, hold still.”

Next thing I know, I’m airborne.

Slung over his shoulder.

My injured foot curls against his leg as we glide into the room.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, trying not to sound panicked.

“I’m not having you hurting yourself more,” he rumbles. “Besides, you’ll get blood on the carpet, and that’s expensive shit. I’m not waiting for another French decorator to replace it.”

“I don’t know you!” I screech in his ear, slapping at his shoulder. “Look, just put me down. I can make it a few feet.”

If he hears me, he totally ignores it.

He doesn't stop moving until we're next to the bed and he's still holding on.

"Seriously, this isn't funny. Who *are* you?" I spit.

"I'm—" He pauses, his blue eyes cold and assessing. "What does it look like? I'm the resort manager. They let me have this room when there are no reservations, which happens more than you think when it's normally eight thousand dollars per night. I'm just doing my job and saving us both some grief. There's a heap of red tape whenever it needs a repair."

Why do I get the impression he's lying?

Still, resort manager is the only way to explain any of this.

I try not to breathe. I'm instantly aware of his smell wafting over me, somehow fresh and evergreen and manly when he's just stepped out of the shower.

I don't speak until he drops me into a plush chair next to the balcony door. I lift my foot, feeling cautiously for any glass shards.

"Well?" he demands. "How's it look? Do I need to get you a doctor?"

I look up and—

Dear God.

His hands are on his hips.

Of course that towel slid down a few more inches.

I've never seen a real man who has an actual V of hard muscle. I try not to think about how I've never seen a man who's packing an entire howitzer, either.

"Lady, are you—"

"I'm f-fine!" I force out. *I'm so not fine.* "Sorry about the lamp," I add.

He moves to the table beside me and flicks the light switch on. "You must be mighty important to get this suite. Who are you?" Before I can answer, he yanks the phone on the table off its cradle. "I'll have them send something up to take care of that foot."

I shrug. "Not as important as you think. I'm just a social media influencer. My friend helped me get a room here. They gave me the best for my review. I thought it was pretty cool until...until this."

His stiffens then, gazing down at me like I'm holding a loaded gun.

"You hungry? Do you want something to eat or drink? Room service? I'm sorry as hell about the mix-up and it's only fair we try to make this

right.”

Huh? Why is he not scowling anymore? I’m pretty sure that scary-hot look is like his only expression.

“Nope. I just want to get back to sleep.”

He pushes a button on the phone anyway.

And I burst into a laughing fit as it slowly dawns on me.

“What?” His eyes flick to me and linger. “What’s so damn funny?”

“Now, I get it. I see why you’re bending over backwards offering me room service. Dude, you’re so obvious.”

“What do you mean?” It’s not quite a bark this time, but that too-stern tone is back.

I choke off a laugh just long enough to regain some composure.

“You’re worried about the review. You think I’m going to take you to the woodshed and trash this place. And that would suck when Winthrope Lanai is already down to a four-star average on every site that matters.”

His eyes narrow.

*Will you, witch?* He doesn’t actually ask, but his eyes are beaming that question.

“Don’t worry. I’m nothing but honest,” I say, holding a hand up like I’m being sworn in.

“Honest? Shit,” he mutters. “Just sit tight and we’ll figure this out.”

I raise a brow as he waits impatiently, trying to keep my eyes on his face.

Ugh.

Maybe someday I’ll appreciate the irony of my would-be axe murderer suddenly being afraid of me.

I don’t have my review written yet, but I meant every word.

Some would say I’m brutally honest.

And yeah, you can bet every penny that being scared out of my skin by a walking sex statue is going in my feedback no matter what he does.

This place is so beautiful. When I arrived, I couldn’t fathom why it had such mediocre reviews.

Now, I’m starting to understand.

Staffing issues.

His people can’t handle basic procedures like booking.

Not a good sign.



No glorious ocean views and drinks so smooth you can't taste the liquor make up for a heart attack in the middle of the night.

"You're sure about the food? We have these coconut-macadamia nut muffins on our breakfast menu everybody raves about. If I call the kitchen, I bet I can score you a couple out of the first batch this morning."

Muffins? He's trying to buy me off with sweets?

"No thanks." I try to keep my voice neutral.

As he drums his thick fingers impatiently against the desk, waiting too long for someone to pick up, I snicker.

"You're still laughing?" he whispers, his eyes dark and glassy. "Never mind. I'm glad you find this so funny."

*Oh, Mr. Grumpmuffin, you have no idea.*

**BE MY GUEST (BROCK)**

**F**uck, fuck, also *fuck*.

I haven't been off the damn plane for an hour and I already have an irate reviewer on my hands. One more pissed off influencer in the legion torpedoing my crown jewel resorts.

What kind of review will finding the goddamned CEO of the entire company naked in your shower cause?

I resist the urge to put my fist through the wall, imagining the carnage.

It won't take ten seconds to go viral, and that's all I—or Winthroppe Resorts—needs right now.

I've got to take care of this shit.

I still have the phone pressed to my ear, and there's still no answer after a dozen rings. Another reason for our lackluster reviews, I guess.

Finally, there's a click and someone picks up.

"Thanks for calling Winthroppe Lanai. This is Shelly. How may I help you?"

*Wake the fuck up, Shelly*, I think, wondering if the night crew has any coffee on hand.

Her voice is so monotone it sounds like she's been napping.

"Are you tired, Shelly?" I clip.

"Huh? Well, it's three a.m. and I—"

A groan slips out of me.

You *never* tell a guest you're exhausted on the job.

What kind of train wreck am I running?

“How can I help you?” Shelly asks again.

“Shelly, this is *Brock*.” I emphasize my name so she doesn’t ask Brock who. The last thing I need is for this influencer to find out how far up the food chain I really am. “There’s been a serious mistake. Someone overbooked the presidential suite. I need to know who made my reservation and the reservation for—” Damn. I don’t know her name.

That may be a first.

Usually, a girl as pretty as her knows exactly who I am before she sees my package.

Shit.

I look over to the chair, where my little intruder has gone from bright red to pale. I hate that my gaze lingers.

She’s all long legs and shy curves, barely concealed behind her skimpy pj’s. Rumpled blond bed hair spills down her shoulders, and her starlit green eyes only meet mine when she thinks I’m not looking.

She chews her plump lip nervously—and it does nothing to calm these devilish, intrusive thoughts I’m having.

In another life, I’d be having a very different night, alone in a room with a woman like this.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Piper,” she says.

Great. Of course she’s named after the guy in that fairy tale who steals all the kids with his magic flute and marches them away.

“Piper what?”

“Renee,” she whispers.

I’m not about to make the porn-star-name joke that springs to mind. It certainly won’t help anything now.

And I watch her reach for the bed on her good foot, pulling off the closest blanket and throwing it over her bare legs.

Too bad. If we weren’t in crisis mode, I wouldn’t mind seeing her lounge around in those little pink panties longer.

“Shelly, I need to know who made my reservation and the reservation for Miss Piper Renee. I also need a new room ASAP because there’s an existing guest in the presidential suite this weekend,” I say, glancing at her foot again.

In the light, the cut looks small, but it's still oozing blood. She really should have a bandage and an alcohol wipe.

"And please send up a first aid kit for Miss Renee, pronto."

Piper laughs. "You're standing here in a towel, so I think we can skip the formalities. You don't have to call me 'Miss.'"

*Is it missus then?* My jaw clenches.

Shelly must hear that. "Is everything okay, sir?"

Fuck no.

And it feels like it can only get worse.

"It will be if you just do your job," I say coldly.

"Do you have a preference for what room you'd like?" Shelly's voice strains like she's finally realizing the sky-high pile of shit she's in.

I'm about to ask for a honeymoon suite.

It's the next tier down, right below this one.

At this point, I'd rather have Miss Renee keep the best room plus whatever else I can manage to avoid getting nuked into slag online. But something she said replays in my head.

We do have mediocre reviews, and most of those aren't coming from the top-shelf suites.

"Put me in a room on the Garden level," I say.

If I'm being kicked out of my usual room, I might as well find out how most of my guests stay.

"Garden room. Right," she says, like she's checking if she heard me right. "Let's see, I'm going to put you in room... one oh nine. Will that work?"

"Yes." I hang up, trying not to slam the phone down as I look at Piper. "Let me get dressed, then we'll sort this out. Stay off your foot."

She blinks at me and frowns.

I stomp to the massive closet beside the main door and grab my duffel bag. I didn't expect to unpack until tomorrow and I usually sleep naked.

Apparently, it's going to be a while before I get any shut-eye, though.

It takes me five minutes to change in the bathroom.

When I walk out, I find Piper still lounging in the chair, holding a tissue to her damaged foot, the blanket pulled aside.

Shit, I'm staring.

I was so gobsmacked earlier that I didn't appreciate the way her t-shirt hugs her mango-sized tits or how perfectly those lace panties cling to her sweeping hips.

I wish I wasn't so observant now.

"They haven't come with your first aid kit yet?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

Goddamn, someone needs to overhaul the entire training program.

I'm about to make excuses or at least apologize when we're interrupted.

*Knock-knock!*

I nod. "Better late than never."

I head for the door and yank it open.

"First aid kit as requested, sir," a uniformed attendant says.

I take the white box from him. He gives me a quick update on a system error from the front desk, supposedly the cause of this insane mishap.

When he's finished, I shut the door, walking back into the sitting room and tossing the kit in Piper's lap.

"For your foot."

"Thanks." She opens it and takes out a sanitizing wipe and a bandage, then sets to work on her foot.

"Once you're dressed, I'll have someone come up and clean the floor so you don't step on glass again."

"Thank you," she whispers, mouthing the word more than saying it.

She doesn't even look at me.

It's not just because she's cleaning up her foot. She's trying like hell to avoid me.

*No improvement. She's going to draw and quarter you in that review, you dolt.*

"How do we make this right?" I ask, stepping closer and stopping next to her, waiting for her to meet my eyes.

She looks up at me and winces.

"...are you kidding? You weren't exactly Mr. Congeniality until you found out what I was. Honestly, I've never been so terrified in my life. I thought you were a serial killer here to axe murder me."

"Serial killers and axe murderers aren't the same," I point out. "One is fueled by total psychosis; the other is a raging case of reckless—" I stop,

pinching the bridge of my nose as she gapes at me. “I listen to a lot of crime podcasts when I’m traveling, okay?”

I sigh. That’s hardly the full truth but we’re not getting into that.

She gives me nothing.

Just two hot accusing green pinpricks for eyes.

I shrug. “Whatever. The point is, you didn’t *look* scared while you were gawking at me in my birthday suit.”

She glares at me and makes a startled sound. “Um, what? Do you hear yourself? I woke up to a noise *inside* my hotel room on a floor with a private elevator. You can’t possibly blame me for thinking you were either a murderer or an employee. And I know most resorts don’t send staff into rooms while their guests are sleeping, so I had to assume the worst...”

Ah, there she is.

Feisty.

I’d rather have her spitting venom than acting like she’s made of wood.

“Looks like there was a problem with the system. Once the first reservation was made, the system should have locked out the same dates. I don’t know how this happened, but rest assured I intend to talk to the people who made each reservation and my IT manager. At Winthrop, the customer is god, though. So will you let me make the rest of your stay enjoyable? I know what a dreadful fucking start this is, and I’m sorry. If there’s anything I can do to make it up to you, tell me.”

For a second, she looks around like she’s considering it before her eyes meet mine again, her lips open, and—

“No.”

*Damn her.*

She’s determined to make this more difficult than it needs to be.

Apparently, I’ll have to work my ass off to win Princess One Star over.

“Think harder. There must be something,” I urge.

She raises a hand and taps her fingers on her face like she’s pretending to think.

“Hmm. Nope. Sorry, but there’s no chance this doesn’t go in the review,” she says, holding up a finger. “*But*, since you’re groveling so nicely, you still have a chance to decide what else makes it into that review.”

“I don’t grovel,” I snap. “This wasn’t intentional, you know. As I said, there was a system error and—”

“Winthrop is a multibillion-dollar brand, isn’t it?” She raises her voice. “If the computer system can’t handle basic reservations that budget chains manage without this kind of epic fail, then maybe you should invest in better software.”

She sighs, bringing her hands up and pushing each one away from her like she wishes she could shove this whole incident aside.

For my sake and the resort’s, I hope to hell she can.

I’ve taken too much negative heat online lately.

If shit like this nightmare happens regularly, I can see why. But I have a hard time believing it does.

My staff is competent.

Mostly.

Our systems are top notch, even if the code occasionally breaks and turns into overcooked spaghetti.

“I’m sorry. It’s not your fault.” She sighs, rubbing her ankle. “You’re just a hotel manager, so—I shouldn’t take it all out on you.”

My jaw clenches.

I’m anything but a simple manager, but nothing good can come from telling her the truth.

“I’m sure no one from the main company consults you on software purchases,” she continues. “But look, I haven’t quite slept off my jet lag yet. It’s been an eventful night, and...I’m not dressed. I appreciate you taking a downgrade so I can keep my room. But I need sleep. So if you really want to help, can you just leave?”

Of course.

I’m such a frigging blockhead.

While I spent half this conversation draped in a towel, I didn’t even consider the fact that she might not be comfortable talking to me in her pajamas. “Sorry. I’ll go, and we’ll figure out a way to salvage your vacation first thing tomorrow. I promise.”

“...that won’t be necessary.”

I hope she’s right, but I can’t let this slide.

If there’s some way to wow her, to outshine my buffalo dick move, it could even do wonders for our online credibility. As I grab my bag and exit,

I think back to my grandfather's advice.  
*Never let a good crisis go to waste.*



ONCE I'M SET up in my new room, I pull out my laptop and start furiously Googling Piper Renee.

*Please be some wanna-be web star with seventy-six followers who are mostly friends and relatives.*

That would be a huge save right now, but even before the page populates, I know it won't be true.

No one comps the top suite for a chick with a handful of followers.

The first hits are her socials.

Instagram photos and Reels with millions of views in some cases.

I swallow, hating how fucking dry my throat feels.

Then there's TikTok. She has over five hundred videos there over the past two years, most with decent reach and a few big breakouts. Her followers are in the low six figures.

"Damn," I mutter.

The most annoying woman alive isn't exactly a celebrity, but her network is wide enough to deliver a serious kick in the balls if she torches Winthrop.

And her content runs the gambit, ranging from old-school reviews to showing off pretty scenery and a few where she's just goofing around.

Most of her videos are focused on US travel. It looks like the Pacific Northwest is her favorite stomping ground.

Also, birds. Lots of them. I've never seen anyone waste so much time in a pretty place filming some feathered dinosaur-knockoffs pecking at rotting trees or tapping at bugs in the grass.

Still, I can't help watching her run along a sunny Oregon beach in a silky green sundress, the wind pulling it around her frame, all lethal curves and a peach of an ass any man would love to sink his teeth into.

Especially this dumbass flicking intently through her content.

Over forty videos in, I look down and realize I'm hard as a nail.

"Idiot," I mutter.



I know how insane this is.

Getting hard for her feels like getting hot for a hissing cobra.

Also, there's no rhyme or reason to some of her stuff, or maybe it's just my age talking.

A glamping shack in Idaho got a rave review and lots of shout-outs in other videos while a luxury resort in Colorado got two lukewarm stars.

What the hell?

Even worse, a quick look at the most popular people leaving comments tells me she's connected. There are other travel junkies with a significant footprint, followers soaring into the millions combined.

I feel myself going pale.

There's no question about it.

A horseshit review from this woman blasted across the web could deal months of damage to Winthrope Lanai's travel base, and even hurt my other new resort in Maui.

Never mind my reputation.

I can see Gramps now, showing up from London to rap me on the knuckles in his very British, very eccentric way that really means *what the fuck are you doing to the company I founded, you little rat?*

Shit!

I have to win this wildcat over, somehow, even if I have no idea where to start.

I grab my cell and call the front desk.

"Thank you for calling Winthrope Resorts. This is Shelly. How may I help you?" She picks up on the first ring this time and she doesn't sound like the undead.

Progress.

"This is Brock Winthrope. If Piper Renee doesn't have a breakfast package for her entire stay, make it complimentary, please. If she's paid for a package, credit it back immediately."

"Sure, no problem. Anything else, sir?"

"She's a reviewer, Shelly. You understand? We need to pull out all stops after someone's mistake sent me barging into her room. Use your imagination. Spare no expense," I say, hoping this goldfish at the front desk has one.

“Um, I can do that...” She doesn’t sound confident. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“A basket with some goodies from the shops in town. A ten-pound bag of our signature peaberry beans from Wired Cup to bring home. A full day comped at the spa. Hell, *all of it.*” I sigh, hating that I can’t hide my frustration. “Help me out here. You must know the client base better than I do and their preferences for odds and ends. I’m not a good ass-kisser by nature, and frankly, I’m not sure what else to do.”

I wait as Shelly clears her throat.

“People love to get out and explore, don’t they? That’s kinda the whole charm of Lanai, lots of gorgeous beaches and places to go without the crowds on other islands. We could comp her one of the sightseeing tour packages? Or have the concierge arrange something special?”

“Now you’re thinking,” I say. Then I remember Piper’s foot and frown. “Except, I’m not sure how much she’ll be up to long walks for the next few days. Hold off on finalizing anything until I’ve investigated further.”

“No problem.”

“I’ll be in touch.” I cut the call and resume scrolling through Piper’s videos like the madman I am.

The place she kept raving about in Idaho was family owned. She advertises it as an authentic bed and breakfast.

Apparently, some local kid took her around to the best places and his mom made cheese-blanketed comfort food for every meal.

If her foot isn’t giving her hell, she’ll want a local experience.

Right. That’s something I can work with.

I just don’t feel comfortable trusting this to my staff.

When you’ve been top dog as long as I have, you find out fast that no one else is ever quite as invested in your shit as you are.

I know the island well enough, don’t I? I’ve been coming to Maui and Lanai since my balls dropped, and there’s nothing else pressing on the agenda.

If I have to play tour guide to Miss Snapping Turtle, so be it.

Yes, I’m not the best people person.

Yes, this could be awkward as hell.

Yes, I could just blow everything to kingdom come if I get under her skin deeper than that glass did.

She certainly made it clear I'm the last person she ever wants to see again.

Still.

The risk would be mine alone.

Win, lose, or draw, I'm not above rolling up my sleeves.

I don't know if I can even talk her into doing this.

I just know I'm not trusting anyone else with this job.

Punching up my email, I send a note to my resort manager—the real one—letting her know to notify me as soon as the private elevator opens.

If Miss Renee is spotted anywhere else on our property, I want to know immediately, building in a fail-safe in case someone misses the elevator being used.

I should feel a little guilty going full stalker.

*I don't.*

After five hours of fitful sleep, I wake up to three missed calls from a few minutes ago and my phone ringing again.

Groaning, I wipe my face with my hand and answer. "Yeah?"

"My shift just ended, but I wanted to make sure I got you, sir. She's having breakfast at Café Oceannaire on the second floor. I comped her breakfast and left a note under her door to let her know, per your instructions. But I can't tell you if she found it. She still looked rather groggy when she came down."

"Thanks. On my way now." I dart out of bed, fumbling for my clothes as I hang up.

In an alternate universe, I might enjoy the challenge of taming Piper Renee in a very different way.

In this one, I'll do my damndest to make her grateful for my company.



I HEAD DOWNSTAIRS in a three-piece suit, dressed to impress.

After our first encounter, I figure more layers are probably for the best.

Whatever helps her not picture me stark naked—though the fact that I know she will makes my lips turn up.

I walk into the restaurant and glance around.

A few well-dressed people sit at tables or linger around the brunch buffet.

Then there's Miss Renee.

She's all alone at a table for two, shockingly underdressed compared to the usual crowd. Is she still in her pajamas?

At least she's wearing shorts this time, hunched over the big ceramic coffee mug with both hands wrapped around it like it's anchoring her.

I pull out the chair across from her and sit.

"Enjoying your complimentary breakfast?"

Her head jerks up from her coffee cup and the hazy half smile she was wearing looking out at the ocean disappears.

"Um, yes. Of course. Thank you."

"Have you tried the lobster yet? It's brought in locally every day and sinfully delicious," I say, trying to play it up. "Plenty of folks go home preferring Hawaiian lobster to anything they'll find out east."

She stares at me like she doesn't comprehend a word I say.

*Lovely start.*

"Mr. Manager, you don't have to worry. I probably won't mention you in the review. I've been thinking it over and I don't want that incident to become a huge distraction from whatever else I say about this place." She sighs, glancing away and then back at me again. "Also, I've heard rumors the CEO is a major hardass. I'd feel a little bad if he finds out and blames you, all over some crappy software bug you had nothing to do with."

*Major hardass, huh?*

I suppose my reputation precedes me.

"So you've done your homework on Winthrope Brands. Who did you hear about the CEO from?" I ask, ordering a coffee from the waitress who stops by.

She takes a drink of her own, frowns, and sets the cup down.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I should've asked for a refill," she says glumly. "My coffee's gone."

I look around, but our waitress has disappeared.

Damn.

Then again, I own this place.

"Hold on. I'll get you more." I stand.

“Is that something hotel managers usually do?” She laughs.

It is when they need to survive a battery of reviews with their skin intact.

“Sure,” I lie. “The coffee is impeccable here and it shouldn’t wait. I had a hand in sourcing it myself.”

I stab at my chest proudly. She almost rolls her eyes.

Too much, I guess.

Maybe she’d be more impressed if I mentioned the fact that sourcing this coffee also had me steering my yacht into a once-in-a-century Seattle storm to help coffee mogul Cole Lancaster save his now-wife from a total psycho.

No good deed goes unpunished.

Another server who waited on me last time I was here walks by and stops with a big smile. “Ah, welcome back, Mister—”

*Shit, shit.*

*Don’t say my name, pal. She already thinks the new CEO is a walking stick up the ass.*

“Brock,” I spit quickly.

He blinks at me. “Really?”

*What do you mean, 'Really?'*

It’s my damn name.

“Yeah. Don’t wear it out.” I nod briskly.

I can practically feel Miss Renee’s eyes glued to me, questioning whether or not I’m sober.

He slaps my arm, beaming at me like I just loaned him my custom Tesla, a gift from a man too rich to name who knows a lot about rockets. He really enjoyed his stay in our Arizona resort with its own observatory.

“Thanks, boss. I mean Brock. Wow!” He stands woodenly. “You’re such a down-to-earth dude. You don’t deserve half the crap they give you.”

Goddamn, this kid is going to blow this and bury me alive.

“Do you need anything?”

“Two of the house coffees.”

“Sure. Do you need cream and sugar?” he asks.

“Monk fruit,” Piper says.

I stare at her. I barely know what the hell that is, but it’s her second cup of coffee, so I’m going to assume we have it.

“You heard the lady.” I nod at the kid. “Monk fruit sweetener. While you’re at it, bring her a fresh lobster omelet, too.”

“Got it! I’ll be right back.” He walks away.

I drop down across from her again.

“Oh, I usually eat light. I’m not sure I need lobster this early. I mean, sometimes I even skip breakfast. Intermittent fasting is my jam.”

Of course it is.

When you live on TikTok, you’re prone to following every damnable fitness and diet fad—even at the expense of indulging yourself for one flawless Hawaiian morning.

I try not to glare.

“Make an exception today. No one turns down free lobster,” I say, pinning on a fake smile.

“Lobster for breakfast? I know it’s Lanai, but is that even a thing among rich people tourists?”

“It is at Winthrope,” I say matter-of-factly.

I try not to let my gaze linger, or start slipping down her chest.

Fuck, I knew she was beautiful last night, but I didn’t notice the blue streaks in her chin-length blond hair, framing a pink mouth made for heaven, hell, and everything in between.

“Nice hair. It’s a good fit for Lanai, all spun gold and bits of blue. Very colorful.” It just slips out and I instantly regret it, even as her cheeks turn red and she looks away from me.

I clear my throat.

“Obviously, I meant nothing else by it. I’m not blowing smoke up your—yeah.”

*Do not picture her peach of an ass, man.*

*Hit the brakes on the brownnosing.*

She drums her fingers against the table. I can’t blame her for being annoyed.

“Look, Brock... I’m not quite sure how to say this, so I’m just going to be blunt. I appreciate that you’re nice enough and trying to make up for last night, but I’m only in Lanai for a few days. The way we met was weird enough. You showing up for breakfast feels even weirder.”

I hold up my hands. “Guilty as charged. Understand, I couldn’t leave you high and dry after what happened. How’s the foot?”

She doesn't answer and looks down at the mug in her hands, fidgeting.

"Have I insulted you?" I venture. "I promise you that was never the intention—"

"I just...are you stalking me? Watching my every move?" She looks up with her lips pursed. "We both might be better off if you just leave me alone."

Well, fuck.

The best-laid plans of mice and men collapse before my eyes.

"I'm the manager," I say, sitting up straighter. "Your stay at my hotel got off to a dreadful start, all because of an outrageous employee error—"

"I thought you said it was a computer error?" She raises an eyebrow.

"That was *half* of it. The software shouldn't have allowed the same room to be booked twice. However, a new employee was trying to be very helpful to me and make sure my room got booked, so when the computer wouldn't allow him to book the reservation, he overrode it and booked it for me anyway. The code was changed this morning. Staff will now call a manager if they ever need an override. It's definitely never happening again, and I'm sorry as hell you had to give us the kick in the cock we needed."

Oops.

That makes her giggle, at least, this bright sound that startles me for a second.

"Pardon my French. Anyway, glitch or human error, it's my job to make it right," I tell her.

"That's nice and all. But the problem wasn't the bug. It was thinking I'd be murdered in the middle of the night in my fancy room." She sits back in her chair and sighs. "Honestly, I'm not sure you can make up for that. There's no way to fix running into each other like we did... This place sure is beautiful and I'll do my best to be fair. But I'd be lying if I said it isn't pretty tainted for me."

Shit.

Overreacting much?

Somehow, the scars my stupidity left on her psyche feel worse than a bad review.

If she keeps dwelling on it, this could be a lawsuit waiting to happen.

Miss Renee closes her mouth, but the way she grinds her teeth into her lip makes me think she has more to say, and none of it's good.

"What else? Let me have it, lady. Everything," I demand, curling a fist on the table.

She stares at me intently.

I'm slightly grateful her cup is empty by the time the waiter returns with refills. He puts a small container next to Piper's coffee.

"Liquid Monk fruit."

"Thanks!" She looks up at him.

I nod at the kid and he walks away.

"Well?" I repeat.

"Well, what?"

"I don't think you're done, and if you're holding back any punches, there's no need on my account," I say firmly. "Hit me, Piper Renee. Bruise me."

Her eyebrows go up.

"Okay, martyr man, I didn't want to get into it but... It's annoying that you're this crazy about making things right, and I think it's only because you're scared of getting lit up online. I may be just another travel vlogger in a thousand, but my stuff is authentic." She tears open the monk fruit packet and dumps it into her cup, stirs, and sips. "FYI, I'm not into massive suck-ups coming after me with baskets of goodies and comps purely because they're afraid they won't measure up."

Shit.

I'd better tell Shelly to cancel the Love Lanai basket. I also need to choose my next words very carefully.

"Miss Renee, I never asked you for anything less than authentic. I simply don't want anyone jetting off from my resort after a damn Halloween funhouse experience rather than a world-class luxury escape. If I went about repairing the damage wrong—"

"Which time? Which time, Brock?" The way she says my name sends fire through my blood. "Was it when you carried me across the room half-naked? Or when you practically shoved a free lobster down my throat like you think it'd make me forget what happened? Like I could ever forget stepping on broken glass and seeing you buck flipping nak—*never mind.*" She takes a fast gulp of coffee.



Too fast. She coughs loudly into her hand.

Damnation.

This firecracker is going to leave a smoking crater where my nose used to be.

“Both times,” I bite off.

She looks at me slowly and takes a sip of water from the other glass in front of her.

“Well, you’re honest, I guess. That’s one point. And this stuff is pretty good.”

“The coffee?”

Thank fuck we’ve done one thing right.

“Yep. Divine. Even better than the Wired Cup stuff back in Seattle if that’s your supplier. I did a little research and heard the coffee was supposed to be this special extra perk to keep people happy and coming back. I heard Mr. Hardass CEO even dragged his whole team to Kona for a taste test just to make sure it was right. Can you imagine?”

Are my eyes daggers?

Yes, lady, I *can* imagine.

Because I am Mr. Hardass and I was there. Absolute perfection is a reasonable demand when I’m buying the world’s rarest coffee by the truckload just to keep my guests happy.

It was also amusing as hell watching Cole Lancaster pretend he wasn’t smitten with that little coffee geek he married who was just his smartest lab wonk then, but I digress.

“Can we focus on us?” I say, trying like hell to shift the subject.

“Sure. I’m glad you admit you’ve made some real dick moves.”

*Oh, you little screamer, if I wasn’t playing peacemaker, I could show you dick moves you’d never complain about.*

“They weren’t dickhead moves...were they?” I growl.

She looks at me like I’m stupid and laughs awkwardly again.

“Oh? You want to decide that, huh?”

I roll my eyes.

“Listen, I get the message, loud and clear. No attempt to smooth this over with lobsters and massages is ever going to be enough, and I’m sorry to hear that. I also understand.” I inhale sharply. “I wouldn’t want some ogre intruder who woke me up from a dead sleep bribing me with gifts

either. Still, isn't it best practice to make sure guests enjoy their stays? I don't have a time machine."

"Disappointing," she says, raising a brow. "I was expecting you to offer me the full H.G. Wells experience."

Is that a joke?

I don't fucking laugh.

"As for showering in your room, you know I thought it was mine," I continue. "The error won't happen again. I'm not sure what else I can do except change the future, and that means making the rest of your stay here so goddamned glorious you go home exhausted with a smile plastered on your face that makes your fucking cheeks hurt."

"Sounds painful." She winces and takes another long pull of coffee.

*Damn her, is everything I say cursed?*

She stands, grabs her coffee, and starts walking past me.

"Wait, what are you doing?" I call after her. "Miss Renee!"

"Getting some peace and quiet like I asked for when you invaded my space again. I'm finishing my coffee in my room," she says without looking back.

"Your lobster—"

"Eat it. No one turns down free lobster, right?"

My hand cramps.

When I look down, I see I'm clenching it so hard my knuckles are bone-white.

Goddamn, she has a talent for stressing me out with a simple conversation.

Snarling, I pick up my coffee so fast it sloshes out over my wrist.

I swear and chug a few quick sips anyway, then pull out my phone and email the front desk to assign Miss Sunshine a two-thousand-dollar spa credit.

Time to break out the big guns.

A minute later, the server returns with a buttery omelet that smells like fresh lobster and cream. He stares at Piper's empty seat.

"Oh, she left? I can keep this warm for her if you'd like."

"Just give it to me." There's no point in wasting perfectly good lobster eggs. "Oh, and one more thing—it's Mr. Winthrope. We really adhere to formalities for staff morale."

His face sinks, but damned if I care.

Because there's no point in pretending I'm not on my very last thread,  
and I don't need to bite my own tongue off trying to hold it for this strange,  
insufferable woman.

## PIG HOSPITALITY (PIPER)



I'm not sure what time it is in Seattle, but as soon as I'm back in my room, I call Jenn.

I need some moral support ASAP.

It rings a few times. I'm afraid she's asleep or at work or whatever it is people in Seattle are doing on a normal evening.

"Hey, Sunshine. How's Hawaii?" she finally answers.

"O-M-G. Are you free for story time? Because you will *not* believe this."

"Holy crap! You met a hot surfer dude and you're getting married on the beach? Pippa Renee, when's the wedding?"

I burst out laughing at her dumb joke. "...I mean, that isn't much more absurd than the truth."

"Lay it on me," she says eagerly.

"I *did* meet a hot guy. Found him naked as the day he was born in my hotel room."

"*Day-um*. What? Is it something in the air? I didn't know I was sending you to Hawaii to score a hookup like that so easy. And you *never* hook up. Did you order the dude on-demand? Is there an insta-stud app I don't know about? Is he an ornithologist?"

I roll my eyes.

Everybody knows I'm a bird geek and they still rub it in.

“That would’ve been more fun than stumbling on Captain Grumpmuffin. Or how he stumbled on me, I guess.”

Jenn goes silent.

“I don’t follow. You mean you never met him before he wound up in your room in the buff? How?”

“I woke up from a nightmare. I thought I was dreaming at first, but actually that noise was—”

“*Get. Out!*” she belts out. “The hot guy broke into your room? Naked? I would have screamed.”

“Oh, I did. But it gets better because he wasn’t just some random creeper.” I pause for effect, waiting until she draws in a breath. “He’s the freaking manager here. Apparently, they let him use this room whenever it’s free. Someone made a massive boo-boo and let him book this room in the system, even though I was already staying.”

“Holy—um, don’t tell me you’re suing Winthrope? That could get awkward when I’m the one who hooked you up with Lanai.”

“Nah, can’t stand lawyers. This guy talked me down when I stopped freaking out and showed me his keycard. He had his own room downgraded. But he was showering in my suite at two thirty in the morning.”

“God. That’s bonkers!” she throws back.

“Yeah, and now he’s worried about what I’ll say in the review. So he keeps groveling, following me around like a lost puppy and asking how he can make it up to me. So annoying. I’d rather go skinny-dipping in a swarm of bees.”

Jenn laughs loudly in my ear and doesn’t stop until she snorts, gasping for air.

“Hang on, are you crazy? You didn’t fall or anything when he scared you, right?”

“Nope.” I tap the side of my head gently. “Still all there.”

“Lady, you’re at a top Hawaiian resort and they’re at your beck and call. Why don’t you see how far they’re willing to go to make it up to you?”

“Really?” My brows go up. “Isn’t that like a conflict of interest coming from *you*?”

“You never heard it from me and I’m off the clock.” She laughs. “So, yeah. They’ll either give you everything you want or tell you to buzz off.”

What have you got to lose? You're flying back home in like three days, right?"

"Yeah. I don't know. I don't really want to give Moody McGrumpface another reason to talk to me. It was awkward enough when he ambushed me at breakfast and tried to practically hand-feed me a free lobster omelet. Jackass."

No need to tell her he'd shame a Michelangelo sculpture—especially below the beltline.

"Awww, why jackass? It's not his fault they messed up the reservations."

"I don't know. You're right. It's just hella awkward. And I don't think he'd be trying to make it up to me so hard if I wasn't a reviewer."

"Maybe not, but...does it matter?" she asks. "You *are* a reviewer, Pippa, and a damned good one. Naked In Hawaii needs your review. So milk it."

I'm quiet for a second, turning over her advice.

"Reviews should be honest to matter. I can't fathom how I could ever be objective about this place, considering the crazy that went down."

"True. But you're just giving him a chance to show their customer service skills and earn a good review. Plus, you should come out of it with something to show for the near-heart attack."

I never thought about it like that.

"Why do you make so much sense?" I wonder out loud.

But before we can talk it out more, my phone pings. I look at the screen and see an incoming text.

"Hold that thought," I say. "New message, I need to make sure it's not about my dad."

"How's he doing?" Her tone sobers.

"He was fine when I left." But that could always change. I tap my phone and scan the message from Winthrop concierge. "Hmm. You may be right."

"I'm always right, but about what?" Jenn asks.

"They just gave me a huge spa credit. So, yeah, maybe you're onto something and I should just see how far they'll take it. Maybe they'll help pay for my next vacation?"

She giggles. "Do it, girl boss. You also need to tell me why you're going out of your way to avoid NIH now that he's fully dressed and chasing after

you.”

“NIH?”

“Naked In Hawaii! Duh.”

I bite my lip.

“Oh. Well. I *may* have forgotten to mention that I was wearing a t-shirt and panties at the time.” I wince when Jenn gasps. “Seriously, though, it wasn’t hot. I thought he was a serial killer. So I armed myself with a lamp which I deftly dropped in the commotion. I even cut my foot on a crystal shard.”

“Ouch!”

“Nothing too nasty, thankfully. When he called to downgrade his room, he also sent up a first aid kit.”

Jenn laughs so hard she snort-coughs. “Are you serious? Pippa, it’s like you lived every bad rom-com meet-cute. You’re going to marry this guy.”

“And I’m going to wring your neck,” I whisper.

“So, when you say it’s awkward, it’s not because you smacked into a nude model in your bathroom—”

“That too.”

“But it’s mostly that you’re mortified. You don’t want to admit he made you all tingly.”

I don’t answer.

I hate how well she knows me sometimes.

“Ha, see? That’s it!” I imagine her smiling warmly. “I vote for you to go kick back and have some fun. Who knows when you’ll be back to Lanai. It *could* be worse, you know?”

“Worse how?”

“Imagine if all that happened on video.”

“Ugh.” I press a palm over my face.

I guess that’s the one upside of this mess.

Virtually no one knows about it except for me and the butt-kisser.

And Jenn has a knack for being right.

I’ll leave this fairy-tale place soon enough, and then I’ll never run into anyone who knows about my misadventures with the naked man.

“Fine, you win. I’m milking it.”

“Umm—you might want to reconnect with the hot manager first so he can hook you up.”

“We’ll see. First, I’m going to use up the spa credits in peace since I should let my foot heal for a day,” I say.

“Now you’re thinking. Glad I could help,” she says brightly.

“I should go.”

“Hell yes, you should. You’re losing precious Hawaii time. Go get your muscles worked into jelly and enjoy the beach. I’d better not hear from you again unless your hair is on fire.”

I hang up laughing and check the time.

Okay, let’s do this.

I call down to the spa and find out they’re wide open right now.

So I head downstairs and indulge in what they call the heavenly trio—a full facial, a relaxation massage complete with hot stones, and a pedicure that makes me feel like I’m sixteen again.

With the mellow music, floral scents, and heaven right outside with the ocean view, I feel my luck turning around.

It’s the most relaxing experience of my life. Definitely the recharge I was looking for.

With a freshly peeled face and tiny palm trees on my toes, I walk back to the hotel and stop by the front desk in the lobby.

“Can I speak with the resort manager, please?”

“I’m the resort manager,” a Hawaiian woman says pleasantly.

“Oh, um—the other manager? The tall guy?” I pinch my lips shut, realizing my mistake. I should just get what I want from her and avoid any awkward turtle moments.

*But what would be the fun in that?* a voice in the back of my head asks.

“Other manager?” Her face scrunches up.

“Umm—Brock, right? I think that’s his name,” I say.

“Oh!” Her eyebrows stab up. “Oh, of course, yes, I’ll call Mr....Brock right away.”

I shrug. “That’s not necessary. No need to drag him away from anything important.”

“My schedule is clear.” His smooth baritone voice makes me jump when I hear it behind me. I whip around. “Miss Renee, has your stay improved since morning?”

“It’s about to,” I say flatly.

He nods slowly. “Let’s have it then. What’s on your agenda?”



The manager lady watches us intently, looking weirdly amused.

I don't get why.

Part of me wants to fling more crap at his smug, annoyingly square and sculpted face, but there are too many people milling around to lay down the law.

I hate that his good looks make him a natural charmer, even when he's offering the clumsiest bribes.

*Stay strong.*

Influencers who fall to flattery and comps lose their audience's trust.

But like Jenn said, I'm just giving him a chance to earn his review, right?

Still, I'd rather have the whole world not listening in.

"Let's talk in private. You can buy me a drink in the bar," I offer.

He snorts loudly. "I feel so privileged."

"You should." I lean over and whisper so only he can hear. "Crazy naked guys usually have to buy the drinks up front, y'know."

He stumbles back a step, coughing into his hand, and I laugh.

"I'll do you one better, Miss Renee. I have a private office. We can order drinks there." He leads me to an office behind the reception area without another word.

God, he's a walking cologne ad, and I hate it.

Every breath in his personal space bombards my senses with that heavy, masculine halo of Brock.

I'm already regretting this.

Especially when I feel his eyes all over me, roaming wild, quietly drinking me up until I'm fanning myself.

"Still adjusting to Lanai temperatures, I see."

Oh, God.

That smirk on his lips says he knows it's not just the hint of humidity in the air that's turning me into a hot mess.

I drag myself into his office behind him, though.

Very posh with its wooden walls and huge glass frames overlooking the waves.

No surprise.

He sits down in a leather power chair and motions to the seat across from him, where I drop down.

“What are we drinking today?” he asks.

“Surprise me. Whatever tastes like a smoothie, but still has a good kick.”

He picks up his office phone and hits a button. “Bring me a frozen sunrise and a finger of brandy. I’m in my office.”

“Wow. I should be a resort manager,” I say. “You’ve got a lot of perks.”

His eyes rake over me, clearly assessing what I’m up to.

“It beats shoveling horse manure. Now, what can I do for you? You never did answer me over breakfast about your foot.”

“It’ll heal. But you want a glowing review, right?” I steeple my fingers together, watching how his eyes catch the light and glow like the Hawaiian sky.

“Sweetheart, every manager ever born wants that.”

I nod. “If I’m helping you, you’re helping me.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I’m not paying for any of my food or drinks until I leave, for one—”

“Done,” he snaps, surprisingly fast. “You already know I don’t have a problem with comps. I gave you a free breakfast and then ate your lobster eggs because I turned your stomach.”

Fighting down a smile, I hold up a finger. “Hold on. I wasn’t done yet.”

That shine in his eyes kills me.

“There’s more?”

I suppress a devilish grin.

“Yep. So, my videos get more reach and better engagement when I’m able to show off secret places. You know, the cool, exclusive stuff off the beaten path that only the most well-connected people ever get access to.”

He stares at me, this bear of a man stuffed into a suit. It’s hard not to feel slightly intimidated.

“And you need me to find some special places to wow your people?”

His gaze deepens with an intensity that cuts right through me.

Heat thrums through my veins.

Every second my eyes are fixed to his throat, his mouth, strong muscles working and lips that might steal some lucky woman’s soul.

But I find my words. “Close. I’d actually like you to hire a local tour guide to take me around the island. Show me Lanai at its dreamiest.”

His weight shifts as he leans in his chair. He strokes the shadow of dark scruff around his chin, thinking deeply for a moment before his eyes snap back to mine.

“On one condition, Miss Renee. If I agree to this demand, *I’ll* be your tour guide.”

“You? No way!” I clap a hand over my mouth the second it’s out.

The reaction is visceral. Explosive.

I don’t mean to be rude, but holy hell. I was *not* expecting that—or the smug amusement on his face as he rakes his eyes over me again.

“Is the idea so appalling? You wound me.” He thumps his chest dramatically and mimes like he’s extracting a knife.

*Elephant dick.*

“Dude. You hate my guts. You’re only working overtime to make my time here awesome because you’re scared of what I’ll say. How would either of us have a fun day together?” I cough once for emphasis.

I think I’d rather have Lucifer himself show me the island.

He stares at me too intensely.

“We’ve been through this. I fessed up to buttering you up like a good boy, didn’t I?” He waits for me to nod. “I’m simply doing my job. Personal feelings hardly matter. And for the record, I hate everything that complicates my life—including you. That doesn’t mean I won’t curl your toes with sights you couldn’t conjure up in your wettest dreams.”

I’m dead.

The way he casually sexualizes this whole situation—and me—leaves my jaw hanging.

I think about his response for a solid minute, twirling a strand of hair in my fingers idly.

“You should choose another habit,” he says, interrupting my thoughts. “You’re about to pull your hair out. It’d be a shame if you put a bald spot on that pretty little head.”

*He didn’t.*

*Oh, but he did.*

I glare back, resisting the urge to give *him* a freaking bald spot.

“You know what? You really are brutally honest when you’re not sucking up. That’s rare,” I say neutrally. “Travel is all about stepping outside your comfort zone. And frankly, I can’t imagine anything *more*

uncomfortable than spending an entire day in paradise with you. So, yeah, let's do it."

He snorts, scratching the side of his face to hide what I suspect might be a smile.

"You've got yourself a deal, Miss Renee."

He extends his hand for me to shake.

I hesitate before I take it, but when I do—my hand rips back.

There's a flash of blue light in the room, I swear.

Jesus.

"Damn static. It's the humidity control. I'll have to get that adjusted," he grumbles.

Um, right.

"Whatever. You'd better curl my pigs like you promised or there'll be hell to pay for years on TikTok."

"Pigs?" he repeats.

Smiling, I lift my sandled foot to the edge of his desk and wiggle my toes.

"Really." He lets out an exaggerated sigh and slouches in his chair. "Who the fuck did I piss off to be at the mercy of a woman who names body parts after farm animals?"

I swallow a snicker.

"I only have like a few days left to soak up Lanai. So kindly shut it and make it incredible, and I won't even tell anyone I got cut on your property."

I think his hellish blue eyes could light me on fire.

"You're sure it'll be well enough to walk around tomorrow? I wouldn't dare risk hurting your *pigs*."

I nod, looking around his office so I don't lock eyes with him again. Why is it getting harder every time to look away?

"See how easy that was? I offered to do all of this for you last night," he says.

I hate that he's right. I don't need a reminder.

"Don't blow this by calling me stubborn," I warn, shaking a finger.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Miss Sunshine. You're headstrong—not unreasonably so—and I'm sure that extends to your ten little pigs, too."

*Too ridiculous.*

I'm about to laugh in his face when an attendant knocks at the door with our drinks.

I pick mine up as soon as the girl leaves and take a gulp.

Oh, hello.

It's my tongue that's curling right now as sugary bliss wrapped in citrusy tang rattles my senses.

"Dang. It's like liquid sherbet." I stir it around with the straw and glance up at him. "You're *sure* there's alcohol in this?"

"Yes. I hired the lead bartender myself. He had the job the instant he promised me dangerous drinks. Precisely why I take my poison straight without hiding it in a glass of fruit, but our guests do love their sugar bowl ways of getting intoxicated." He downs his brandy, his throat muscles working obscenely. "When would you like our Hawaiian honeymoon to begin?"

*Oh, no, no, no.*

I choke on my next sip of sunrise and turn away, sputtering against my hand.

"As soon as you stop doing that. And after our drinks are gone." I hope the dirty look I'm wearing tells him how serious I am. Enough of this crap.

"Did you enjoy the spa, at least?" he asks.

I smile. "Yeah. I actually got a hot stone massage. I've always wanted one of those."

"Always fortifying. I enjoy them a few times a year."

"You use the spa?" I clutch my glass closer, surprised.

"Occasionally."

God. There's an image I don't need—this tightwad wall of hard muscle sprawled out on the table, wearing nothing but a towel, hot stones dancing down corded muscle.

"I need to be a resort manager when I grow up," I say absently.

He cocks his head.

"Sure. It's all fun and games until you shower in someone else's room." He taps his long, thick fingers on the desk again. Weirdly, they're more like workman's hands—thick and weathered—definitely not the kind you'd expect from a guy who takes spa days. "What do you like to do, Miss Renee? So I know where to take you."

“Oh. Well, I don’t have to like it, necessarily. I just need to see the places there aren’t already two thousand videos about. Go for uniqueness. I told you, traveling is about getting outside of your comfort zone. And if you don’t try new things, how can you know what you like?”

His piercing blue eyes connect with mine, stealing my attention.

He’s very good at that.

He’s also talented at making me feel like an unwanted piece of modern art he can’t quite decipher.

Something about the way our gazes fuse feels too close. *Too intimate.*

Everyone who praises an overactive imagination doesn’t know it’s a curse.

“There’s some truth to that,” he admits. “Still, if the point is salvaging your trip, having some idea what you enjoy would help immensely.”

I shrug, drawing a slow breath.

“I like sharing the world, honestly. More views, more messages, more subscribers. Just get me anywhere with good scenery and some sun. Oh, and birds.”

For the briefest second, he smiles.

I’m so taken aback I tilt my head.

“Birds, huh? I appreciate that you’re all business. I didn’t know we spoke the same language. I should be a social media influencer,” he growls.

I start laughing because I can’t even imagine it. He’d have to grow a real personality first.

His phone buzzes and he plucks it from his pocket. He stares at it for a moment before he pounds out a message with both hands.

“Something wrong?” I venture, taking another drink of my adult smoothie.

“The joys of management,” he says, never looking up at me. “If you’re feeling up to it today, we can start our tour this afternoon.”

“If it’s not a lot of hiking, sure. Let’s get this over with.”

The angry look he throws back should make me smile, but I wonder why a twisted part of me is actually looking forward to this.

“Finish your drink and we’ll hit the beach. Or pack it up and take it with, I don’t care,” he snaps.

“Management must be brutal if you can flop down on Lanai beaches in the middle of the day,” I say sarcastically.

“I don’t have a choice. Some smart-ass influencer stole my room, blamed me for a murder plot, and then threatened to torch my livelihood if I didn’t fall down and worship her.”

For a second, I’m not sure he’s joking until I see the spark in his eyes.

Then I burst into laughter.

“She sounds like a real bitch.”

“I know. Yet she looks so innocent with her round cheeks and that hint of blue in her hair. You never see it coming. It’s almost like false advertising—or those bright jungle frogs that kill you with one touch.”

Not a nice comparison. I’m no frog.

But considering his jerkface good looks and the harem of supermodels he probably has on the side, he might think I am.

I can’t help feeling shriveled up.

But I down my drink in a couple more gulps, ignoring his crap.

At least jabbing at each other makes this ever so slightly less awkward.

It also makes me more prone to count my blessings.

I’m in Lanai with a gorgeous insider who’s sharp, funny, and my private tour guide for the day. Even the devil had his charms.

I finish my drink and set the empty glass on his desk.

“Okay then. Take me to the beach.”

“If I show you a secret exit, do you promise not to record it?”

It takes me a few seconds to realize he’s dead serious.

I make a pouty face. “Boo. I thought the point of these super exclusive hacks was to get me likes and subscribers. How does that work if I have to hide the coolest stuff?”

“Have faith, Miss Renee. I’ll show you plenty of breathtaking places you can video until you’re blind. This is a security matter,” he explains. “Several other luxury resorts have been the target of major break-ins and thefts in the last ten years. Some of them armed and violent. When they built this place, I made damn sure my staff had a secret exit in case of trouble. The island is exclusive and I doubt anyone with bad intentions would ever get far in Lanai. Still, I want my employees taken care of in the unlikely event tragedy strikes.”

“Oh. Wow. Maybe I won’t be a resort manager if you’re fighting off supervillains. I don’t like thinking about things like that.”

He chuckles. “You could have fooled me last night when you came charging with that lamp.”

“I really don’t.”

“Yeah? Even when you were ready to attack because you thought I was a serial killer?” He stares me down.

“Please. I’m thousands of miles from anyone I know, and some psycho broke into my room in the middle of the night. I had a right to freak out.”

That cocky smile I want to rip off his face reappears.

“Are you done, Miss Renee?” He stands and goes out the door of his private office, calling “Follow me” over his shoulder.

With a shrug, I trail him as he pushes a service door open and we step through it.

We head down a long hallway and I look around, wondering where the secret passage is.

The hall is long and dark. We haven’t come to another door or even a bend, but he stops anyway. “Here we are.”

“Here? I think whatever was in your glass was stronger than brandy,” I say sharply.

He gives me an arctic look.

I scan the long empty hallway around us, training my eyes on him. “Not to point out the obvious, but we’re in the middle of a hall.”

He doesn’t answer.

*O-kay then.*

“You usually say, ‘here we are,’ when you’ve arrived somewhere. But we haven’t. We’re still standing around having this conversation.” I wrinkle my nose.

“You think so?”

I nod.

“There’s a reason influencers aren’t paid for their security talents,” he clips.

What the hell does that mean? I’m about to ask, but I’m caught off guard when he moves, his massive body lurching forward.

He places both of his huge hands on the wall and shoves it so hard his body rocks.

Even as muscular as he is, he shouldn’t expect to be able to move a wall. I’m about to say as much when the wall shifts aside, revealing a blue



square of light that leads into a courtyard of greenery and bright flowers.

“Whoa,” I whisper.

“Told you it was supersecret.”

“I’m honestly impressed,” I admit. “I never would’ve guessed that was there in a thousand years.”

“Glad you approve, Your Highness. Never breathe a word.”

I hold up my right hand, a little annoyed. “I solemnly swear, Prince Asshat.”

He gives me a heavy look like he’s disgusted that’s all I can come up with.

Then I follow him through the large garden.

Out here, it’s a painting come to life. Most of the flowers have large drops for petals and they come in every color and fragrance you can imagine.

I stop after a few paces, frozen in awe.

“So beautiful,” I gush, leaning in to sniff the sweetness.

“They’re verbena. Not exactly native to the islands, but they grow all over it now.”

I notice a peach and yellow flower with a bright-orange center. “Is that verbena too?”

“Hibiscus. It is native to Lanai, but there was none in this courtyard until I had it planted. The verbena were already here.”

“What? You’re the gardener too?” I laugh at the idea, genuinely shocked he knows as much about plants as he does.

“I review all of my lead employees personally, and that includes the gardener,” he says, straightening his tie.

“Can I pick one?” I ask.

“Normally, I’d say no. But since I owe you, take one.”

I try not to squeal with delight as I pluck a small hibiscus and tuck it behind my ear. “What’s the point in having a garden this beautiful and keeping it a big secret?”

“That exit I took you through is a secret, but we rent these gardens out for weddings. This is a popular spot for photos. There’s another entrance guests use,” he tells me.

Interesting.

Brock leads us down a path that snakes directly to a long line of white shimmering sand. “This is the same beach your balcony overlooks.”

“I don’t see anyone there. How does a beach this beautiful not get used?”

“It’s the closest you can get to a private beach on this island. The garden is the only real access that doesn’t involve tromping across natural fences of rocks, and since there’s no wedding on-site, you’re in luck.”

I stop and stare, taking it all in, smiling at the thought of some blushing bride enjoying the ceremony of her dreams.

“This would be wedding heaven,” I say.

“Today, it’s yours. You should watch your step, though, Miss Renee, there’s—”

I don’t let him finish.

White sand sprawls out in front of us. I run toward it at a ground-eating pace, feeling like I might break into song.

“This is so awesome!” I belt out, loving the warm sun on my shoulders.

“It’s a beach. And be careful, you’ll want to keep your sandals on to avoid any stray lava rocks. They can get sharp,” he warns.

I can tell by his tone he thinks I’m overreacting, but who cares?

Once he catches up to my reverie, I hold my phone out.

“Can you get a video of me, please?”

He takes my phone and stares at it like it’s an alien object.

“I’m your photographer now? Damn. I would’ve thought you’d be the selfie queen with what you post on your channels.”

“Oh, I am. But it’s windy out here and it’d be hard to get good video without fighting my hair the whole time. Let me know when you’re recording.”

He messes with my phone for a minute.

“Okay, go.”

I fall backward into the warm white sand.

“Hey, Pippa party people!” I chirp, flashing my brightest smile. For once, it’s not forced. “It’s your girl, coming to you from the beautiful Hawaiian island of Lanai. We’re practicing the best beach angels ever. Watch this!”

I move my arms and legs in the sand, my eyes closed, totally lost in the moment until I feel his gaze drifting over me.

Before I even look at him, I know.

He eyeballs me like he's found tonight's dinner, standing on this beach like he owns everything on it—including *me*.

Before him, I never understood how a look could be mesmerizing.

The kind of pure sorcery that reaches down inside you, strokes something deep, and makes every last bit of you shudder.

Something else he said hits me then.

Didn't he mention my channels? Like he's watched them?

Now, I'm burning for a different reason.

I don't even know what to think or feel or hate about that.

"Are we still rolling?" I ask weakly.

I'm not sure if he hears me in the loud wind. He doesn't move for at least ten seconds.

But Brock nods and taps the phone before holding it out to me.

"Here. I'm not responsible for any unflattering angles," he says.

Shaking my head, I get my phone back and take a quick photo of my sand angel. "Don't worry, I always do a little editing."

"A little? Don't influencers edit everything they post?"

"Some do, but I make an effort not to. Authentic, remember?"

He stares at me like he's shocked.

"I love being an influencer, but there's a dark side," I say, turning to face the rolling ocean. "There's a lot of talk about the toll social media has on mental health, and the way people suffer when this stuff gets so embedded in our lives."

He nods slowly.

And I feel his eyes roaming me again. I'm bracing for another dick comment, but he just waits for more. It's weird having a real conversation with this man.

"I like to share travels. They help the people who help me travel by watching my stuff and viewing ads. They also give me honest feedback about where I've been. I mean, if someone saved up for two years to take an amazing vacation, I hope my feedback helps them fall a little more in love with their free time."

"You're not in it for the comps," he says vacantly, as if he's surprised.

My hair tumbles in the breeze as I shake my head.

“No way. Life is hard enough, and we never get enough breaks.” I clear my throat, something harsh and sad at the edge of my words. “But a vacation is only a break if it’s the right experience at the right time. That’s why so many people come home saying things like ‘I need a vacation from my vacation.’”

“Miss Renee,” he whispers, grabbing me suddenly and pulling me closer. “If I send you home feeling that way, I’ll drop down in a pile of dirt and give you a hundred mud angels on the dirtiest part of this island.”

Holy hell.

He’s too good at this when he wants to be.

I’m glad my strange, sexy stalker man doesn’t look down as he lets me go, or he’d have enough ammo to make my life miserable for the whole trip.

God help me, my pigs are already scrunched up in my shoes.

## THE ANTI-DATE (BROCK)



Yesterday she was beautiful and gutsy and unpredictable, but I never gave her another thought past needing a review.

Today, it really sinks in. The more time I spend with Piper Renee, the harder it is not to notice how sharp she is too—whenever she’s not goofing off like she’s reverted to age ten.

“Holy shit, a petrel!” Piper goes charging into the waves for the dozenth time, chasing this huge blue-and-white sea bird gliding off the shore.

I watch her from my dry spot on the beach as a wave surges in and pushes her back, sending an entire gaggle of birds up into the sky.

I hope her phone’s waterproof. The last thing I need is the damn thing failing and her pestering me to overload my phone with bird videos as a backup.

I’d join her, except I’m in slacks and a button-down shirt.

I was smart enough to leave my jacket in my office today, but stripping down to jump in the water would probably not help my review case.

It’s hard enough keeping my eyes on this woman without my dick turning into a magnet that wants to steer me into her.

So I sit on a rock just where the ocean stops lapping at my feet, glowering, wondering if there was ever a time in my life where I had as much fun as her in full bird dork mode.

Another huge wave crashes against her. She darts under the water, just long enough to make me nervous.

I stand up, looking around.

*Goddamn, don't tell me I have to play lifeguard, too?*

But she bursts out of the water, her smile lit by the high noon sun, that blond hair shimmering and tangled around her shoulders.

“Aren't you coming in?” she yells, splashing with her hand.

My cock jerks, warning me my very survival is at stake.

Christ, this woman.

Her dress is so soaked it's basically *see-through* and clinging to her skin, showing off every curve I'd enjoy tracing with my tongue. Water sparkles across her cleavage like small diamonds, begging to be licked off.

Fuck me to hell, it's impossible *not* to stare.

I'd have an easier time getting my eyes plucked out by the fishing birds soaring higher now, circling in neat formation.

“Whatever, Brock! Your loss.” With a pout that turns her lips into a ripe strawberry, she flings water in my direction.

“I should have dressed lighter before we set out,” I lie. “The winds can be unpredictable around here and I thought layers would work best.”

“Aw, so what? It's only lunchtime. Let's go back to the hotel so you can change.”

The longing look she gives me slices me in two.

“This day isn't about me, Miss Renee. I'm in Lanai constantly. This is all about making sure you're able to soak in the best this island has to offer,” I say firmly.

*And about ensuring I don't fall face-first into a sexual harassment lawsuit by doing something monumentally stupid with a guest who's already seen me nude.*

I rip my face away, pretending to watch a few more birds launching themselves into the sky off the rocks.

I could use her bird nerdery right now. I fucking need it when her tits are damn near glowing with the silver water foaming around her.

“Come on! We're not that far from the resort, right? I can't have fun with a stick-in-the-mud tour guide,” she calls.

“You were doing a pretty good job of it this morning,” I yell back.

She throws her arms up. “Who am I kidding? I *always* make my own fun, but I feel a little guilty that you aren't enjoying yourself. That's killing the vibe.”

So she's pure empath, too.

That's one difference I'm grateful for. I'm well aware my own emotional IQ rivals an earthworm sometimes.

Whatever else she is—and that definitely includes annoying—Miss Renee is the type who manages to squeeze fun out of pure misery.

The influencer gig must be the perfect job for her. She isn't lacking the enthusiasm.

She bounces up and down again in the water, coming closer, flinging more droplets my way that fall hopelessly short.

"Is that it? You'd better work on your aim," I say sharply.

"Orrr I could just dunk you since you're changing anyway." Before I can react, she lunges forward, throwing a palmful of water that hits its mark.

A growl boils up my throat when I look down.

Of course she's splashed me right on the crotch.

So much for hiding that raging hard-on I *hate* her for riling up.

"Brat, you want a splash war?" I glare at her until her smile fades.

Then I'm stomping into the ocean up to my knees, scooping madly at the water, throwing it at her face.

She goes down laughing like the damnably adorable sea sprite she is.

"Okay, okay! I surrender," she yells. I douse her one more time for good measure before she spits a stream of water at me. "Let's go back to the hotel. You can change and we can get ready for whatever's next! I could go for a pick-me-up, too."

"No more coffee. I'm cutting you off," I snarl.

Her smile disappears.

"Woman, I just ruined my pants to play with you." Honestly, saying it makes it that much more unbelievable. "Yeah, let's head back. You should change too. We won't be spending as much time in the water this evening."

She blinks and looks down, her cheeks heating like she suddenly realizes how exposed she is.

"Oh. Okay. I'll keep a bikini on under my clothes just in case we jump in the ocean again."

Did she have to say that? I cannot unhear *bikini*.

With her thin dress so soaked, it's not hard imagining what she'd look like in a bikini.

I doubt I'll think of anything else for the rest of the entire day now.

"Come on. Just a short hop up the road, and we'll take the secret entrance again." I glare as she claps her hands.

"Cool," she says. "So what's up next?"

First, I'm grabbing a whole carafe of coffee to keep up with her.

"We'll go into Lanai City so you can see the shops. We can grab lunch at a local place." I pause. When she doesn't answer immediately, I say, "We could also have lunch at the resort, or have a picnic lunch packed. Our menu is always on point, whatever you choose."

"Let's go local. Don't take this the wrong way, but there's a Winthrop Resort in Seattle. I'm from Washington and I can eat your food anytime."

Washington? I grit my teeth, hoping like hell she doesn't live in my backyard.

I shrug. "If you don't mind missing the best seafood in Hawaii."

My stomach growls like a bear, demanding another lobster.

"I'm from Washington. Right on the Pacific."

*Shit, shit.*

I say nothing because that's way too close to home base. That also explains her heavy travels in the Pacific Northwest.

After she dries off, we jump into my rental Jeep and I take us up the road. I don't press her about home, not when she'd ask about me.

I'm still aiming to leave her clueless about who and what I really am.

Back at the resort, I lead her to the concealed hotel entrance that opens into the private garden. I punch in the code and push the gate open.

"Meet me at the front entrance in twenty minutes and we'll head out again," I say.

"Sounds good. Come dressed for Lanai this time." With a parting look that's pure sass, she sails toward the elevator.

I sigh, trying like hell to tear my eyes off her lush little ass.

The things I could do to this woman—if only I wasn't counting on her professionalism.

Since I've been exiled to the first floor, it's a short walk to my garden room.

I change into a USAF t-shirt and khaki cargo shorts with deep pockets for my phone, leaving my hands free.



When I get to the main entrance, I see Piper standing impatiently, already waiting.

Her strapless blue sundress brings out the emerald-green of her eyes. I almost laugh when I see it's speckled with white outlines of owls.

I wish I could only find her outfit funny.

She wasn't joking about the bikini.

A bright pink strap crawls up her cleavage and wraps around her neck. That pop of color might as well be a dagger in my brain, destroying whatever section makes me a sane human being.

"...are you okay?"

My head jerks, nodding, so quick to lie.

*I'm not okay.*

*I'm not well.*

I'm fucking bewitched by a vision of guiding this girl straight through the private gardens, pinning her against the wall, and tearing that pink strap off with my teeth.

"You sure?" She studies me, her eyes searching mine.

"You look goddamned ravishing," I blurt out.

Shit, shit.

*Way to make everything weird again, you gibbering lust monkey.*

"Oh." She falls back a step and then beams at me. "Well, thank you."

She's smiling, isn't she?

Crisis averted.

*I hope.*

"Ready for Lanai City? I'm pumped to check it out," she says, already heading for the door.

"Of course." I step past her in two quick strides and hold the door open for her.

"Thanks! So how far is it from here?"

"Not far at all." I veer my head to the right.

We walk together quietly until we reach the Jeep.

That lingering blush on her cheeks tells me she's still stuck on my dumbass comment.

I don't want the wheels turning in her head, making everything awkward again.

This silence isn't helping.

“I’m glad you gave me a chance to make up for that disaster your first night,” I tell her.

“I believe in second chances. But why are you so worried about my review, really? I’m a pretty middle rung reviewer.”

I don’t answer right away. Maybe this conversation was a mistake.

“Truthfully, we’ve been hit with a lot of negative feedback lately. We don’t need another big mishap on our hands—especially not my little intrusion.” I start down the sandy path, and Piper follows me.

“You just need to change your mindset,” she throws back.

“What mindset?”

“You attract what you think about. You’re obsessing over the bad reviews. That could be why your people made a huge mistake when they were just trying to do a good job for you—”

Oh, fuck.

We’re really doing this law of attraction shit?

It’s come up at sales conferences a few times. Always from people who dress in eye-bleed bright colors and who do a better job running their mouths rather than selling anything.

I can’t buy it.

Still, it wouldn’t be wise to blow her off.

“Why don’t you enlighten me?” I bite off, staring at the road and clenching the wheel.

“You just need to look at your reviews objectively. Don’t take them as a personal insult. How can they help your place improve? You should be *happy* someone takes the time to tell you what’s bothering them. That’s a chance to improve.”

Sure.

I’ll get right on that when someone complains about the feeling of custom lava rock floors on their feet that took five million dollars to install.

I try not to roll my eyes at how obvious and overly optimistic her outlook is.

“You don’t like my advice,” she says, staring.

“I find it amusing. Only you could turn a bad review into a gift from God, Miss Renee.”

She smiles. “Because my mind is in the right place. If you’d try getting yours there, you might have a lot less to worry about.”

Hell, I'd *jump* at the chance to transport my mind.

Preferably to a place where I'm not thinking about stripping her naked under the high tropical sun.

"Piper, this situation is more serious than you think. It's been an entire slate of bad press. This resort only opened roughly a year ago. If its reputation gets shredded out of the gates—if we lose business—I could be staring at layoffs or transfers. My staff came in with a lifelong dream of landing a Hawaiian position, or they grew up locally and won't leave this island for anything."

"Hmm. I'm sorry," she says thoughtfully, biting her lip. "But I don't think it'll come to that..."

Is she serious?

How does some vlogger fresh out of college even have a clue?

She laughs bitterly and shakes her head. "If you want me to shut up now, I will. I can tell you think I'm stupid—"

But I don't. She's just out of her element.

My eyes snap to hers and I slow the Jeep down as we take a winding curve that hugs the cliffs hanging over the ocean.

"Wrong. I know you're not finished, so let me have the rest," I urge.

"Well...what if you played with the pricing? You charge more than the Four Seasons. I know you're supposed to be bigger and better and fancier, but if the guests don't agree...maybe it's time to adjust? If anything, a few negative reviews might knock you down to a lower price. You'll make less money per stay, but you might get more customers willing to take a chance on something with a four out of five rating. And don't tell me it'll bankrupt you. You're Winthrope. The owner, he's like a bazillionaire, right? And you must make a bundle."

I clench my jaw.

I'm sure she means my grandfather since she doesn't seem to know who the hell I am.

"There's been a change in leadership. Ross Winthrope stepped into the background a couple years ago. Even so, he was a cautious man, and his money strategies are still gospel. It got our brand this far."

She must see the feral look in my eyes and holds up her hands. "Oh, right. Sorry. I didn't mean to imply—"

“That I’m just another spoiled rich fuck in a big machine that churns through real dollars like Monopoly money? Always above getting my hands dirty and doing the heavy lifting? Imply away, Miss Renee, you’re hardly the first,” I rumble.

That wins me an awkward laugh.

“And what happens if I get knocked down to a cheaper pricing tier and keep getting negative reviews?” I press her, loving how she chews her bottom lip when she’s thinking.

“If you see them as opportunities, I doubt that’ll happen. But I also don’t know why people freak out so much over nasty reviews. I’ve bought books *because* of crappy reviews before!”

I raise a brow. “What kind of books?”

Her face glows red and she goes quiet.

“Um, romance. Chick lit. Not the kinda stuff you’d be interested in—”

“Smut then,” I say. “Erotica. Got it.”

Her mouth drops.

“What? Whoa—okay—I mean—”

“Miss Renee, there’s no need to pretend you’re Miss Puritan. Plenty of women in this company who spend long hours traveling like their fuck books to keep them company. I don’t blame them one bit. Who doesn’t enjoy reading?”

For a second, I enjoy her bewildered silence, the way her face burns cherry red.

“Now, what about those bad reviews? Regrettably, our appeal can’t be salvaged with sex.”

She clears her throat. “I mean, when I’m thinking of going somewhere that hasn’t offered me a free room, I look at the three-star reviews first. Unless it’s someone with a track record. The fives are usually too gushy and shallow, and one stars usually mean someone just had a bad day. Threes are where you get the real pros and cons.”

I nod. Decent observations all the way around.

By now, we’re arriving in town.

Once we pull into a public space and park, I let her mill around a few gift shops and then head to a small place down the street for lunch.

“What do you recommend?” she asks.

“Classic plate lunch. It’s kalua pork or katsu chicken with rice and macaroni salad. The best on the island—if you’re brave enough to enjoy the carb overload.”

“Lucky for you, I’m starving. Can I get Hawaiian bread to go with it or is that some kind of mainland joke?”

I snort.

She thinks she’s so funny. For a girl who’s traveled, her questions are so cute you’d think she’s never left the mainland US before.

“Just order the Portuguese sweet roll on the side,” I say.

She smiles. “And I know macaroni salad is like a staple around here, but it makes no sense to me. How’d this place wind up married to macaroni noodles?” she asks after we’re seated, lifting a glass of water.

“Well, my history is rusty, but I think macaroni and cheese took off here in the early twentieth century. It was a cheap way to feed the farmers since everyone loves comfort food. Street vendors started putting their own twist on a hot thing. Now, it’s weird having lunch without macaroni salad on the islands.”

“Pretty interesting. Thanks, professor!”

I shrug, refusing to be blinded by her smile again.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as we head inside the restaurant. I pull it out and see a text from Keenan.

***You’ll be back by Friday, right? We’ve got a new headache at the New York resort. I’m emailing you all of the docs now.***

I hold in a sigh and send back, ***Yeah. I’ll review them and put out the fire as soon as I can.***

Piper clears her throat.

***What the hell happened? Summarize,*** I send.

I pretend to drink my water until my phone buzzes again.

***Keenan: Don’t have all the details yet. But some chick was crazy pissed and threatening to sue last night. I gave her a free night and Mets tickets. I think I’ve talked her down from going nuclear...for now.***

I nod at the screen out of habit and punch in, ***Thanks for reminding me why I keep you around.***

I look across the table at Piper.

Her eyes are narrowed as she stares at me, questions etched on her face.

“Here’s your inside look at the downsides of hotel management. I answer texts constantly so I can babysit reviewers. It’s not all elysian beaches and sipping mai tais.”

“You’re a dick,” she whispers.

“Careful, Miss Renee. If I didn’t know better, I might think you’re treating this like a date with date-like expectations.”

That shuts her up.

Thankfully, she forgives me enough to make small talk while our food arrives. We both wolf down our lunch while she tells me about the many cozy cabins she’s been to everywhere from Leavenworth to Yellowstone.

After lunch, I lead her down the street and rent a four-wheeler.

“What’s that thing for?”

“We’re visiting a local ranch for horseback riding, but it’s pretty far off the beaten path. This is the easiest way to get there. You ever driven one before?”

She shakes her head.

“I’ll drive then. You just sit behind me and enjoy the ride.”

Her eyes swell and she nods tensely.

I sit down and wait as she climbs on behind me, so careful to leave a gap between us.

Now, it’s my turn to tense up.

My blood goes molten at the slightest brush of her hand.

“Is there like...something I can hang on to?” she asks weakly. “Sorry. I get around, but I’ve never been on a sports vehicle or—whatever this thing is.”

I chuckle. “You already know what you’re supposed to hold on to, Miss Sunshine. Right in front of you. If touching me makes you that uncomfortable, I’ll figure out something else for us to do.”

For a heady second, she’s quiet.

“No, that’s...fine. Although, I’d rather see dolphins than horses.” She knots the sides of my shirt in her fists.

She’ll definitely want a better grip than that once we get going, but I don’t say anything.

“It’s the end of whale season, I believe. Hold on and we’ll find them.” I hit the gas.

The ATV lurches forward with a droning roar.

“Oh! Oh my God!”

There’s a panicked flurry of small hands around my shoulders.

The space between us disappears.

Then she presses her body against my back for dear life. Her arms hug my chest, little nails digging into my shirt.

Even when she’s almost drawing blood, it makes me harder than a brick.

There’s something wrong with me.

It’s a bumpy ride to the ranch, but that’s not why it’s a special kind of exquisite torture.

Her hands brush my skin.

Her breath falls against my neck in hot sighs.

Her body fucking *trembles* against mine.

I’d have an easier time escaping a pit of scorpions than the thousand scalding images of all the other ways I wish I could make her shake.

By the time we’re pulling up the dusty road and a grinning guy with a dark tan approaches, we’re damn near molten, her hot little body snug against mine.

Her breath comes so shallow, giving her tits this delectable friction I can’t stand.

Even the balmy heat does nothing to stifle the instant cold when we climb off and pull apart.

She won’t look at me.

It takes at least a solid minute for the redness on her cheeks to fade.

When my phone vibrates against my hand, I’m thankful for the distraction as we walk toward the horses. I glance at it, making sure Keenan’s New York nightmare is still under control.

“Do you ever take a break?” she asks, finally looking at me.

“Can’t right now. Not all of us make our living filming exotic birds.”

She huffs. “But what would happen if you *did* turn your phone off for a few hours? One evening? The resort won’t burn down. I promise.”

I throw her a slow look.

Then again, when the hell was the last time I *enjoyed* Lanai and it wasn’t all business? I mute my phone.

She’s still wearing the same enchanted look on her face she’s had since yesterday with the sand angels. The one that reminds me of an awestruck

girl on her first trip to Disneyland.

A hollow feeling rips through me.

Was travel like that for me when I was a boy? Before everything became work?

As the day goes on with our slow, bobbing horseback ride over the ocean cliffs, one thing becomes increasingly clear.

Piper Renee is my exact opposite.

She's a ray of sunshine, lighter than anything else in this world—especially when she starts singing obnoxiously loud on an isolated stretch of coastal road.

I pretend it annoys me to death.

Honestly, broken chords of “Walking on Sunshine” make my ears bleed, but when I tune her out, her beauty eviscerates me.

Another sight I don't need.

Another feeling I don't have time for.

Another temptation to keep eye-fucking this pretty girl.

I'm starting to get why I've been single for so long.

This could have been a productive day. Instead, I'm spending it as a glorified chaperone to a woman who doesn't know she's turning my balls into softball-sized blueberries.

*It's only temporary*, I remind myself, breathing slowly as she belts out another broken tune.

She doesn't stop until I grit my teeth and dagger her with a dirty look.

What the hell is this?

A mammoth clusterfuck, apparently.

An illusion of a date with a pretty girl who doesn't know I'm a chronic liar.

Fuck, it's an anti-date.

Winthrop International has real problems I need to deal with that go way beyond apocalyptic reviews.

Yet here I am, stuck with this sun pixie with my phone switched off, trying like hell to pretend I have a life.





SHE CAN GET brunch from any restaurant she wants at Winthrop tomorrow, so tonight I decide to wow her.

We drive across the island to a restaurant so exclusive the waitlist for reservations is usually six months deep, but the managers know who I am.

The rare flex of my name scores us a private booth as a courtesy.

Piper sips her wine, her strawberry mouth taking in the burgundy sweetness.

*Focus on her eyes, damn you, I remind myself.*

“Tell me your favorite part of the day,” I say, swirling my own wine and looking down.

Anything that keeps my dick from ripping through my trousers.

“Do I have to pick one? I don’t know... Everything here is so beautiful. The cliffs, the little craft shops in Lanai City—oh, and that humpback whale! I’ve seen orcas plenty of times but the humpbacks are harder to catch back home. It was so cool when he breached.”

I love the whimsical glow on her face.

“Good. Sounds like a welcome break before you go back to—” Damn. I realize I’m about to ask a question I dread. “Where did you say you’re from in Washington?”

“Seattle.”

Shit.

There it is.

“We’re basically neighbors,” I say flatly.

I have no fucking clue why my cheeks hurt, fighting down a smile and a grimace simultaneously.

Maybe because I’ll know she’s there—far too close for comfort—even after she melts back into a sea of over a million people.

Still too close for my mad, simmering desires.

Barely a short car ride away from reconnecting, from haunting my balls until they’re bluer than the sky.

Yes, I’m being fucking ridiculous.

It’s not like we’ll ever have a reason to see each other again.

After tonight, after she posts her review, we go back to our separate worlds.

“Oh, you manage the Lanai resort from Seattle? You live there?” She looks over the top of her glass.

Fuck. I've already said too much.

"Technically, no. I'm traveling constantly in this role. I have a beautiful house in Seattle, though," I admit, ignoring my better judgment.

Her eyes sparkle.

"Wow. You're living my travel nomad dream. God, I wish I could travel so much I didn't feel tied to any place. You've got the life I'd lead if I could be someone else—if I wouldn't miss my family way too much."

*Sunshine, you have no idea what you're asking for.*

"Is that the only reason? You underestimate yourself, Miss Renee." I take a slow sip of wine and capture her eyes. "You've got a steady following. Once it's big enough and you lock down more ways to monetize it, there's no reason why you won't be able to jet around to your heart's content."

She shakes her head quickly.

"No, it's just...it's not that easy. I'm lucky to get away at all."

I frown at the way her head drops with her eyes closed before she looks at me again.

"Why?"

"I—" She pauses. "I just have obligations back home. Personal things."

"You're young and free. You only get that once." I study her left hand closely, confirming there's no ring.

It's a safe assumption she's not tied down, even if she might have a serious boyfriend.

"Not as free as you think," she mutters, glancing away.

"What's tying you down then? Children? School? A man?" I try to keep the jealous edge out of my voice on that last word.

She snorts like I've asked her if she's hiding a pair of unicorn wings.

"No way. Nothing like that, but I do have family issues that keep me in Seattle. But it's not important." She sighs and props her chin on her hand. "What was *your* favorite part of the day, crankyface? Lanai must be kinda boring when you're here so much."

I stare at her for a second and decide I'll humor her.

"Clever dodge, Sunshine. Lanai has a certain familiarity to it, I think, so I value experiences. Anything out of the ordinary."

"Yeah? You mean you did something with me you haven't done a thousand times before?"

I pause, dragging her gaze to mine before I answer.

“You really want to know? Okay.” I lean in closer. “Frankly, my favorite part was when you wrapped yourself around me on the ATV. I wish we never got to the ranch.”

Her mouth twists open as she gasps.

“...bad answer, Brock.” She blushes but can’t hide her mutinous smile.

“Sure, but you’re enjoying my mischief, aren’t you?” I cut a piece of my steak and chew slowly.

She makes a disgruntled sound and shakes her head vigorously. That smile she can’t shake gives her away.

Thankfully, I end it there, before anything monumentally stupid happens that undoes all my hard work.

*Control yourself. You want to walk out of this with a glowing review, not her panties, bozo.*

We focus on the dessert menu. I convince her to try the decadent coconut cake, the best she’ll ever have. Since she can’t eat the whole thing herself, we share a piece.

It’s the kind of magnificent torture a man only experiences a few times in his life.

This fucking mockery of a date that’s not a date.

Trying like hell to convince her to like me for my resort—and not because I want her screaming in my bed.

After dinner, we head back to the resort under a smear of silver stars hanging over the ocean.

She slumps in her seat with a muffled groan.

“Oof. You weren’t kidding about that cake. Too delicious, even if I’m busting at the seams. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Miss Renee, for not murdering me with a lamp the other night.”

“You got lucky. I was a little distracted.”

I wonder if she means my body—my sizable package—and I hate that I can’t ask.

It certainly wouldn’t be the first time my cock left a woman stupefied, but never the unique way Piper Renee experienced.

“Lanai is a good place to be distracted,” I tell her, my eyes flicking over as I drive. “I’m afraid we won’t be shower buddies ever again.”

She giggles, her face heating that damnably alluring ruby red.

“Let’s take the long way up. I’ll show you the rock garden,” I suggest once we park.

We set off on the winding walking path around the resort, veering down a trail flanked by ferns and flowers.

Before I realize I’ve done it, I’ve got her hand in mine.

Real smooth.

Apparently, while I was too busy focusing on not doing anything stupid, my hand went straight imbecile on its own.

I should drop her hand now.

Pretend it never happened.

Mutter something pathetic about how it’s a bad habit and leave it at that.

But she isn’t pulling away, is she?

Quite the opposite—her little fingers curl around mine like she’s begging me to stay. To touch her just a few more seconds.

*Goddammit.*

If I push her away, she’ll be offended for sure.

Why double down on dumbassery?

And if I’m being honest, I enjoy her warmth too much, the way her nails press lightly into the meat of my hand.

What’s truly pathetic is that this is the closest thing I’ve had to a *genuine* date in years.

Managing an empire as big as Winthrop doesn’t leave time for much more than shallow hookups where you’ve barely traded names in some upscale bar before clothes start falling off.

“Wow,” Piper whispers, stopping at a break in the brush and palm trees to study the sky.

It’s such a clear night, and the stars are truly brilliant.

I can’t help tightening my hold on her hand.

I’m here so often I take this view for granted.

“It looks like a movie or something,” she says, inhaling sharply. “You don’t get skies like that back home. And it hits different here. It’s not like New Mexico or Utah where I’ve seen some pretty cool night skies.”

I offer her a smile.

“Now you know why so many astronomers set up shop in Hawaii. This way.” We’ve arrived at the rock garden so I pull her along the curling

manicured paths.

Not that it matters.

This lightning bug of a woman won't stay on the path to save her life.

She breaks away from me, pulled toward the rocks like a magnet. They glow dark purple under the full moon.

She makes a game of hopping from one large moss-covered stone to the next. After a few near acrobatic jumps, I'm not sure she'll keep landing on her feet with catlike grace, so I catch her midair.

Her eyes go wide, but she doesn't complain as her arms curl around my neck.

"Why'd you have to ruin it?"

"Because *you* must be the only guest who's ever used a world-renowned Japanese artist's creation as her personal playground," I say with a snort.

"Got it. You should just put up a No Fun sign then. It'd be less disappointing." She flicks her tongue out.

This hard-on will *murder* me.

I look up and see Jupiter glowing brightly overhead, this massive star blasting through the night. They say it's the closest it'll be for another hundred years.

The added light only enhances Piper's dreamlike glow.

"Woman, you might resemble a pixie, but you don't fly. Keep your feet on the ground. You shouldn't be jumping around with your foot healing, I'm sure."

"Whatever, bossypants." Her emerald eyes drop from my eyes to my lips. "Also, my feet aren't touching the ground right now, and I'm very content."

Oh, fuck.

*Oh, fuck.*

It's like those words seal our cursed fate.

I don't think a boulder to the head could keep me from kissing her hard enough to take her soul.

"Miss Renee?" I rasp, moving my face painfully close to hers.

"Yes?"

"I lied about my favorite part of the day."

"You...you did?" She blinks like she senses what's coming, her soft smile fading in a mess of giddy nerves.

I nod slowly. “My favorite part was spending the whole day with you. We won’t see each other again, but you made me wonder what it might be like to travel with someone. To share the world and know they’d always be there. *This* is the life I’d lead if I could be someone else. I’d spend all my days with someone like you.”

Her arms tighten around my neck.

She closes her eyes and sighs, this nimble creature in my arms, mine for the taking.

It’s a sound that splits me in two.

My entire body throbs. I want to brush my lips over hers very lightly, teasingly, but this feral growl trapped in my throat doesn’t let me.

When we collide, it’s all violent sparks.

Pure delirium.

Her mouth is a fever, burning to my very bones, and there’s only one cure.

I slide my tongue past her whimper, firm but gentle.

But her tongue moves against mine with a pressure I have to match.

Fuck, it’s too much.

Too good.

Too blinding.

My vision reddens as I suck at her mouth, devouring her, everything turning frantic. My fingers dig into her hip before I tear myself away.

“Back on your feet now,” I whisper raggedly, my brain howling with disappointment.

Every last bit of me might be screaming to fuck this girl right here, but I can’t give in.

I can’t undo the repairs I’ve made today, even if walking away from another taste of her kills me.

She whimpers as I set her down and she finds her balance.

“You just had to go and make this difficult, didn’t you?” she whispers sharply, still smiling.

“Believe me, it’ll be pure hell for me, too, trying to forget. Consider it a blessing we won’t see each other again. It’s been a lovely day, Miss Renee. Let’s not taint it with anything you’ll regret.”

We both turn to the sky again.

My hand finds hers.

We watch Jupiter, the moon, and the stars dancing around them for a few more minutes in blazing silence until she laughs.

“What?” I ask tensely, turning to look at her.

“Who would have thought? The naked intruder is a gentleman after all!”

*Hardly.*

If she could only read my mind, she’d know she’s barely escaping wearing my mark from the inside out.

Instead, I just shrug and turn back to the silver night.

“I’ve been called worse, Miss Renee. You need to up your insult game.”

## RESERVATION FOR DISASTER (PIPER)



*Two Months Later*

**T**wo months.

Two freaking months and I still have days where I'm trying to forget Lanai and Brock and the kiss that left my toes curled long after I came back home.

It's like some magic from that not date rubbed off after all.

That trip brought in streams of new followers and videos garnering millions of views.

Jenn and Maisy think my high-quality, exclusive videos were what got things rolling, but I know the real truth.

That bruising kiss with Grumpmuffin opened up the entire universe. But it's been two months and I wish I could forget sometimes.

I've tried to find him on social media, but the man is a ghost.

I don't even know his last name. He also made it abundantly clear he doesn't care to see me again.

And honestly, he's right.

We shared a magical night in a majestic place. Nothing more.

I should just get over it.



But as I try to sip my fuchsia-colored chipotle chai latte from Sweeter Grind, it's *hard*.

Lanai was also the last place I was able to squeeze in. Ever since I came home, I haven't been able to shoot anything besides local stuff within an hour or two of Seattle.

Don't get me wrong.

This is an awesome place, so there's always plenty of local stuff.

It could be worse.

But slower content means watching my already meager ad revenue crashing. So I keep applying for side jobs in online content just to keep my money up, and so far, no dice.

It takes a toll on a girl's motivation.

Jenn keeps hounding me about this marketing opportunity at Winthrop.

As if that wouldn't just extend the free rent Mr. Tall, Growly, and Dangerously-Good-At-Kissing already enjoys in my head. And if I took her up on the crazy offer and we somehow collided without him wanting it—

Yeah.

No.

*Not happening.*

I sip my chai again, trying to ground myself in the moment. I love this drink.

Someday, I'll make it to exotic places like India. Their chai must be mind-blowing, but even if I could magically fund that trip, it's too far from home.

I wouldn't get back fast enough if anything comes up.

Sigh.

Just to indulge my fantasies, I'm searching 'American content creators for India' when my phone rings.

Annoying. I thought I turned it off.

But Maisy's name flashes across the screen as I hold it up.

Weird. She makes a point not to disturb me when I'm working, unless—  
I swipe the green bar.

"Hello?"

The way she dry heaves into the phone turns my blood cold.

I know it's bad news before she says a single word.

"Maisy, are you—what's wrong, honey?"

My sister takes a deep, rattling breath.

I use the precious second to shove my laptop in my bag in case I need to bug out now.

“P-Pippa, can you—can you—c-come—”

Oh, God. I’m going to have a heart attack before she gets it out.

“Maisy, calm down. Deep breath. Hold it for a second, and then tell me what’s wrong.” I’m on my feet, darting out the door and heading for my car.

It’s a crapbox Dad helped me buy from the salvage yard, so the damn door chooses *now* to stick. I fight to pry it open like I’m struggling with an undercooked crab shell.

“Come to the hospital!” she manages.

Shit.

“Okay. Seattle Memorial?” I jostle the door until it pops open and practically flings me on the ground.

“Y-yeah. The—” She sobs. “The one we always go to.”

Seattle Memorial it is.

I’m still petrified to ask why.

“On my way, just sit tight.” I suck a cutting breath. “Is it you or Dad?”

“Dad. H-he was so pale. Pippa, he’s—” Her voice cracks with pain again. “I don’t think he’s okay.”

“I’m coming,” I say softly around the hardening lump in my throat. “Maisy, I need you to wait for me. Grab some water or eat ice chips from the machine until I can get there, okay? It won’t be long.”

I know the hospital ice is a comfort she liked when she was a little girl.

Ever since Dad’s health started flagging and we had to take care of him.

God, I hope he’s okay.

I’m suddenly grateful for the lack of side gigs and travel prospects.

Maisy may be growing up, but she can’t deal with these ugly surprises alone.

She’s only seventeen.

Damn.

Why did I have to leave for the coffee shop today?

I don’t count how many traffic laws I break, but I’m at the hospital in just over fifteen minutes after swiveling through the maze of traffic.

I glance at my phone as I jog through the parking garage toward the elevator.

Maisy never gave me a room number, so I decide to try the ER first.

*Dear God—Dear Universe—please take care of him.*

*Don't take him away.*

*Not yet.*

I bound into the ER waiting area breathless, looking for any sign of Maisy or her familiar pink cardigan.

Nothing. I'm about to sneak past the locked doors when a voice behind me calls, "Ma'am, can I help you?"

I spin around to find a nurse staring at me, her arms akimbo.

"I hope so. I'm looking for my daddy, Harold Renee?"

"Oh, yes. You're the other daughter? Right this way."

Geez. I don't usually say, 'Daddy.'

But I guess that's where my mind is now.

Shrinking. Scared. Childish.

If Dad's health has truly deteriorated for the worse, I don't know how we'll manage.

I just know that for Maisy's sake, I'd better live up to my responsible big sister role and figure it out fast.

Life doesn't stop for grief.

Not for anyone.



JUST PAST THE massive metal doors, Maisy sits in the off-white hall, right outside Dad's room just like I told her.

Her face is a red mess. I see the dried tracks where tears streamed down her cheeks.

I drop to the floor beside her. "Is he okay, Mais?"

She shrugs. "They won't tell me much because I'm not eighteen. The nurse said she'd talk when you got here."

I nod. "You never texted me the room number."

"God, you're right. Sorry!"

She hurls herself at me, this little cannonball of sad fear.

I hold her, running my fingers through her long dirty-blond hair and tuck my arm around her shoulder.

“Maisy, it’s okay. It’s an honest mistake.”

She pulls away from me. Something hits my nose and stinks like pure salt from the coffee cup she’s holding.

“What are you drinking?” I know I stressed water. I didn’t want anything caffeinated making her more hysterical.

“Chicken broth. The nurse insisted. She told me it would make me feel better, but so far...eh.”

I nod. “I need to check on Dad.”

I step inside his room with the waiting nurse.

He’s asleep, this thin, sagging lump almost as pale as the sheets wrapped around him.

He’s not in any obvious pain, at least, though he doesn’t look peaceful either when he’s connected to a spiderweb of machines. There’s a tube in his nose and an IV in his arm and wires running everywhere.

I glance at the heart monitor, holding my breath.

Something seems off, though it might just be my imagination.

I’m no doctor, but I’ve been through this drill enough times to know a steady jagged line is normally good. When the pattern stabs outside baseline, too low or too high, like it is right now...

I swallow thickly.

The nurse clears her throat loudly and the door swings open, catching my attention. I look over to see Maisy coming in to join us. A tall, dark-haired woman marches in behind her.

“I’m Dr. Ligotts. Are you his primary caregiver?” the doctor asks.

“I thought he doesn’t have a caregiver? He’s a grown man,” Maisy cuts in, shaking her head.

The poor kid doesn’t realize that’s what we’ve been doing this whole time.

I nod. “Yeah, you could call me that. I’m his oldest daughter.”

“Ah, good. So, Harold’s condition is stable right now, but we do need to keep him another full night for observation. You’re welcome to stay, or you can go home and we’ll call you if anything comes up.”

“We’re staying!” Maisy insists.

I guess that’s settled.

“What even happened this time?” I ask.

“The drugs are killing him.” Maisy rubs the red, puffy spots around her eyes.

Dr. Ligotts looks at me. “His degenerative condition is progressing, I’m afraid, and the drugs are very strong. I’m sure you recall he received a new steroid last month to help slow the progression, plus an anticonvulsant to prevent seizures. The anticonvulsant medication worked a little too well, it seems. His heart wasn’t contracting fast enough when he overexerted himself on the stairs. That’s what caused the fainting.”

“Wait. The seizure drug made his heart stop?” I ask.

“It sounds worse than it is,” the doctor rushes out. “Regrettably, these drugs can produce volatile results if the dosage isn’t exactly right. We’re working to refine his prescription right now.”

Yeah, no crap.

This is our second time in the hospital this year with a drug change.

“Every patient’s needs are different, Miss Renee, and so is their tolerance. As much as I wish this was an exact science, sometimes it takes several adjustments to determine what’s optimal.” The doctor folds her arms.

I sigh. I’m in no mood to argue with experts today.

“I understand, but if a doctor knows that—and I’m guessing you do—then why wouldn’t they just hold him overnight upfront when changing the meds? That seems better than sending him home and just waiting for something to go wrong.”

“I’ll talk to the rest of the team and see if that’s an option for future changes,” she says.

“Thank you.” I look beside her to Maisy.

My heart breaks a little more.

She’s so small, hugging herself and barely breathing.

“Let’s get some real food in you, sis. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

I lead her down to the cafeteria where we order grilled cheese sandwiches and fries. We’ve been here enough times to know it’s one of the few decent options that doesn’t taste like cardboard.

“Well, do you think he’s actually going to be okay this time or are you just doing the brave big sister thing?” Maisy asks, eyeing me intently.

“I do, Mais. I’m sorry you were alone when it happened, but thank God you found him.”

She shrugs. "It's fine. You can't always be at home."

Guilt knifes me in the belly.

I'm the oldest daughter.

It's my job to take the brunt of this, but Maisy hates it when I remind her. This conversation is already hard enough.

"How freaked out were you?" I ask quietly.

"Um, *freaked*. I thought he was dying! His pulse was so faint, Pippy. Like barely there. I think he flatlined *twice* in the a-ambulance. Even though the medics swore his heart didn't stop." Her voice quivers.

I take a deep breath, bracing for what's next.

There's no easy way to say this.

"I've got some good news and bad news," I say.

She blinks at me, her pale-green eyes a shade lighter than mine. "Um, you mean there's more besides finding Dad passed out on the floor?"

The sigh rattles my shoulders. "Maisy, I'm suspending the pipe dream of paying all our bills with my travel stuff for now. Dad's new medicine is really expensive and this is like the fourth emergency stay this year. Overnight hospital stays are like ten thousand dollars a pop. Most of that's covered, but still... There are holes in the insurance. Never mind the furnace sounding funky and that plumbing bill from winter we're *still* paying off. We were already strapped for cash—"

"Pippa, no!" She covers her ears for a second, her hair flapping from side to side. "You can't just quit because Dad's sick. I mean, what else is new? It's not fair for you to support all three of us when I'm seventeen and I can get a job—"

"I'm *not* supporting all three of us," I say. "Dad still has his pension and disability. But it takes a lot to keep the house running and cover unexpected bills. You can't mention this to him, Maisy. If you do, he'll quit taking the pills. You know how stubborn he is. He won't let us support him."

She purses her lips. "Who does he think was keeping us out of collections?"

I wince. "Ehhh...I might have told him his VA insurance was covering incidentals. We're lucky he hates paperwork."

"Scandalous!" She makes a shocked face, her hands pressed to her cheeks, suddenly the bright-eyed kid I love again. "But you're serious about your online stuff? You're just gonna drop it?"

I rub my temples before I answer.

“We’ll call it a hiatus. I just need a steady check for a while. Six months, whatever. The good news is, I won’t be gone on weekends as much with the job I have in mind, so you should be able to do things then—”

“Yeah? What’s the bad news?”

I pause as cold reality sinks in, numbing me like an ice bath.

“I might be working until at least five o’clock some days, so I’ll need you to come home right after school. You don’t necessarily have to stay, but it might be better if you did. I just need you to make sure he’s okay, and text me if he isn’t.”

“I can do that. I come home after school anyway unless I have track or lit club, and the discussions are mostly online.” Her face sinks and she gives me a long look. “But Pippa, I’ve watched you build up your channels for years. You were making money—”

“Not enough,” I whisper.

“Ugh! I just hate to see you give up to take care of us. And I... I always thought maybe if you could do it, then maybe someday I could too,” she says.

That last part guts me.

“You want to be a travel influencer? I had no clue.”

“Not necessarily. I just want to do something cool and be successful. Like it’s nice knowing it’s even possible to do your own thing.”

“It’s not the end. I’m just taking a break. If everything lines up, I’ll still technically be in travel marketing. Jenn told me about a job at Winthrop headquarters downtown. Unless my recent review is some weird conflict of interest or something, I’m sure she’ll help me get it. Real money like that doesn’t grow on trees here in Seattle, and it has actual benefits.”

“I hope you’re not making a huge mistake,” she says quietly. “But that does sound okay-ish.”

I smile.

“I’m just doing what I have to. That’s life. Sometimes you just suck it up and make do.” She’s seventeen and hasn’t figured that out yet. I’ve done a good job of protecting her from what a two-timing prick reality can be. “Honestly, it could help me make new connections in the travel industry, so it isn’t a total loss. I could do a lot worse.”

“I hope you’re right,” Maisy says glumly.

Even with the rough smile I plaster on, I still don't believe my own pep talk.



“THANKS a million for the awesome recommendation again! I don't think I'd have landed this job without it. I was sure they'd pass me over when I was honest about the review. But I didn't want to hide it and have someone find out about it later either,” I say.

“Buy me lunch and we're good. You were right to be honest, Pippa. You'll be great,” Jenn says cheerfully.

I follow her through the enormous building, walking like a nervous puppy. Every footstep echoes off the marble floor and high ceilings.

“This place is like a museum. I'd be lost without you.”

“Welcome to Corporate America. Intimidated yet?” She laughs. “Don't worry, though. Most people only feel lost for a few weeks. After their first month, they know the layout.”

Great.

So I'm going to be stumbling around, lost in this place for a whole month?

But I can't complain.

I need the money and settling into this palatial office feels like the least of my problems.

“I feel like an earthworm,” I say.

“Don't! A lot of the junior copywriters and video editors are fairly new. You'll fit right in.”

“Huh, yeah, I noticed. I mean, most of the team has been here less than six months, right? Why is that?”

“Don't know. There's been more pressure on marketing lately. They keep bringing in big ad agencies and consultants to bridge the gaps.” She glances up thoughtfully.

“That's odd. A company as big and established as Winthrop shouldn't be fighting so hard for good talent, should it? I thought marketing would just be a brand recognition thing—reminding people we're here and glamorous.”



“You’d think, but social media keeps changing like crazy. I hear rumblings the TikTok people hate us, and they get a lot of views with everywhere else bleeding users.”

“Really? Why?”

“I wish I knew. It’s just weird. Several resorts took a real dive in their online ratings lately, but nothing much has changed in the internal customer satisfaction surveys. And our numbers are roughly the same as last year, so we haven’t seen a big drop-off in guests. For now.” She shrugs. “I worry the crappy reviews piling up will eventually scare off new guests.”

My mind jumps back to Lanai.

Grumpmuffin’s pathological obsession with my review makes more sense now. He must’ve had orders from the higher-ups to prevent a total massacre at all costs.

I blush, remembering where that led us.

“What’s up?” Jenn asks with a sly look.

I realize I’ve been quiet for a minute.

“Oh. Nothing.”

“What? I don’t believe it. You’re not all red for nothing!”

Damn her.

She knows the whole story, so there’s no point in rehashing it. “I’m just starting to see why the naked manager was having a conniption fit over my review.”

“Naked In Hawaii?” Jenn snorts. “I’m still surprised he lost his spaghetti. With the reviews, I mean, not you.”

She snickers.

“You are?” I ask.

“Resort managers don’t usually care that much. They usually push it off on corporate to deal with bad PR online,” she says.

“Oh, wow.” I laugh. “I’m sure he didn’t want anyone here to know.”

“Yeah, well, most of the time no one gets blamed for bad reviews unless they’re directly mentioned. We just have to hustle harder to maintain basic quality control. But I think if the execs found out about him showering in a guest’s room, that might’ve been a different story. He would’ve gotten a call from HR over that—and probably for dating you after you tried to split his head open.” She giggles.

“Jenn! It wasn’t a date,” I hiss.

“Uh-huh. And I’m not having a salmon sushi-burrito bigger than my head for lunch.” She flashes me a too-wide grin. “Come here, lady. There’s one more place you have to see before we try to do something useful. It’s kind of a perk of working on this floor. You’ll love it. But please keep your voice low and act nonchalant. It’s close to the bigwigs and they’re hanging out there all the time.”

I follow Jenn around a corner and—

*Holy panorama.*

The view is beyond breathtaking and we’re not even close enough yet to fully appreciate it.

Elliott Bay gleams under a sweeping wall of glass. The clear summer day makes the city look like an animated painting, alive and bristling with ocean and mountains and lazy ships. Mount Rainier is even out today, towering like a giant over a toy city.

Honestly, the view could rival the Space Needle, except it’s infinitely more private.

“Wh-oa,” I whisper.

I just stop and stare and don’t notice Jenn pointing at the door first.

“It gets better! Come on,” she urges, gesturing to a glass door I didn’t notice that leads to a wraparound balcony. “Best view in Seattle, right this way. It’s even more amazing without the glass filter.”

She charges ahead, holding the door for me.

I smile sincerely for the first time since I trudged into this place.

Only, as we’re walking through the door, a gaggle of well-dressed suits are coming our way.

And I, in my infinite grace, misstep.

I go plowing straight into one of the big bosses.

“What the hell?” he whispers.

My eyes flick up.

Oh, God.

I’m expecting to find some glowering old man with silver hair, ready to fire me on my first day for insolently ramming his executive highness.

That should be fun to explain in future interviews.

I’m about to start machine-gunning apologies, but my brain catches up and processes what—and *who*—I’m looking at.

I recognize him instantly.

I'd know *him* anywhere.

How could I ever forget that moonlit kiss I've been obsessing over for months?

My jaw falls open and my lungs stall.

Brock's piercing blue eyes lock with mine like lasers, and the feral scowl on his face softens.

*Panic time.*

Heat throbs under my cheeks as an unmistakable spark flares in his eyes.

He sees me, too.

He knows.

Holy shitting mackerel.

Didn't I want to see him again? Back when I had a functioning brain?

Um, yes.

But not here.

Not now.

Not like this.

I'm so dead.

I've got to get out of here, or I'll be the next Renee with a hospital trip.

I have no earthly idea what to do, so I grab Jenn's hand while she looks at me like my hair is on fire.

"B-bathroom!" I spit, the word just a rush of strained air.

"Come again?"

"Umm, Jenn—remind me where the restroom is?"

"Of course. It's just—"

I spin around and bolt back the way we came, forgetting to let go of her.

She lets out a yelp and I pull her along like a doll behind me.

Even when I let go, she fights to keep pace.

"Whoa, where's the fire?" she whispers in my ear. "Pippa! How much coffee did you have this morning?"

"Just help me find the ladies' room," I yell over my shoulder.

"Oh." Her voice goes up an octave like she suddenly understands why we're rushing for the bathroom.

"That was *him!*" I whisper after a few more paces.

"Him?"

“Brock. Naked Brock. Grumpmuffin,” I mutter out the side of my mouth, hoping no one else hears.

We definitely get a few bewildered looks as we fly across the marble floor.

Then we reach the bathroom.

Jenn stops in her tracks, laughing for what seems like a solid minute. I’m looking back with dread over my shoulder, half expecting him to burst in behind us.

After all, he’s very good at unexpected surprises.

“Are you done?” I bite off.

“Let’s go.” She pushes the door open and pulls me through it. Jenn bends over to check the stalls for shoes.

This is so middle school.

“So you’re sure it was him? A hundred percent sure that was *your* Brock?” she says, her eyes wide and searching.

“Hell yes! That’s the guy I made out with. I knew he worked in Seattle sometimes, but to smack right into him my first morning here—what are the odds?”

She’s freaking gawking at me now. I guess that says everything.

*No wild Vegas sprees for you, Pippa. You’ll lose every penny.*

“What?” I snap, tapping my shoe impatiently. “Don’t tell me you think he’ll get me fired. Because if he wants to come at me for a little accidental bump, I’ll—”

“Piper, that guy...” She stops and swallows. “You don’t know, do you? That was—”

“Yeah! I know he was staring,” I cut in. “He recognized me, too. There’s your proof I’m not crazy, okay?”

Jenn just stares at me with her mouth hanging open. I want to shrink through the floor.

I fold my arms. “...what? Why are you looking at me like that?”

**EVERYONE'S A CRITIC (BROCK)**

“Reschedule my day tomorrow, Mr. Dutton. I have a meeting with Ward Brandt about a concept design for a new resort in Orlando that takes priority,” I tell my assistant, annoyed that every word seems forced.

“Right-o.” Keenan taps at his phone diligently, but I catch him sneaking looks at me over the screen. “When’s the meeting with Brandt?”

“Noon.”

“Dammit, these new hires,” Creighton, the CFO, barks to me. “She wasn’t even paying attention when she plowed into you. I should have gotten her badge number.”

He looks at me like he’s expecting a pat on the head.

“Drop it,” I snarl, remembering to soften the blow too late. “It’s not important. We have bigger concerns than a few toes getting stepped on.”

The stunned look on his face tells me I’m the asshole who should take my own advice.

I still can’t fucking believe it.

*Miss Sunshine.*

Here.

All rolling curves and blond seduction with the same sea-blue highlights that’s had me waking up in a cold sweat for two goddamned months.

Her face was even as crimson as the first time I scared her half to death.

What the ever living fuck?

A face-to-chest collision and not even a hello before she took off like she was afraid I'd light her ass on fire?

At least Creighton's irritation confirms it wasn't a hallucination.

Without it, I'd be questioning my sanity, considering I've been as fixated as a damn kid with a prom date since that night in Lanai.

No illusion, though.

Our gazes melted.

Her emerald eyes with mine.

Her strawberry of a mouth, pert and sweet and aching for my teeth.

I forgot how striking she truly is in the flesh. No fading memory of that weekend could ever do her justice.

She's the most gorgeous woman I've ever kissed, and that's the problem.

"Boss, do you know that young woman?" Keenan asks.

I whip around, ignoring his question. "Was she a new hire?"

My mind flashes back to the black-and-gold company badge hanging from her collar. Not the same badge we use for guests and freelance contractors.

I'm about to take off after her—but at the pace she's going, she's probably ahead of me by now. She damn near pulls that poor brunette with her right over.

Meanwhile, Creighton speeds ahead and disappears through the glass doors. I hope I didn't bruise his ego too much.

I glance over at Keenan. "Who was that?"

But I already know she's a vlogger named Piper Renee I can't extract from my psyche.

"You mean the blond your eyes were superglued to?" Keenan says with a knowing smile.

I glare at him, willing the ground underneath him to open up.

He laughs. "Don't worry! She looked surprised to see you too. Haven't ever seen a staring contest that intense since...ever."

In true Keenan style, he's not taking the hint.

If he weren't the best damn executive assistant I've had—the only one who's ever kept up with a million moving pieces that change daily—he'd be long gone. And as an added bonus, he's never hit on me because he prefers delicate and sensitive artist men who wear bright colors.

“Get me her name and division,” I say. I narrowly avoid adding *ASAP*.

Keenan wags his brows and leans into my ear.

“You feeling okay, bossman? Because if you’re suddenly in the market for a scandalicious office romance...”

“Don’t,” I bite off. “Don’t even joke about that shit. This organization has a sterling reputation, and Gramps will have me castrated if I don’t keep it. Capiche?”

“Capiche? You’ve gone all Tony Soprano now? This *is* serious.”

I snort, struggling not to crack a smile.

If I’m going to have an asshole as my right-hand man, at least he’s a witty asshole.

“Sorry. My grandma used to say that when I was in trouble, even though we’re less than one percent Italian. Look, if the blonde is who I think she is and she’s on payroll, I need to talk to her. She could help our marketing woes. If it weren’t for the meeting, I’d go looking for her myself.”

“And you don’t need me there to take notes now?” he asks.

“Dammit. I hadn’t thought about that. Find a secretary for the notes and you find Miss Clumsy for me. Pull her personnel file. I’ll decide what happens from there.”

Keenan doesn’t say anything, but from the way he stares, I can tell he’s intrigued. He snaps off a crisp salute.

I roll my eyes. “Out with it. If you’ve got any shit on your brain, let’s have it now.”

“I’m just surprised if you aren’t cruising for a hookup—something I’m sure your grouchy fun-hating self would never do. We’ve got our best people working on the big bad, vets with ten years in digital marketing. They haven’t been able to figure out what the hell is going on with reviews. So, why would some new hire?”

“She’s new, but I’ve seen her talents shine before. She could bring valuable insights you just won’t get from a desk jockey, even if they’re damn good at what they do. I’d be a fool to ignore her.”

Keenan nods slowly, still side-eyeing me. “I’m on it. Enjoy your meeting.”

We split apart as we head back inside.

My jaw feels tight enough to splinter.

A hundred justified business reasons for finding Miss Renee still can't hide the awful truth.

I'm aching to taste her again.

That abstract, phantom lust I've carried around for months just turned into a bleeding sore.

What the fuck happens if I know she's in reach?

If I know she's in this very building, and infinitely more forbidden than she ever was on a starry Hawaiian night?



THE MEETING IS pointless mind dribble.

It's an hour and a half of listening to a contractor moaning apologies because he can't meet the deadlines he agreed to and all the reasons why the consequences shouldn't be contractually enforced.

Missing deadlines wastes my time.

So do meetings that drag on with a litany of excuses.

I glance at the middle-aged man across from me, Price my Legal head, and sigh. "You don't want to activate the penalty program, but I do. The contract was breached—"

He goes pale and starts to say something.

I hold my hand up.

"Look, I'm not concerned about the breach right now, but I need delivery in full next week. The Austin property has a tight construction schedule if we want to go live during the seasonal upswing next year."

Price starts in, "Mr. Winthrope, before rushing to litigation, in my opinion it might be wise to extend a certain grace period—"

I look at the secretary before he finishes.

"Record a one-week courtesy waiver in the meeting notes. *One week*, and not a day more. I'll retain my right to arbitration if work isn't started seven days from now. As soon as we're finished, please send Mr. Price a copy of the minutes. CC myself and Keenan Dutton." I stand and look back at my petrified Legal man. "You'll have to get over it and hope our partners pick up the pace. I don't have time to waste on bullshit."



I leave the room and head for my office. You'd be surprised how draining it gets ruling this place with an iron fist.

Keenan walks in through my still-open door holding a manila folder before I even make it to my chair.

"What now?" I ask.

"Miss Piper Renee's file, as requested. And it is *Miss Renee*, in case you wondered." He winks at me.

My look lances through him as I snatch it out of his hand.

Why does fate have to be so goddamned annoying when it smacks you in the face?

Things happen for a reason. I've always believed that.

That's why I'm not taking my unexpected slice of sunshine for granted. She's here to help with my PR problem.

"Let me have it," I tell him, leaning back in my chair.

"She's a new hire in marketing. About twenty-four years old. She comes with an exceptional candidate recommendation from an internal source with three years in the department. Her resume lists a few years of content marketing experience, a bachelor's in media relations, and...a massive love of dogs and birds."

I choke back a laugh.

I'll never understand the birds, but dogs? We might have *one* thing in common.

"Marketing, huh?" I say absently, reaching into my desk for the same battered tennis ball that always keeps my hands busy when I'm thinking.

I start throwing my ball, wondering if I can get away with moving her without another direct encounter.

The ball strays off course on my next throw.

Keenan ducks before it sails over his head. It bangs the wall behind him and comes bouncing back to me.

"Sorry," I mutter.

Usually, I like it when things are easy, but if steering her where I need her just requires a word from a supervisor versus a meeting with the CEO, we might get through this without a scandal.

"What's her role?" I ask.

"Entry-level copywriter."

Dammit, there might be a good reason for that meeting after all.

Copy grunts don't handle high-level marketing decisions, and no one will understand a snap promotion without high-level approval.

I don't need her in copywriting, stringing together words when I've seen what she can do on video.

"Let her know I need to see her first thing tomorrow morning."

*Strictly business*, I remind myself, hiding a smirk.

I just need help with the review crisis. Wanting her in my office has nothing to do with the way her body molded to mine or the way she tasted on Lanai.

"Will do. Should I come too?" Keenan lifts his brows and gives me his usual incredulous look.

"I think Miss Renee will find my presence demanding enough without adding smart-ass comments," I say.

"Suit yourself, boss." Keenan leaves with a chuckle and I turn back to the screen on my desk.

I'm barely logged in when I get a Zoom notification with ROSS WINTHROPE next to it.

Shit.

Why did he have to retire without really retiring so soon? I don't have anything nearly as under control as Gramps did in his day, and I think he knows it.

My finger stabs a key and Grandpa's face flashes across my screen. His bright-red tinted shades hang low on his nose like a bad John Lennon impression, and his familiar mane of silver hair has gotten longer and shaggier than ever.

"Congratulations on a few more grey hairs," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "What can I say, my boy? I thought after you were grown you'd quit making me so distinguished, but we're still waiting."

A joke that's too close to the truth.

Besides the review debacle and marketing snafus, I've done nothing but worry my half-retired billionaire grandfather.

"How's London today?"

"It's London. Foggy and cool, but there's a beef bourguignon with my name on it for dinner, so I have no complaints staying busy. I've taken up more painting classes—I have to do something with all this free time on my hands." He gives me a rare smile. "Care to see my latest piece? Your

grandmother says I should auction it off for charity, but I say we hang it in the great room after I have it properly framed.”

I hold my breath while he reaches over and grabs a black canvas covered in blue splotches.

Don’t ask what any of the misshapen blueberries are supposed to be.

I don’t think it’s all the same hue because some of the lines are darker.

“Well?” He waits.

“It’s...interesting, Gramps.” I twist in my seat, reaching deep for something to say. “Very colorful. Wish I’d paid attention in art history so I could tell you more.”

Then again, if I had, my head might be exploding at this abstract abomination he’s brought to life.

Gramps taught me to always be honest at all costs. Meanwhile, Grandma says it’s best not to speak if you can’t be complimentary.

I’m not sure he’d be flattered if I point out how his painting looks like Picasso took acid in a jungle. And it doesn’t matter.

He spent over fifty years turning Winthrop into a world-class luxury brand.

If bad abstract art is what he wants to spend his golden years on, so be it.

“You’ll be happy to know the Orlando and Austin resorts are both progressing,” I say, changing the subject.

“Ah, yes. I sincerely hope the early reviews in Austin turn out better than the Hawaiian gems you spearheaded. Such a shame. I thought with that locally sourced peaberry coffee from Mr. Lancaster, they’d be singing your praises from Lisbon to Beijing.”

“They *adore* the coffee,” I say, trying not to grit my teeth. “It’s the one thing nobody whines about.”

Yes, I think miserably.

“Great resorts aren’t made by its beverages,” he says matter-of-factly, his eyes swelling with sympathy. “However, you’ll find your footing, son. I was older than you when they began singing Winthrop New York’s praises, you know.”

*Tick-fucking-tok*, he means.

He was one, maybe two years older.

He trusted me with his company, and so far, I'm an underwhelming successor at best.

He's right about one thing, though.

I'll come back from it.

*I have to.*

I'm not letting my grandparents down and settling for mediocrity. I just need more time to set everything right.

If only Gramps wasn't still reading over our quarterly updates and briefings. I keep hoping he'll be too busy to notice the damn PR problem that started in Maui and Lanai and keeps spreading like a blight.

Worst of all, I'm not even close to figuring out who might be fucking me over with this exaggerated horseshit.

The silent majority who stay at Winthrop properties never leave reviews.

Sometimes if you offer them freebies, maybe.

But your average luxury client isn't easily wowed by small extras. Real reviews come when people have a noteworthy experience and walk away either glowing or pissed off.

I still have a hard time believing our resorts are making people that irate.

"Is that my Brock?" Grandma calls from off-screen. "Oh, let me say hello!"

"Did you hear that?" Gramps asks.

Grandma smooshes into the frame with him a second later, pleasant as ever with her plump face and regal smile. "How are you doing, my little bear?"

"I'm fine, Grandma."

"Are you eating enough?"

I can't help laughing. In her mind, I think I'm forever frozen at ten years old.

"Yes."

"Make sure you don't overwork yourself. Go to bed by a decent hour." She wags a finger. "There's more to life than managing a hotel empire, dear. Take it from this guy."

She elbows Gramps playfully and he gives her a dirty look back.

I sigh.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“It’s easy for you to talk. You guys not only built the brand, but took it to the stars. I’m fighting the whole world just to keep it airborne.”

“Not the whole world,” Gramps corrects. “Just a few jealous competitors and review sites.”

“Sure, that’s all—” I cut off mid-sentence. Speaking of keeping things from crashing down... “I’m afraid I forgot something. Can I call you back?”

Gramp’s face hardens. “You’re not behind on work, are you?”

“Worse. I forgot a favor for a friend.”

He nods. “We’ll let you get to it then.”

“I love you, sweetheart!” Grandma says.

“Take care of yourself, Brock,” Gramps says.

“Love you both.” I end the call and yank my drawer open, searching for the recommendation letter that’s handwritten on company letterhead.

I remove it from the unsealed envelope and scan it once, then a second time.

Then I pick up another handful of written, revised, and sealed letters from my desk that Keenan brought in last week and add this one to the top of the stack.

Fyodor, my driver and personal assistant, can handle the rest. I grab my phone.

“I need you to take care of something for me. Can you come to my office?”

“On my way.”

I quickly respond to a couple of emails before there’s a tap at my door five minutes later.

“Come,” I call.

He walks in, adorned in a brilliant gold-and-white designer shirt crisscrossing his chest. Fyo might be a snazzier dresser than Gramps and Keenan combined, and I cringe to think he might spend more of his salary on designer brands than I do, even if I pay him well.

He’s in his late forties and looks like a retired rock star.

“What do you need, Mr. Winthrop?” he asks with a hint of his faded Russian accent.

I wave the letter in the air. “I need you to make sure these get hand-delivered to the deans of the schools Vanessa specified. Have it set up so

they can't ignore them. You still have the list?"

"Absolutely. Anything else?"

"No."

He grabs it without another word and exits my office. I wish all my people were this efficient and immune to pulling my tail.

My phone buzzes with a text from Keenan, though, telling me I might as well wish for a review fairy to come down and shower me with happy write-ups.

**Keenan: So, more bad news. Try not to kill me. You know the travel blogger you wanted to check out the Chicago property—the BIG one with Amex travel? He just turned us down.**

Fuck.

**Did he say why?** I send back.

**Keenan: Too many complaints. The stench won't wash off, boss. This guy had multiple offers for the same weekend you proposed and felt like other places were safer bets. He told me he won't go places he hates if he wants to keep his sanity.**

**Brownie points for giving us the finger nicely?** he adds.

I glare at the screen.

**How can he hate Winthrop? He's never done a single write-up,** I send.

**Keenan: Yes. I checked the records. He's never stayed with us before.**

Dammit straight to hell.

*Stench* is right.

My worst fears are coming true.

This growing shitpile of rotten reviews is souring people's opinions before they even stay with us. They don't want to take the gamble.

The fact that he turned down a premier property in Chicago—the last big project Gramps personally oversaw with a Brandt architectural design—guts me.

**Tell him he's welcome anytime if he changes his mind. We'll cover everything, airfare included.**

Hell, I'll fly in and be his personal tour guide if I have to, even if it'll be a lot less fun than stooping that low with Miss Renee.

I have to turn this ship around before it goes tits up.

**Keenan: I'll let you know what he says.**

Sighing, I slam my phone down on my desk and start Googling Winthrop Resorts with a sneer that hurts my face.

Of course, the first thing that pops up aren't those dick-teasing videos Piper posted of her stay in Lanai.

That would be bad for me in ways that have nothing to do with horrid publicity.

It's the usual dumpster fire of bad reviews all over Google and top travel sites.

There's no escaping the carnage.

I don't make it ten minutes before my blood is boiling.

Snarling, I pick up the phone and punch my marketing director's contact.

"This is Robert."

"Rob, I want your team churning out fresh content on the Chicago resort. All your best copywriters."

He's quiet for a minute. "All of them?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?" His voice shrinks.

"We're not taking this goddamned smear campaign lying down," I snarl. "No one will ever market Winthrop resorts better than we do."

"Oh, right. And you said Chicago? There's an issue there now?" I think I can hear him wincing. "Sorry, sir. I don't know how it keeps happening."

"Not your responsibility. The latest one-star tirade is new, and I want it gone before it goes viral."

"We're on it, sir. I'll let you know how much content we're able to drop before I leave for the day," he tells me.

"I appreciate it." I cut the call.

I need to figure out what the hell is going on so I can be proactive.

Anything beats waiting around for some lunatic to lob another drive-by one-star bomb and only reacting after the fact.

I shove my chair out, stand, and walk to my sideboard.

I don't drink at work often, but today I need something stiffer than caffeine and stress.

I also wonder if I'm overthinking this latest PR kick to the balls.

Is it really shitty review number one hundred getting under my skin or *her*?

Miss Renee's presence in this building haunts me like a bloodhound that knows there's a juicy steak on the other side of its door.

I don't have time for office affairs.

I don't do drama.

I have no appetite to get mixed up with some striking blond bombshell who's already seen me naked.

*How much can a man lie to himself?* I wonder bitterly.

Fuck this.

The one day we spent together had me working like a dog to undo my mistakes. I was never meant to taste her, to have her little whimper branded into my grey matter.

I look down and swear again.

Apparently, the brutal hard-on I'm sporting doesn't care for my excuses.

"Focus, you sex-starved baboon," I mutter to myself, fishing out a bottle and a couple glasses.

I wonder if Gramps ever needed liquid courage when he was my age.

Doubtful. The man was already married and had my father, so he wasn't lacking in the sex department.

I pour myself two fingers of brandy and hope the fire exploding in my belly helps thaw my blue balls.

Guess what?

*It doesn't.*

All it does is remind me of the drinks I shared with Miss Sunshine in a sunny Hawaiian office. Plus, a hundred other damnable things that shouldn't have ever happened there.

The ATV ride after lunch.

She wrapped herself around me like a scared kitten, clinging too close with soft curves and a sweet scent rolling off her I'll never forget.

Goddamn.

I could have driven us into the nearest brush, thrown her down, and taken her right there.

I could have sucked those little red lips she gnaws so thoughtfully raw.

I could have pushed inside her and banished her respectable stubbornness thrust by thrust.

And the long walk back to the resort through the rock garden, where she fluttered from stone to stone.



I was already so hard I could barely breathe by the time she tumbled into my arms.

It took every ounce of my willpower to break that kiss, to refrain from so many catastrophic decisions I wanted to make with her.

How do I ever see her again without remembering how she moaned?

Fuck, it was like she'd never been kissed before.

But that's insane, of course she has.

There's no earthly way a woman that beautiful made it to her twenties without a mile of men lined up, preening all over her.

My fingers tighten around the glass.

I already hate these imaginary hookups.

That's where my mind is—stuck on jealousy for a woman I can never claim unless I want to blow my own career to kingdom come.

If only the chemistry on that breezy night wasn't so *real*.

Still, her talent is real too. That's more important than indulging these lizard brain desires.

She knows her shit, especially travel marketing from a fresh perspective the average marketing new hire will never comprehend.

She can help put out this fire, no question.

*So why the hell did she run away?*

An unpleasant thought gnaws at the back of my mind.

Maybe she's had time to think about what happened in Lanai.

Maybe the lovely videos she posted and the glowing review of the resort there was just that.

*A review of the facility and its amenities.*

Not that stolen kiss with yours truly.

Maybe the chemistry is all in my head and she regrets everything.

She damn sure wasn't eager to talk, but she definitely recognized me.

*Shit.*

Does she resent me for seizing her lips? For walking away and doing the annoying smart thing instead of hauling her up to my room?

We have to clear the air.

I need her talent more than I need any hard feelings about what happened on that trip, and I have to make it clear workplace boundaries *will* be respected this time.

I finish my drink and angrily pour another, sloshing strong brandy over my hands.

My phone buzzes on my desk. I swallow the second glass down and look at the screen.

Keenan again. ***Mr. Big turned you down again. He said he was just trying to be polite about the scheduling conflict. He didn't expect you to come back with another offer. But you seem like a nice guy and he wishes you all the luck.***

I rip the phone up and start mashing at the screen.

***Brock: What the actual fuck? I can't give away time at my luxury resort with transportation covered now?***

***Keenan: Better we don't waste comps on folks who won't appreciate them, IMO.***

Fuck. This is bad.

I thought we still had time before top critics start shunning us like a haunted mansion.

***Can you find someone else like him? Anyone from the other travel mags?*** I finger-punch Send.

***Keenan: Working on it. I just wanted you to know where we're at.***

***Brock: I know. Up shit creek with no paddle.***

***Keenan: Can't disagree. Sorry.***

Damn. I was hoping he would.

***I've got marketing churning to bury the latest garbage from Chicago,***  
I send.

***Keenan: We might need a better strategy. No offense.***

***Brock: I know, Einstein. Any suggestions?***

***Keenan: Burn the shit to the ground and start over?***

Growling, I throw my phone to the edge of my desk.

Drastic times. Drastic measures. Drastic anger.

I *could* rebrand the names of some properties as an absolute last resort.

If I did that, the negative reviews might fall off the radar, but it would also zap my entire legacy, upset my grandparents, and we'd be starting from scratch.

No.

The best defense is a good offense, especially if there's a chance this is a coordinated smear campaign.

I just need to figure out who the hell keeps stabbing me in the back and why.

I don't have many enemies or petty grudges beyond the usual rivalries in this business. Who would want to one-star the fuck out of me?

My phone vibrates again.

I expect another message from Keenan, but this time, it's Vanessa.

***Hi. Fyo just told me he made arrangements to have the letters delivered. Thanks! It means the world to AJ. I know he appreciates it.***

There's one thing finally going right.

***Brock: It's the least I could do. And it is. Let me know if you need anything else,*** I add as I hit Send.

Keenan texts again. ***Focus groups?***

***Brock: We tried that months ago. The demographic is wildly different from the people leaving negative reviews. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with people. I think someone just has an axe to grind.***

***Is it possible?***

He doesn't answer for a couple minutes.

When his next message comes in, my gut clenches.

***Keenan: ...I don't. Sorry, that's a little paranoid. The reviews are at different resorts and you'd better believe I dug deep to see if those were bots or paid shills. No way. All real people.***

My lip curls with disgust.

No matter how many times he pushes back with impeccable logic, I'm not convinced.

All my prestigious flagship properties can't suddenly suck monkey balls.

Someone wants to bleed Winthrop dry, and I'm going to find out who.

**GOOD HELP IS SO HARD TO FIND (PIPER)**

“Jesus, Pippa. I’m so sorry,” Jenn says. “I didn’t expect you to meet the CEO—er, meet him *again*—on your first day. If I’d known—”  
Oh, hell. I hadn’t even thought about that.

“The CEO was there?”

She blinks at me.

“I mean, I know you never got his last name in Hawaii, but you’ve figured it out, right?”

“Jenn, what are you talking about?”

“Brock Winthrope. Your Brock. He’s the chief.”

Instant goosebumps.

My brain doesn’t want to work.

“Hold on. Lanai Brock? Naked Brock? Grumpmuffin *Brock*?”

Jenn nods tightly. “All in the same big moody Brock package.”

I swallow forcefully so I don’t throw up.

“Holy shit. Holy—you’re not joking are you? You’re serious. He owns the entire company and I just walked right into him.”

I bury my face in my hands, digging my fingers into my eyes.

“He must think I’m a total moron,” I whisper.

But our dinner from that last night pops into my head.

He mentioned Seattle, didn’t he?

And he did it without *explaining* anything.

He could have told me the truth.

He chose not to.

“Don’t freak! You probably won’t even see him much,” she says with an awkward smile. “I mean, I only see him occasionally in big staff meetings, like once a quarter or so. Everyone’s blood pressure goes up when he walks into the room. He’s a busy man and pretty intense.”

Like that makes this all okay.

I’m still trying to wrap my mind around it.

“Pippa, you’re redder than a cucumber. Are you okay?” She lays a soft hand on my shoulder.

“Cucumbers aren’t red,” I say, peeking out behind my hands.

“Yep, and you just passed the test. Sorry, had to make sure you’re still in there.” She grins.

I nod, feeling a painful hook in my neck.

“I wonder why he lied to me, though. But now it makes sense why he was so panicked about the review. A flipping CEO with a shiny new property has a lot more at stake than a basic manager.”

“It also looks way worse for a CEO to show up naked and start showering—”

“Ugh, you’re right.” I almost fall over.

I grab her arm for support.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Really, if you need to duck out early, I don’t think anyone will notice,” she says.

I laugh until my stomach hurts.

Awkward laughing fits make confronting total madness a little easier.

My shoulders come up to my ears in an exaggerated shrug, my best effort to curl up and die.

“He didn’t care to see me again. I know that much. He knew we were both in Seattle and never asked for my number. He saw my social media accounts and never tried reaching out. I kind of hoped I’d see him again somehow. Now, I wish I hadn’t!”

“I understand.” Jenn throws me a sympathetic look.

I doubt she does.

When I met him in Lanai, after the initial shock, he seemed so decent.

So strong.

So smirky and a lot moody under the surface, but he had his heart in the right place.

Now, I wonder who I dated without actually dating that day.

*What man did I kiss?*

“Do you think he meant it when he didn’t want to see you again?” Jenn asks.

“What?”

“I saw the way he looked at you. There was a second of surprise, but then—let’s just say the way he stared could rival an eagle and a field mouse. When you looked back at him, he smiled. It was quick, but it was there. Ask anybody around here—Brock Winthrope *never* smiles. He’s grump-zilla personified. So if he wasn’t ticked when you bumped into each other...that’s good news. I bet he would’ve pulled you aside and had a few words before we ran off like hens on fire.”

“That’s why I ran! I didn’t have a clue how to say, ‘Hi, dude. Yep, I’m the girl you made out with for a nice review, and now I work for you. Isn’t that awesome?’ I can’t believe this. I knew he worked for Winthrope, obviously, but I never imagined he’d be the—” I stop as I’m saying it.

I should have known something more was up.

I booked the gig in Lanai because my best friend works at Winthrope headquarters and had a contact.

When Mr. Not Manager told me he spends his time in Seattle when he’s not traveling for work, I should have guessed he was going to Winthrope home base.

“I’m the biggest idiot who’s ever worked here, right? Be honest.” I laugh bitterly.

“Pippa, stop.” She grabs my shoulders and gives me a little shake.

I should have known better than to believe a stranger.

Especially a strange naked man in the running for world’s biggest footlong.

*Will I ever learn?*

*And for the love of all that’s holy, will I stop thinking about his atrociously large—yeah.*

“Look on the bright side. He’s a nicer tour guide than he is a boss,” Jenn says cheerfully.

I frown back.

Even my bones are frowning.

“Where’s the bright side?”

“He’s a huge, demanding, type A crazy workhorse—and I’m sure the A stands for asshat. I’ve never had to deal with him firsthand, thank God. But I’ve heard the stories. Other people had the audacity to make a mistake in front of him and it wasn’t pretty. Poor Robbie worked for two days without sleeping once to fix this screwup with some Facebooger ads.”

“So, what, he inherited this role? I know he didn’t start the company.”

“His grandparents did. You’ve probably seen Ross Winthrop in the news before? Kind of eccentric, very British, dresses like Willy Wonka on cannabis gummies... Brock came in and took the full reins just a couple years ago, not long after the hot new Chicago hotel opened.”

Wow. I’m at a loss for words.

I don’t even know what to do.

“I’ll give you a minute.” Jenn takes the hint and steps out to give me breathing space.

I stay holed up in the bathroom until I regain my composure.

Somehow, I mangle my way through the rest of the day even though I can’t focus on work at all.

When I get home, I find Maisy lying on the couch. Dad has an arm under her legs and another one under her arm, stooped over.

“What happened?” I ask.

“She fell asleep like always. Girl curls up like a kitten and passes out cold. I was just about to put her to bed.”

I gentle my voice as much as possible before I say, “Dad, you’re not supposed to be walking around without your cane. And Maisy’s a big girl now. She’s seventeen. You can’t lift her like she’s seven years old. You need—we need for you to take better care of yourself. Just wake her up.”

He gives me a deflated look and sighs as I collapse on the couch next to my sister. Maisy groans and rolls over.

Is he hurt or just annoyed?

I can’t tell.

“Aw, hell. She’s all tuckered out because she has to run after me. That’s not how it’s supposed to be, Pippa. I ought to be taking care of you girls instead of being this useless lump.”

“You’re *never* useless, Dad,” I say firmly. “And she’s just tired because she was on the phone with Kelly until one a.m. Probably chatting about

some boy. Let me take care of it.” I pick her up and wait until she blinks and stands, then start guiding her toward her room.

Once I have Maisy settled down in bed, I come back and sit with Dad.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“Yeah, Maisy made pork chops. She left a plate in the microwave for you.”

“Thanks.” I stand. “Want anything else while I’m up?”

He glances at his nearly empty water jug. “I’m good.”

I grab it on my way to the kitchen anyway.

A few minutes later, I’m back with my plate of food and Dad’s freshly filled jug.

“Here you go.” I set it down beside him and dig into my food.

“So, how was your first day on the job?” he asks.

*Crap.*

Quick, think of the positives.

“Pretty decent. It’s fun working with Jenn—oh, and it has the best view in Seattle! They call it an observation deck, but it’s really this giant balcony that looks out over everything.”

“Not too shabby, honey.” He smiles at me, his green eyes twinkling. “Sure beats getting your nose pinched by a crab like I did my first day.”

I giggle. “But you were only fifteen!”

“And so damn wet behind the ears I didn’t know a salmon from a squid. Hell of a learning curve when I ran off from that little mountain town thinking I knew how to fish.” He smiles fondly, his mind somewhere else, probably back in Heart’s Edge, Montana, where he grew up a lifetime ago.

I let him yammer on about old times so there’s no reason to talk more about my day.

Of course, I don’t mention anything about the CEO from hell—or the fact that we accidentally kissed in Hawaii.

Dad doesn’t need another freaking heart attack.

“You worked like a mule on all your video stuff,” he says, finally shifting back. “Can’t believe you gave it up for nine-to-five.”

“...I guess that’s part of growing up, right? Also, FYI, I haven’t *given up*. Not totally,” I say, mostly to convince myself. “Smart people know when to cut their losses and shore things up again, don’t they?”



He smiles softly. “You’ve always been sharp as a tack, girl. Just hope you didn’t feel like you needed to step away from what you love for me. I always manage, and you know you’re welcome to stay home rent free for as long as you want.”

I have no idea what to say, but I know I need to say something before he drowns in his own guilt.

“It’s a cool opportunity. I’m still working in the travel industry—”

“But you can’t travel. Thanks to this guy.” He jabs a thumb at his chest.

“Someday, Dad. I might see if I can transfer to an on-site marketing team. Then I’ll be at some resort and I won’t have to hold my breath for freebies or pay through the nose.”

“Still not traveling,” he says, folding his arms. “You’ll just be stuck in the same pretty place an hour away from home. That’s not what you’re after, Piper.”

*Why does he make this so hard?*

I’m trying to form a response that doesn’t sound like fluff, but my face must give me away, because he says, “I just want to make sure you’re really okay with this. It isn’t fair, you holding yourself back because of your old man. Me and Maisy, we’ll manage.”

“Oh, no, Dad. It’s not like that at all. I love the content game, but there’s no security. Even if I do everything right, algorithms shift overnight and can slash your views in half. It’s hard to hold down a routine when you never know when or what’s coming next. I miss the actual travel part, but I like knowing I’ve got a steady check coming and paid time off.”

He nods. “Well, good. You know I couldn’t handle it if my shit pressured my oldest daughter into some phony desk job just to pay the bills. You only get one life. I want you to live yours, Piper, without worrying about me.”

I laugh. “Dad, I’m not going to just abandon you.”

He laughs too. “Sweetheart, kids grow up and move away. All part of life.”

“Not yet. You guys need me.”

I force a smile.

“No matter how much I travel, Seattle will always be home. I don’t have any big plans of going away, and actually, I was getting kinda tired of

the long-distance trips. I'd rather keep it local for a while. Plenty to see in our own backyard."

"Now you're just yankin' my chain." His eyes narrow and he studies my face. "Since when are you tired of new places?"

I smile and shrug.

"Hawaii was gorgeous but the jet lag... Woof. I went through half a case of ginger ale just getting my stomach right again."

Finally, he nods.

"Yeah, that can be rough. You always did have a sensitive belly."

Sensitive isn't even half of it as I exhale slowly, thanking the stars he believes me—or loves me enough to pretend he does.



MAISY IS on the school bus by the time I leave the next morning.

Dad's asleep in his armchair, probably where he crashed out after waking up for a two a.m. snack. I make sure his medicine, cane, phone, water, and life alert are beside him so he has no reason to move around more than he needs to.

When I log in to my computer at work, I have fourteen emails waiting.

Most of them are about new hire orientations, a few basic training videos in company etiquette, and people introducing themselves.

The one from Keenan Dutton gets my attention.

Apparently, he's Brock Winthrop's executive assistant and Mr. Winthrop would like to meet with me in forty-five minutes.

My heart nosedives through my stomach.

*Awesome.*

What the hell do we have to talk about?

Maybe he wasn't impressed by the way I cut and ran after headbutting him?

Or he decided my Lanai content wasn't ass-kissy enough.

Or he doesn't think I'm the right fit for this job.

I swallow.

All the kind words in the world from Jenn can't override the CE-flipping-O if he gives me the boot.

Forty minutes creep by at a death row pace.

My knees almost lock when I start the slow, painful walk toward the elevator leading to Winthrop's floor.

I shouldn't care so much.

I stood up to him before, didn't I?

But that was before we kissed.

And I was the one with the power then, thanks to his naked intrusion.

Now...

I bite the inside of my cheek.

God, this sucks.

I don't know much about Brock Winthrop except that he lied about being some lowly resort manager.

Remember how I kept saying it wasn't his fault that some moron couldn't buy decent software? Oh, but it is!

I cover my face, holding in a sickly laugh, trying and failing to regain composure.

The elevator announces my arrival on the top floor of this literal ivory tower with a *ping!* like a gunshot.

Everything is glass and gold and towers over the cityscape outside.

Left goes to the observation deck I wonder if I should throw myself off—or right to the Tsar of all grumpiness and my inevitable doom.

*Right it is.*

My courage dissipates by the second, walking through the blue-tinted doors that look like they belong in a fancy airport lounge. Inside, it's all glamor, black and gold modern accents and a sparkling chandelier that must be the world's most tedious job to polish.

I imagine people standing on ladders with toothbrushes just to get it done.

"Miss Renee?" A warm voice startles me.

I look up and see a guy in black-framed glasses. He's wearing skinny jeans with a black shirt and a spotless white blazer.

He offers me his hand, and I shake it.

"I'm Keenan Dutton, Executive Assistant. I wasn't sure if you'd know where to go, so I planned to meet you at the elevator, but I got held up in a meeting." His smile feels disarming, at least.

“Umm—are you coming with me?” I clear my throat. “To talk to Mr. Winthrop, I mean?”

“I believe he wants to see you alone, but you shouldn’t worry. I promise you his legendary bark is worse than his bite—but I think you already know that since you’ve met.”

I almost fall over.

*Oh God, oh God, this Keenan guy knows about Lanai?*

*Did Winthrop tell him we—*

But before I finish that thought, Keenan starts moving, urging me on to Brock’s office. Once we reach the door, he opens it for me.

Why do I get the feeling I’m being thrown in a lion pit?

I’m barely one step inside when Keenan shuts the door behind me.

Here we go.

Of course, he’s the center of his entire world.

His desk is a focal point, huge and sprawling enough to rival the Resolute desk in the Oval Office.

There, the corporate god-king rises from his leather power chair, backlit by another dramatic view of a rain-spattered Seattle and the Puget Sound behind him.

Piercing blue eyes meet mine for a breathless second—before his eyes drift lower.

*I. Am. Dead.*

Is he staring at my lips?

I wonder if he’s back in that star-strung Hawaiian night with me, remembering how I tasted while Jupiter glowed overhead.

His gaze snakes down my body, stopping on my chest, my hips, my legs.

I suddenly feel as naked as I did the first night we met, when I had to face him in a t-shirt and panties.

My cheeks heat furiously, but it’s not all desire or nerves.

I’m pissed.

He said he had no desire to see me again.

He didn’t even tell me the truth about who he actually was.

So, why pretend this is any sort of happy reunion now?

Anger gives me the shot of courage I need to speak.

“Well, are you just going to stare or tell me why I’m here?”

“Three reasons, Miss Renee. First, I needed to see you up close with my own eyes to prove it was really you—preferably without you disappearing like a skittish fawn. Second, your talent is being wasted in an entry-level copywriting role. That changes now.”

“What?” I throw out. He’s just randomly changing my job without even asking me? “Okay, CEO or not, you can’t just reassign me on my second day here.”

He stiffens, leveling those soul-searing blue eyes on mine.

“Can’t I, Miss Renee?”

God.

I’m biting my lip so hard I taste something metallic.

I just can’t decide if I want to race over and slap him across the face or sink through the floor.

He laughs. “I’m the CEO and the buck stops here. If you’re questioning my decisions, you’re welcome to appeal to the shareholders directly—including my grandfather, still the majority shareholder.”

“Fine. You want to randomly pick me up and dump me somewhere else? That’s cool. I’m calling your grandpa.”

He snorts loudly. “You’re threatening to call my grandparents on me in the first sixty seconds we’ve been reunited?”

I cross my arms and nod.

He shakes his head. “I’ve never had a disgruntled employee threaten that before. Glad to see it wasn’t just the Lanai sunshine that makes you a wolverine. Here, I’ll sweeten the deal—”

“How? You haven’t even told me the terms yet...” I look at him incredulously.

“Simple. You help me with the organic reviewer slash influencer pool, including your honest assessment of what went wrong, and I’ll up your pay. How does three times your current salary sound? Effective immediately.”

Holy moolah.

The prick knows how to hit me where I live.

With that kind of salary, we’d have a new furnace, a cushion for Dad’s bills, and enough left over for takeout once in a while.

But that pesky little voice inside me tells him to go to hell just so he knows he can’t control my life. I’m not for sale for any amount.

...but we could *really* use that money.

And he isn't asking for anything impossible. Yet.  
I don't think I *can* turn him down just for spite.  
What's the cost of a deal with the devil again?  
"Should I take your silence as a 'yes?'" he demands.  
"...I'll think about it," I whisper.  
His eyebrows go up, and he scoffs. "What?"  
"I'll think about it."  
"Decide by three o'clock."  
"Tomorrow," I insist.

We share a long, cutting glance. The same eyes that devoured me with that kiss beam through me now, so intimidating I could scream.

"What's number three?" I ask.

"What?"

"You said there was a third reason you brought me here. You only gave me two."

"Right." He looks away, but his glance drops down and scans my body. "I haven't forgotten how we parted, and I'm sure you haven't either. Frankly, there's never been a comparable situation and I don't know what the hell to do about it—"

"What do you mean 'do about it?'"

"The urge to leap over this desk and shove my tongue in your mouth again—" He cocks his head. "And that's putting it mildly. I want to do more, but rules matter. This company won't have a fraternization scandal on top of everything else, no matter how much more reckless parts of my anatomy disagree. No more mishaps."

Awesome.

He just *has* to remind me he's the living embodiment of the eggplant emoji, doesn't he?

I smirk at him, hating how my face heats.

"I guess I'll have to do some thinking. I'll let you know." I spin around on one heel and march toward the door.

"Miss Renee, wait!" he barks after me.

I stop, curling my fingers around the handle. I know he won't let me leave like this.

So I look at him over my shoulder.

“You act like it was my fault, Winthrope, but you were showering in *my* suite. And when we came back from the grand tour, *you* kissed *me*. So, drop the wounded act. I’m not some siren turning you into an impulsive animal. What happened is *not* my fault, and you know it.” I’m about to yank the door open for real this time when I add, “And another thing, you’re way too arrogant to kiss again. Now that I know who you really are, and that you lied to me...”

I don’t look back for a heavy second.

When I do, I see a crease forming in his forehead.

“Why the fuck would you say that? What does the truth matter?”

“You knew we were both in Seattle, but you made it crystal clear we’d never see each other again. If I hadn’t gotten this job, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. The fact that you need to call me in to declare there will be no sex scandal—”

“You’d rather I say nothing? Pretend I never made you moan your heart out?” he growls.

My toes curl up in my shoes, but I’m on a roll. Mr. High and Mighty won’t break me today.

“Look—I’m not sure what issues you’ve had in the past, but believe me, your little ‘rules’ won’t cost me any sleep. Maybe we’d be better off pretending.”

I don’t wait for his response.

I’m moving through the door and breathing a sigh of relief as it clicks shut behind me.

God.

What the hell was I thinking?

I can’t believe that’s the man I spent two months pining over. He’s nothing like the gruff gentleman I met in Hawaii.

The moody charmer who showed me around the island must have been a mirage.

That Brock was nothing like CEO Winthrope.

Nothing like this human storm cloud stuffed into a suit, ruling his company with fear and rumors and snap decisions like a lord bossing around his serfs.

Everything Jenn warned me about feels wrong.

Winthrope isn’t just an asshat. He’s a corporate tyrant.

When I get back to the elevator, I find Keenan standing there, waiting to go down too.

“Back so soon. How’d it go? Did he throw anything?” he asks in a low whisper.

I stare at him, shocked.

“Relax, it’s just a joke. I’m just—never mind.” He holds up his hands affably.

“Oh. Um. I’m not sure, honestly.” I shrug. “I’m also not sure you were right about his bite...”

He lifts a brow. “I’ve never met someone so upset about getting a big raise. Seriously, don’t let him scare you. Just keep your head down and think of the money.”

“I wish I could. There’s a little more to it than that, and I haven’t exactly agreed to anything yet.”

“You mean you might turn the bossman down? Wow, brave.” Once we’re on the elevator, he leans in and whispers, “He didn’t pressure you into anything? Back in Hawaii, I mean. He’s a huge cave bear and not that kind of man, but—”

“Nothing I didn’t want to happen at the time,” I confess. “I’m not getting forced into anything just because we’ve got history.”

“Even a pay raise? Lady, I’ll be strong-armed into a raise *anytime*.”

That wins him a laugh.

I don’t elaborate, though.

If this is going to work, Brock Winthrope needs to show me a shred of respect.

The elevator chimes as the doors slide open. Keenan steps out ahead of me with a parting nod, leaving me alone.

I just hope I can make it through the rest of the day without being haunted by midnight-blue eyes scissoring a Brock-sized hole in my heart.



## BECAUSE I'M THE BOSS (BROCK)



I have most of the marketing team assembled for the morning executive meeting including Piper and her friend Jennifer Landers.

Her email this morning named one condition—moving Jennifer into the same role, and dammit, I agreed.

She keeps her friends close, I suppose.

Though I wonder if bringing them into the meeting this soon was a bad idea.

The shape of Piper Renee's mouth is so hellishly intoxicating I can't focus on anything else.

And it's not just her lips that have my attention.

It's the memory, the taste, the way they burned against mine.

Knowing her whip of a tongue once played in my mouth while her nails raked my hair.

We kissed each other like starving animals who couldn't get enough.

That's why I laid down the law—for my benefit and hers.

Rules are rules and 'no fraternization' might as well be a commandment here. I never meant it as some backhanded slap to her pride.

“...but that's not a strategy. Dropping twenty articles with all the keywords your heart desires isn't going to accomplish much against a post that already has ten thousand views. You have to start getting engagement to feed the algorithm. The post with all the views is basically injecting

steroids into the algo at this point.” Miss Renee’s words bring me back to the discussion.

“Forget the articles then. We can focus on video content instead,” Keenan says.

“Not a terrible idea, but I’m not sure it changes anything. Videos get way more interaction than any text-based content these days. But it still doesn’t solve the root problem,” she says.

“Which is...?” Keenan waits expectantly.

“Your problem isn’t the content, necessarily. It’s getting it seen by the right people.”

“We spend astronomical amounts on advertising every month,” Keenan says, looking at me to weigh in. “That must do something, right?”

I nod slowly.

“And how’s that working out?” she throws back.

I have to suppress a chuckle.

I forgot how hard to impress she can be, and it isn’t fair leaving Keenan to make excuses.

“Why don’t you get to the point, Miss Renee? What are you suggesting?” I bite off.

Her face falls. “I’m not sure just yet. I need more info to come up with anything really useful. But organic marketing does prompt more engagement than paid ads, and with platforms like TikTok taking over, organic engagement is king.”

“We’re trying. We’ve been working on expanding our organic reach and getting more influencers involved, but so far it’s been a slog,” Keenan says with a sigh.

“Or you’re letting the Chicago critic who turned us down stick in your head.” I say, holding Keenan’s gaze.

He doesn’t answer.

“Maybe we could look at changing up our paid ads?” Jenn suggests.

“We review ad spend allocation and its efficiency every few weeks,” I tell her, looking at Robert next. “How are the changes to the rewards program coming?”

“We implemented a new pilot program at the Vegas resort. We’ve seen a small spike in repeat rebookings, and dollars spent per booking have notched up ten percent since we started it. We’d like to study it for another

two months to be sure before we do a partial rollout everywhere else. With your approval, of course,” he adds with a nervous grin.

“Finally some good news. Make it happen,” I tell him.

One glance across the table shows me Miss Renee glaring.

Better to have her disapprove of my style than the message itself.

“There’s still the problem Keenan touched on. I’m having a hard time attracting top influencers, which would be the easiest way to promote the program once it goes wide,” Robert says.

Fuck.

Again with the influencers.

“What can we do? Is there any sense we’re not tainted goods from those damned reviews?” I snap.

“It’s a challenge,” he says.

“Bull. There’s no way that many people are having appalling experiences at our hotels. I don’t believe it for a second. Nothing’s changed in our internal customer feedback.”

On the contrary, we’ve had the most highly rated resorts in the world for forty years. Our satisfaction surveys aren’t mirroring the same woes as the shit posted online.

I couldn’t have fucked up badly enough to undo all of that in the past two years if I’d wanted to.

“Clue me in. If people aren’t having bad experiences, then why are they posting bad reviews? You think they’re fake?” Piper asks. “Some of those reviews seem pretty detailed.”

“That’s the million-dollar question, Miss Renee,” I say, turning in my chair. “Someone’s getting paid to post them. That’s what my gut screams.”

“What? Who? When I have thoughts like that about a video getting troll comments, I always ask the same questions. And if there’s no easy answer, then I know it’s on me to improve my content,” she says with a self-assured smile.

Of course she does.

She’s sunshine and jellybeans and thousands of happy travelers eat from the palm of her hand like the birds she adores. I noticed the small silver hummingbird necklace around her neck today.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Keenan staring.

I meet his gaze.

He's enjoying this too much.

He gives a slight shake of his head and rolls his shoulders. I know I'm bound to get an earful when we walk out this door.

He's already the biggest skeptic, fully ready to strap a tinfoil hat on my head.

Still, I don't give a damn how crazy it sounds. Conspiracy or not, the rotten reviews don't add up.

"I stay in our hotels all the time as a matter of habit. I've been watching the internal surveys like a hawk for months. There's nothing wrong with them," I insist, my eyes snapping to Miss Renee.

Her green eyes sparkle like gems as she looks right at me and smirks.

"You're sure, Mr. Winthrope? Because when I reviewed Winthrope Lanai, there was a pretty shocking mistake my first night there. I would have totally two-starred it if it wasn't for the resort manager's intense damage control." I think she enjoys hearing my teeth grind. "Of course, if I'd known from the get-go that he was *just* after damage control, I may have still two-starred, but the past is the past. Maybe you should work on your customer service in crisis situations? Make sure your managers are always upfront and *honest*."

She wipes that damnable smirk away and goes back to looking as innocent as a woman with curves like that can.

I look down and find I'm drumming my fingers on the table loudly.

Damn.

She's completely unraveled me in the middle of a meeting.

"I prefer tactical honesty. I could say you look like a green-eyed devil, but I think you'll prefer the term 'confident.'" Not my best retort, but it does the job.

Her face goes deep red.

I reach for the carafe across the table to refill my coffee cup, taking my sweet time while everyone else watches in baffled silence.

"Are you well, Miss Renee? You look like you had more to say and now you seem rather flushed." I lock eyes with her as I take a long sip of my peaberry brew.

The ambrosia in my cup makes this shit show bearable.

Her eyes narrow into slits so small I can barely see the green.

“I was going to bring that up with HR. It’s freezing in here,” she whispers, folding her arms dramatically. “There’s nothing *hot* about anything in this room at all.”

Mouthy brat.

A few people shift awkwardly in their seats as our verbal sparring match becomes impossible to hide. I hate that I can’t carry her out of this room right now and remind that mouth just how easily I can leave it in flames.

Keenan’s phone vibrates next to him and he looks at me.

“That’s our cue for the conference call with the furniture supplier. So I’m afraid we’ll have to pick up on the world review domination later.” Keenan stands and folds his laptop shut before I even nod a dismissal.

After I grab my computer, I follow him out of the room.

“We’ve got ten minutes before that call. Your office now,” Keenan says.

I rake him with a glance. “You realize I’m *your* boss, right?”

“Like you’d ever let me forget. Do you realize I just saved your ass?”

My lip curls. “I didn’t *ask* you to do that.”

“Uh, okay. If someone didn’t shut down that little staring contest, I think you would’ve dragged your dick right into a harassment case. So, you’re welcome.”

I step into my office and slam the door after Keenan trails in behind me.

“Also, for the record, it’s one thing to start spouting off conspiracy theories in private. But airing them in a meeting with senior staff and top marketers—”

“Bah!” I wave off his concerns with a flick of my hand, standing against the wall. “The meeting was productive until that little hellcat pulled out her claws—”

“Boss, I don’t know how to say this nicely. Everyone else was thinking what she said—especially with the reviews being some kind of sabotage. She just had the guts to tell you to your face. And what happened in Lanai anyway? Because that shit you just pulled was right out of a Julia Roberts movie.”

I’m not telling him how well I really got to know Piper Renee.

I’ll carry that shit to the grave.

He doesn’t need to know about my 'shocking mistake' either.

Hell, is “shocking” good or bad?

Interesting choice of words. That wasn't an idle slip of her tongue, knowing she's a seasoned marketer.

"Nothing happened. I don't know her that well," I lie.

"Right." Keenan rolls his eyes with his usual annoying ability to read me like an open book. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but... Bossman, you can't openly flirt with her—or anyone—in a meeting."

"Flirt? I have no intention," I snap.

He coughs into his hand. "You just did. Everyone saw it."

My forehead feels like it could cook an egg.

"...she started it," I grind out.

Keenan laughs—and then doubles over and laughs some more like the deranged hyena he is. "Man, get a *grip* before I have to make you take a sick day. If you give me premature grey hair, I *will* kill you, Brock Winthrope."

"Grandma always told me everything happens for a reason. Miss Renee dropped into my lap to help with our marketing, not my sex life." Goddamn, my throat feels like cotton.

"See, you're snarling again. For what it's worth, my grammy always told me club soda gets red wine out of white, but it's not always true. Way to change the subject," he tosses back.

"That green-eyed little—"

"There. Right there," he says, stabbing a finger at me. "Probably best you don't call her that. Unless you two know each other so well you're on insulting terms—"

"I don't know her!" I'm damn near shouting now.

"Yeah, not buying it. You suck at lying."

"Hardly the point. She's here to solve our reputation problem, Keenan. I need her suggestions, even if she continues to make a game of pissing me off."

"You know she never formally accepted the promotion, right? HR said the document remains unsigned."

"What?" I clip. "I brought her friend Miss Landers along for the ride, didn't I? What the hell is she waiting for?"

"Let's go easy on the teakettle impressions, okay? You are *steaming*. Anyhow, I'm not sure, but not growling out conspiracy theories like they're gospel might be helpful."

“You’re no help.” I turn my back on him and stomp to my desk. “Your opinion is noted, Mr. Dutton, since I’ve heard it a hundred times. I was raised to follow my gut, and I’m certain this is *not* a baseless conspiracy. We have corporate subterfuge on our hands, and I’m going to get to the bottom of it.”

“Good luck,” he mutters.

“Careful,” I snap, giving him a flaying look.

“Sorry. I can’t blame you for being stressed,” he says. “Still, I think you’d be wise to do your own investigation. Why air anything that’s unproven to our A-listers? It’s bad for morale.”

As much as I want him to be wrong, he isn’t.

I slump in my chair. “Fine, let’s take care of what we can control. Follow up with Miss Porcupine and see if she’ll accept the promotion.”

He nods. “And if she has any doubts? If she turns it down, do you want me to repost the position?”

No, goddammit.

I shake my head tensely.

I want Piper Renee working on my content almost as badly as I want to smother her insolent mouth.

*Purely business, I tell myself.*

*A few bouts of blue balls are a small price to pay around here for competence.*



AFTER FIVE I CALL KEENAN. “Has she accepted yet?”

“She hasn’t given me an answer.”

“Most of Marketing is still here. Let’s go.”

“Not necessarily. I told you I’ll take care of it.”

“Keenan, we’ve had twenty-four hours, and she hasn’t answered you. I need to be sure this isn’t another game,” I say.

“Hopefully, your charm goes over better than it did this morning,” he says with a stifled laugh.

“Just meet me at the damn elevator.”

When we arrive at her desk, I hesitate, drinking her in for a few heady seconds.

Miss Sunshine has her headphones on, this mess of blond curls and slender shoulders, laser focused on reviewing one of our YouTube ads. I stand behind her for the longest time before she notices I'm there.

"Miss Renee?" I finally say, standing over her shoulder.

She practically hits the ceiling, throwing her hands up. Her chair lurches backward so fast I'm afraid it'll topple over.

I throw a hand against the back of the chair to stabilize it. "Didn't mean to scare you. Look alive."

"No? So there's another reason to leer over me?" she says bitterly.

"I need you to accept the offer with HR. We're still waiting for an answer." I gesture to Keenan next to me, who's wearing that mask that says he's loving every miserable second of this.

She studies me suspiciously.

"Whatever. I accept. Just don't make me regret this."

"The only regret is if you don't start immediately," I say.

"You know, I stayed at this beautiful hotel on vacation once." She glances at the screen where the Lanai resort slowly pans out, her voice loaded like she's baiting me to ask.

"And?"

"And you could learn a lot from the manager there. He seemed to actually care about people and their regrets. I wonder if it was an act, though. Everything else he did was."

"Not all of it," I whisper.

Fuck.

Why do I even bother?

She thinks I'm walking around on hooves with little horns, so odds aren't great she'll believe me.

Still, she smiles. "I'm sure you wouldn't know. You weren't there."

I cock my head.

Why is she toying with me again?

I just need her to solve the reputation problem, not lecture me on morals.

"Give me one minute," I say, walking off and waving at Keenan to follow.



“That was easier than I thought. You should be happy,” he says.

“Let’s collect Miss Landers now, and we’ll get them set up in their new office.” I look at Piper from a distance, hating how easy it is to picture her gold-kissed hair in my fist.

Once we’ve got Jenn Landers trailing behind us nervously, we circle back to Miss Renee’s desk and head to the elevator together.

I can hear them whispering back and forth, chattering excitedly about their upgraded workspace.

“So we’ll have a window?” Piper asks.

“I can’t give you an office without one. That’s against the fire code,” I say bluntly.

“So, we have a view? An awesome view?”

“It’s not quite the best on that floor, but it’s still lovely,” Keenan says.

“Score!” Piper beams.

My heart pounds like a war drum.

Damn her and that adorable chipmunk smile.

For a second, Miss Renee the pain-in-the-ass employee melts away and I’m just looking at the carefree pixie I captured in Lanai again.

But I’m not allowed to catch her ever again.

That shouldn’t be such a sucker punch.

We get the girls situated in their new shared office and I leave Keenan to it.

I’d love to stay and watch Miss Sunshine spin around in awe, but there’s too much shit to go over—and that girl’s presence is a fucking blow to the face anytime I’m near her.

The way her black dress hugs her body and dips into her cleavage still burns into my mind as I walk away.

I’d have the dress code changed for the executive floor, but this woman could make a trash bag erotic.

I wonder what the hell I’m getting into by moving her just a short walk away.



BY THE TIME I return to my office, I find my mail waiting on my desk.

A few old-school hard copy contracts from various properties with new conference bookings, and right on top is *Forbes* magazine with a human ass on the cover.

Apollo fucking Finch.

Yes, his name rivals his world-class greed.

And his Oasis Springs resort has a glowing write-up on page twelve that I don't care to read.

Isn't he lucky?

Nah. Luck has nothing to do with that jackass winding up with a major fluff piece from his media ass-kissers.

He got where he is by stabbing enough backs to make Saddam Hussein squeamish, and he's managed to turn himself into my biggest damn rival in spite of having no talent, no originality, and no class.

His so-called luxury resorts aren't even well maintained.

I chuck the mag straight in the trash.

Then I pick up my phone and text Keenan. ***Cancel my Forbes subscription.***

He responds immediately. ***Should I ask?***

***Brock: No. Just do it.***

My computer alerts me to an email before I've finished typing the damn text. The second I see the name Piper Renee, I know I won't like it.

I open it with a sigh and read.

*DEAR WINTHROPE LANAI MANAGER,*

*MY COLLEAGUE and I are happy to begin work on your special new team that currently has two members. There's just one snag.*

I STOP. What the hell does she mean? Keenan was supposed to have them both sign contracts and nondisclosure agreements. There better not be a damn *snag*.

*KINDLY INFORM us what exactly you want us to do. You kind of missed that part.*

*Regards,*

*PIPER & Jenn (Mostly Piper. I just added her name as a courtesy. And she doesn't like you either.)*

FUCK. She's never going to let me live down that blunder in Lanai enough to stop busting my balls, huh?

This girl is something else.

She might have a bigger mouth over the keyboard than she does verbally.

I grab my tennis ball and squeeze the damn thing until it almost bursts before answering.

*PIPER & Jenn (Mostly Piper. I just added Jenn's name because I'm sure she hates me less than you.),*

*FIRST, I want your total honesty on all future projects. An easy ask when you've never had a problem running your mouth.*

*B.W.*

*Chief Executive Officer, Winthrop International*

I PUNCH send and minimize my email so I can read some revenue reports. Barely three minutes pass before my inbox pings. I open it, glowering at the screen.

*BW,*

*YOU WANT HONESTY? Manners would look good on you. Jenn still thinks you're going to show up in her nightmares with razors for fingers if she makes the slightest mistake.*

*Also, most companies provide free snacks in the break rooms these days. Morale might go up if you feed your people more and bark crap less.*

*THANKS,  
All Piper*

*WHAT THE HELL?*

*Now she's giving me facilities advice?*

*My fingers hit the keys so hard I cramp my thumb. I wince and shake my hand after the email goes out.*

*ALL PIPER,*

*PLEASE KEEP your honesty hyper-focused on advertisements and constructive solutions to our negative reviews. Internal staffing issues are outside your job description.*

*Now get to work.*

B.W.

*Chief Executive Officer, Winthrop International*

MORE REPORTS I read but barely comprehend.

More adrenaline the instant I see another email from her come in.

BIG WUSS,

OKAY.

*You know I'm thrilled to provide honest feedback on the ads and negative reviews.*

*However, I feel a biting need to inform you I'm not an ad critic. I'm also not even a real copywriter.*

*I'm actually not remotely qualified for anything you want me to do here. Neither is Jenn, probably, though she's way more qualified than me.*

*Rob seems like the guy you really need.*

*I still don't understand why you want us spearheading huge, sweeping changes to your marketing. Unless there's another reason that has something to do with me seeing you naked?*

THANKS,

*Annoyed Piper*

MY JAW TIGHTENS like a vise as I tap out a reply.

MISS SUNSHINE,

*YOU'RE the only person I've ever employed who knows I could make another billion dollars with my own X-rated calendar.*

*Thank you for picturing me naked again.*

*You're also the only person on the entire marketing team qualified for this assignment, and Miss Landers is qualified by association.*

*Your marketing education comes from experience rather than a classroom. You know how to get views and please people in a rapidly changing content environment.*

*You also had a conniption fit when I tried to promote you. You're okay with telling me things I don't want to hear and you're not afraid to stand up to me.*

*I need that kind of honesty covering my weak spots—even if you're exceptionally good at pissing me off.*

*THANKS,*

*Endowed Gentleman*

*IF SHE WANTS to keep bringing up that clusterfuck anti-meet-cute, so can I.*

*I wonder if it'll scare her off, but her response is immediate.*

*COCKSURE "GENTLEMAN,"*

*GENTLEMEN DON'T LIE, and the pissing off is mutual.*

*Are you done annoying me yet? I have a lot of work on my plate and my boss is a tyrant. He might dock my pay or send me a naked calendar if I don't get this done.*

*YUCK.*

*I also can't help wondering what kind of timeline he's looking at for turning things around. This is a lot for two people, you know. Even Rob pitching in won't expedite things much.*

*This old content pile is so big I wonder if these ads go back twenty years. Do they?*

*THANKS,  
Not Your Sunshine. Ever.*

*OH, hell.*

*I'm horribly tempted to track down the best boudoir photographer in Seattle and send her a calendar she can sneak into bed.*

*If only Keenan wouldn't have an aneurysm.*

*I settle for sending one last reply just to remind her who's in charge.*

*LITTLE LIAR,*

*JUST GET it done as fast as you can. Pinpoint what's relevant to our direction now and ignore anything made before 2012.*

*I'll check in with you soon to see what you've accomplished.*

*And go home at a sensible hour. There's no point in losing sleep over this so soon.*

*THANKS,  
B.W.*

*PS YOUR SEVEN-YEAR-OLD reaction to my calendar idea tells me how much you want it. Go YUCK yourself.*

ENOUGH OF THIS FUCKERY.

I'm going home early today because I have to get the hell out of here. Precious distance so I can get her out of my head. I log out and shut down my computer.

My phone lights up with a text from her.

No greeting. No closing.

Just, ***you're so yucking full of yourself.***

I don't respond with all the ways I could fill her.

Something tells me that will just expedite our descent into hell.

When I walk out of the building, Fyo waits outside, parked on the curb and waiting like always.

I climb in the back seat, holding in a growl.

"Any news from Vanessa?" I ask.

"No. Nothing to worry about." Fyo chuckles and pulls onto the road. "Have I ever let you down?"

Hardly.

And for the faintest second, I wish my new star marketer were just a bearish Russian man with a taste for Versace shirts.

Life would be so much easier.



**NOTHING GOOD AFTER MIDNIGHT (PIPER)**

**K**ing Shameless left us a cloud folder from hell. It's more than two thousand documents deep and *still* loading as I sip my coffee a few days later.

"How are we going to get through this before we turn eighty?" Jenn asks.

The sinking pit in my stomach says we won't, but we'll try.

I need to earn my keep since this job is the first breathing space with Dad's bills in years. I skim through ten thirty-second videos, mostly Great Recession era offers begging people to snap up cheap rooms.

They're about as exciting as watching an ant crawl up a wall.

Only nine hundred and ninety more to go.

"Jenn, if it's obviously ancient, just watch the first five seconds. This crap is way too outdated to be useful."

"You want to do this ten at a time?" she asks.

"Do you know a better way?"

"No. I kind of took this job expecting to write copy or maybe do some light video editing... I never really expected to quality check a thousand ads for ideas to solve Winthrop's review problem."

The ads are short and mostly irrelevant, thank God. We manage to pick up the pace when we're over a hundred in.

By noon, we've made a tiny dent in the workload.

Jenn groans at an old ad featuring disgraced Hollywood starlet Evangeline Triton. “Oh my God, isn’t this the actress who went crazy on her hero son? What did we do to deserve this? *None* of this is remotely helpful.”

“Payback for Hawaii,” I mutter under my breath.

Although I’m not sure what I did there to piss him off.

Maybe it was sending him that big fat *Yuck* to his totally inappropriate offer of haunting me with naked photos.

Like we really need to make this more awkward.

Jenn glances at our office door to make sure it’s closed. “So, um...ignore me if this is too personal, but now that the truth is out... I can’t believe you kissed Brock Winthrope.”

I spin around in my seat.

She smiles shyly. “Was it good? I guess it must have been because when he was NIH, you wouldn’t shut up about it.”

“Jenn. *Shut up!*” I hiss.

“Right. I figured.” A wide grin covers her face as she turns away.

It’s just like being back in high school. I notice the way she’s moving in her chair, and it’s obvious she isn’t done.

She’s going to explode if she doesn’t say it.

“What’s eating you?” I say with a sigh. “Just spit it out.”

“...does he look even better in the shower than he looks in his suits?” She’s blushing when she looks at me again. “That’s the only thing people ever liked about Winthrope. On the man-o-meter from one to ten, he’s a twenty.”

Blood pumps under my face. “You’re asking about the CEO naked? I’m trying to keep things professional here.”

“Fine, fine, keep telling yourself that.” Her smile wilts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Girl, the way you called him out in that meeting—you were *daring* him not to flirt.”

*Was not!*

Wait. Did she think I was—oh.

“He was flirting?” I say, pretending to play dumb.

“Like you weren’t.” Jenn laughs. “I love you, Pippa, but you’re such a nerd sometimes.”

Maybe so, but that doesn't answer my question.

And if I have to ask again, I know I'm just inviting death by innuendo and memories of our naked boss.

"So will you answer my question? Is he as hot as he looks without clothes?"

"Jenn!"

"Oh, Pippa. We've been friends for ten years. You can tell me if he still seems as hot as you said back in Hawaii now that you know who he really is."

My face is melting.

I hate myself as I nod—only to humor her.

She laughs so hard her chair rolls across the floor.

I'm almost grateful for the tap on our door a split second before it pops open. That shuts her up.

Then I see who it is and my relief disappears.

Brock takes up the entire doorframe, tracing his eyes from me to Jenn and back to me again.

We both sit up straight and go quiet. I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"Are we actually working?" His eyes lance through me.

I throw him a dirty look. "Are you? Or did you just drop by to give us your impression of detention teacher?"

"Miss Renee, this assignment is *critical*," he snaps. "The faster you work through the slush pile, the sooner you'll be generating new ideas."

"I can think of things I'd rather work through." Jenn realizes what she blurted out too late and claps a hand over her mouth.

Brock's jaw clenches as he stares at me through flaming blue slitted eyes. He leans over me to look at my screen.

I hate how I stiffen down to my toes.

I hate that he smells so good.

My breath hitches at his proximity and every part of me vibrates.

He exhales slowly, his jaw clenched like he's refusing to smile. "Almost halfway there, I see. But if you two insist on laughing like schoolgirls, keep it down. I can hear you from my damn office."

"Got it. No fun. Is that it, Principal Buzzkill?" I glare at him.

"If either of you are hungry, I'm going to lunch with Keenan. You're welcome to tag along."

Oh, now he's trying to be nice?

Jenn stands and pushes her chair under her desk.

"We're not," I say quickly, ignoring my friend's scorned look.

"It's on the company's dime," Brock offers.

"That makes us even less hungry, Mr. Winthrop." I smile at him.  
"Enjoy *your* lunch."

He mutters something that sounds a lot like "insolent" under his breath, turning away from me.

"Could you leave now? We have a ton of work to do—"

"And your boss is an ogre?" he growls over his shoulder.

"You said it, not me, Shrek."

Shaking his head, he stomps out of our office, shutting the door behind him.

"Are you crazy!" Jenn shouts the second he's gone. "Pippa, why? I *know* you can hear my stomach growling from here. We've worked so much my eyes are crossing, and I'm starving."

"Calm down. We'll grab pizza so we can keep chugging along. I saved us a lot of awkward silences at some stuffy restaurant. You're welcome."

Her frown has zero gratitude.

"Pippa. We could have escaped for a walk and fresh air. Listen, the next time you go kissing some weirdo intruder, please make sure he doesn't have the power to turn us into bugs. This *sucks*."

"Oh, he's just waving his dick around. The lunch thing was a total flex."

"Pretty big flex. You've got the CEO mad enough to barge in micromanaging us," she points out, flicking her hair over her shoulder.

"It feels like he's looking for something, but I have no clue what. It would be a hell of a lot easier to find if he'd just tell us what he really wants."

"Here's a protip. When it comes to working with Brock Winthrop—he will never make things easy. *Never*. I promise. You should have let him buy us lunch. He owes us for this crap!"

"Hey, I need to keep it professional here. For reasons."

"What would be so damn unprofessional about lunch with the boss and his assistant?" She's quiet for a minute before a slow, catlike grin pulls at her lips.

I try not to shudder.

“You’re not over your little crush. That’s why you can’t stand having lunch with him,” she says matter-of-factly.

“You know you’re my best friend and I’d never tell you anything that isn’t true, right?” I say, staring her down.

“Yeah?”

“Okay. If you don’t shut up, I’m going to throw you down the hall. That’s not a threat. I used to put you to bed in college when you’d pass out in the break room.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sorr-y! I didn’t mean to hit a nerve, crankypants.”

“Liar.” I pick up the phone and call in a pizza order.

We keep working at the Everest-high pile of old ads until the front desk calls to say it’s been delivered.

“We need new copywriters.” I push my chair under my desk.

Jenn opens the door. “Why?”

“Because this stuff is mind-numbing. Ads need to be cute or funny or at least vaguely interesting to get attention these days.”

She nods. “Don’t be too harsh. People worked hard on that copy and it’s ten years out of date.”

“Maybe they need a workshop or something. Something to spice things up.”

We stop to eat lunch and make small talk about Maisy’s not-so-secret crushes and Jenn’s lovely grandma with her rustic inn on an island not far from here.

The day is almost over by the time we close out the last video, update our shared notes, and start moving on to the reviews from hell.

“Check this out. Here’s an interesting tidbit from Chicago,” I say, my eyes flicking over the words. “It calls the food ‘inedible cat vomit,’ but apparently the cuisine at the Winthrope Lanai wowed them.”

“Well, Chicago is a long way from Lanai,” Jenn says with a shrug. “Maybe the Chicago restaurant just sucks and the Lanai’s is awesome. Because, um, Hawaii.”

I frown.

She could be right.

Considering what happened to me, though, it’s safe to assume there could be some major glitches with all the resorts.

My office phone rings. “This is Piper.”

“Piper, it’s Keenan. Mr. Winthrop would like to see you in his office and he’s too much of a workaholic walrus to call you himself. Can you make it?”

“...sure,” I say after wincing. “Jenn too?”

“I believe he only requested you,” Keenan says quietly.

Oh, boy.

An image of Winthrop’s hot mouth tracing mine as he shoves me against his desk competes with the firing from hell where he’s roaring in my face and thrusting a box in my hands, ordering me to clean out my stuff and go.

“Do you know what it’s about?” I ask.

“I don’t. Sorry.”

“Okay. I’ll be there. Thanks.” I hang up the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Jenn asks.

“Winthrop wants to see me.”

“What now? Where does he find the time?” she huffs.

“Who knows, but I have a feeling it can’t be good.”

“Oh, relax. You’ll be fine. We didn’t do anything except hack through the jungle of blah he ordered us to.”

She’s right, even if that feels too easy.

I laugh. “Maybe he wants to cuss me out for having a spine.”

“Can you blame him?”

Yes.

He did lie about being a lowly resort manager.

I steel my spine, gather my courage, and march to Winthrop’s office without waiting for more sass from Jenn.

He’s just your average frowny man with an entire saguaro cactus up his butt.

Just a man with nine zeros in his bank account.

I can handle this.

I take a deep breath, ready to knock on his door, but he yells at me to come in like he has some sixth sense.

*Psychic bastard.*

Barely one step inside his office and I’m already rattled, but I keep moving.

“Report. I’d like your assessment of what you’ve seen today,” he clips.

Not even a hello.

Peachy.

And a report? Yikes.

I'm so not prepared.

"I don't have anything written down," I say flatly, refusing to show any fear.

His gaze sharpens.

"An oral report will suffice, Miss Renee. I trust a few hours of dusty ads haven't short-circuited your razor-sharp wits."

*You wish, asshat*, I think to myself.

"Well, we've gone through the videos, but we're just starting on the reviews. My assessment isn't much more flattering than yours—the old material sucks. It feels like it was made for retired guys who live on golf courses, and I can't imagine the vibe was much different in 2012 or whenever."

He stares at me, his face set like an unreadable stone.

My toes invert, curling against my feet because I can't hide the rest of me.

All the brave words in the world can't override Brock Winthrop's intimidation stare.

"I'm not trying to insult your marketers just for fun," I tell him. "And I'm not sure how to say this, but you told me my ability to say things you don't want to hear made me right for this gig, so I'm just going to go for it \_\_\_"

"That bad, huh?"

I pause, unsure how to soften the blow. The ads are stale cereal.

"They're too corporate. Too stiff. A hard sell a decade ago and impossible in this market," I say.

"Those ads brought my grandfather over a billion dollars a year," he bites off.

"But times change, don't they?" I ask gently. "They're too formal and disconnected. I looked you up, honestly, and I see how they talk about you online."

"How's that, Miss Renee?" His stare deepens.

Ugh. Like he doesn't know.

He's richer than Midas. Dangerously handsome. Skilled at his craft—supposedly—but everyone worships the brand name more than the man like he's just a continuation of his world-famous grandfather.

“You're basically Mr. Young Money, right? I'd guess that's what you're trying to attract. Young money after a luxury experience who travel a ton. The old ads aren't going to cut it. If they rolled across my screen back when I was doing content stuff, I'd keep on scrolling.”

“You're not doing your travel videos anymore?” He sounds surprised.

My face heats.

*Ignore it.*

There's no need to make things more personal, and it's none of his business anyhow.

“Like I was saying, we've just gotten to the negative stuff, but some of it, it's, well—” How do I say this? “Intense.”

“Tell me something I don't already know, Miss Renee. I've already concluded there are five hundred ways to call my resorts dogshit. When I figure out what the hell's going on, I'll sue the perpetrator into smoking ash.” He's so mad he's almost growling.

His piercing blue eyes become molten sapphire.

Scary hot, even if I hate that he's so upset.

“Are you alright? This seems like it's getting kinda personal,” I say.

His eyes soften. “This isn't your fault. Clearly. You weren't even on the radar when it started months ago. It's just very goddamned frustrating.”

Our eyes connect.

When I realize what's happening, I rock back slightly.

Oh, God. He's managed to get under my skin again.

I'm feeling actual *sympathy* for Brock damn Winthrope.

“Anyhow, I need you on a conference call with my Australian marketing head this evening,” he says slowly. “We need more cross-pollinating across regional divisions if we want fresh ideas. It's going to be a late night, so order food on the company card.”

Oh.

I rode with Jennifer today because my car kicked the bucket, and I also promised Maisy I'd stay with Dad tonight so she could go out with friends.

She's just a high school kid. She should get a social life at least a few times a week.



“About that. I’d love to, but—I rode with Jennifer.”

“I’ll have my driver take you home then. We can share a car.”

*Eep.*

My skin turns to needles as he exhales slowly.

“You hate that idea? Fine, I’ll take a damn Uber. Something tells me I’ll fare better in one than you anyhow, Miss High-Maintenance.”

A startled laugh falls out of me. “Hey, the gentleman is back! *Sort of.*”

He smirks, stands up, and moves closer.

“After your friend’s comment earlier today, I presume Miss Sunshine kisses and tells,” he rumbles. “That’s a naughty fucking girl.”

I never knew words could be so destructive.

I’m burning down.

Right here.

Mere inches away from those hateful lips with the terrible power to cut me into pieces, drench me in gasoline, and leave me a blazing pyre.

“Dude, I’m sorry. I thought you were some wonky manager in Hawaii I’d never see again when I told her. And the way I reacted when I saw you —” I shrug. “Of course, she knew. I told her to drop it because it was a one-time mishap and we work together now.”

For a second, his nostrils flare, like he’s smelling me and trying very hard not to sink his teeth into my flesh.

Then he jerks back, swiveling on those tall legs and putting more space between us as he pivots to the sweeping view of the city outside.

“Go order dinner, Miss Renee. I’ll see you tonight.”

“...what should I order? Are you eating too?” I ask in a whisper.

“Whatever the hell you want.”



I’M ABOUT TO SELF-COMBUST.

We’re sitting on a sleek leather couch in his office, so close our sides are touching.

It’s impossible not to notice how gigantic he is next to me.

Even sitting down, he towers over me, a wall of a man with mile-wide shoulders and a jaw so chiseled it could shame Hercules.

*Don't stare at him. Pippa, don't—*

Oh, but my eyes don't listen.

They wander over every inch of that button-down shirt wrapped around him so tight it almost looks painted on. His corded muscle is almost *obscene* when he's freed from his jacket. My glance flicks helplessly down to his lap with a terrible memory of what I saw in the shower.

Does it ever get awkward when he takes a woman home and he's just too big for them?

Would he be too much for me?

Would I even be able to close my hands around that ridiculous—

He whips his head toward me abruptly like he can read my thoughts.

I gasp, shrinking back in my seat.

"Feeling all right, Miss Renee?" he snaps.

"Yeah! I just—" I grab the water bottle at my side and pretend I've been drinking. "I'm fine."

*I'm anything but.*

It's a minor miracle I remember to breathe before he punches up the reason for this meeting on the laptop screen he's positioned on the table in front of us.

Michelle, Winthrop Australia's marketing director, comes through Zoom a minute later. I'm a little jealous at the wide, alluring grin she gives him with her platinum-blond model good looks.

I pry my mind off his unmentionables long enough to listen to her ad successes and struggles.

The meeting drags on for roughly half an hour. We've gone over some new marketing ideas, but the conversation always swings back to the reviews.

I'm beginning to think he's obsessed, and not in a healthy way.

*Is he just an egomaniac after all? Is criticism his kryptonite?*

"I've been reaching out to organic influencers like we discussed months ago with some success," Michelle says cheerfully. "The big ones kept turning me down, but then I found a lovely young lady from Brisbane with a middling following. She had an in with an entire group of shockingly powerful TravelTok people, and well, the results speak for themselves."

"They do. Your revenue growth leads the pack over our other branches for two quarters straight. That's a move in the right direction," Brock says

happily.

I'm annoyed with another pang of jealousy as she smiles at him like a golden lab who's just been thrown a bone.

"Is Winthrope Australia implementing the reward system Robert Clivewell proposed?" he asks.

"Oh, yes. We've started a lovely pilot program in Sydney. Robert recommended we review the data for a few months before extending it, and I tend to agree," she says.

He nods. "Good. That's everything I need to know then. Anything else?"

"No. I'll let you two go. I know it's rather late there." She waves at the screen. "Ta-ta for now."

We wave back to her, and I feel a hint of mounting dread, knowing I'm about to be alone with Winthrope, and this time with no distractions.

She exits the meeting first.

Brock closes the program and sets his laptop on the coffee table beside him, clasping his hands as he looks at me. "What did you think?"

God. I so don't want to answer that.

Everyone's working hard, but I still think we're missing the mark, helplessly picking at insights overseas that might not apply here.

"The ideas are fresh." I don't elaborate.

"And?" he clips.

"The midlist influencer thing seems smart, honestly. We can replicate that here pretty easily," I say, biting my inner cheek. "Although their in-house content leaves a lot to be desired. Their ads just don't capture any mystique, and you already know how I feel about the content here."

"Mystique?"

"Yeah. Like remember when we were in Lanai and we talked about what life would be like if we could be different people? Even for one night?"

"Like either of us could ever forget, Miss Renee," he says with a glance so sharp it hurts.

God.

Not what I was going for.

Not something he'll ever let me live down, either.

“My point is, that’s what makes a luxury hotel stay so inviting. You don’t have to be *you* while you’re there. You get to switch off, step outside your comfort zone, and experience another life. That’s the magic that makes people travel and it’s what makes a short video of a fancy place shine. Thirty seconds of glory to spark the imagination.”

“You want us to sell fantasy then,” he growls.

I rock back and blink.

*Huh? What’s he so upset about?*

He lowers his voice when he speaks again, a thick whisper now. “I won’t pull too many insights from something so personal. Strange things said on a strange trip to a strange woman I hate having to resist.”

My hand trembles.

My breath catches in my throat.

I have to force out air around the lump in my throat.

“You have to resist me?”

I shouldn’t ask, but I’m breathing too hard. No way he doesn’t notice.

“We work together, Miss Renee.” His whispers go from strained to vulnerable.

That throat boulder only grows larger, and my ragged breathing isn’t helped by the fact that he’s breathing harder too.

“But it’s a *struggle* to—to resist me?” My free hand shakes so hard the notepad I’m using starts slipping out of my grasp.

His hand brushes against my skirt as he catches it.

Our eyes lock.

His hand lingers on my thigh.

“You have no goddamned clue. The fact that you’re here in front of me, dangling like a piece of meat in front of a hungry lion...” He doesn’t finish that sentence as he jerks his face away.

He doesn’t need to.

I can’t pull my eyes off him, and honestly, I don’t want to.

I know how dangerous this is.

*Lion* really is the best analogy when this man could swallow me whole in so many ways, equally wonderful and devastating.

I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I hope it’s more than words, even as my brain protests.

Oh, but he’s leaning forward, his weight eclipsing me.

I close my eyes, tilting my chin up in anticipation, this fever overwhelming me.

I can't think.

I just feel as strong, searching arms wind around my back.

The next time I inhale, breathing him in, I open my eyes. Looks like I'm sandwiched between the back of the couch and Brock's huge chest.

His nostrils flare.

His eyes flash like gas flames.

Then his mouth falls on mine and I'm so flipping gone.

Deliciously wrecked.

The way he rasps against my tongue tastes that much sweeter because it's so reckless, so wrong, so taboo.

Every forbidden kiss I've dreamed about since Lanai happens in the span of a minute.

His tongue chases mine until I squirm.

He gives up another growl and I moan into his mouth.

"Fuck, Piper Renee. Do you have any clue?" he whispers, pulling away and pressing his hot forehead to mine.

"W-what?"

"All the shit you do to me. How many nights I couldn't sleep. How often I had to wake the fuck up and stroke myself off, thinking about the ways I didn't get to savage you in Hawaii. Do you know how many times I came in this hand?" He pauses, breathing flames against my lips, holding up his huge, clenched hand.

*Oh my God.*

"Woman, if you hadn't come back to me, I would have hunted you down," he whispers darkly.

I'm breathless.

I can't remember who or what I am until he breaks my trance with another feral kiss. This time, his teeth seize my bottom lip, pulling with enough excitement to bruise.

I don't care.

I want this sting.

I want him to demolish me as my hands twine through his sandy-dark hair, digging at his scalp just like I did when we kissed under a starry night sky.

No stars here except our own in this office, but God they're so bright.  
He clings to me tighter without breaking the kiss before he pulls away.  
I need a few seconds before I open my eyes and see—

No.

Not that.

Not yet.

*Please.*

The heavy, stricken look on his face scares me.

Like there's this gravity holding him back, telling him this is wrong, and he'd better stop before we both make a mistake we'll never take back.

I scratch at his hair, desperately trying to move him closer.

His lip curls faintly.

He likes that I'm dying for him.

"Brock," I whisper, sliding my foot up his leg as he dips his head again and storms my mouth.

Now, we're in the moment.

No longer beholden to anything except this searing lust.

No rules, no demands, just his greedy tongue tracing the shape of my mouth and moving in hot rushes. Then the sweep of his hands up my legs, pulling them apart, slipping down where he stops at my panties.

"Fucking shit," he rasps, almost choked. "I want to take this. I want this hot little pussy wrapped around every inch of me. I want to—"

His phone goes off as loudly as if someone just chucked an armed grenade into the room.

I jump back and slide toward the other end of the couch, fixing my clothes as he lurches up like it hurts him and stomps over to his desk.

I can't look away, though, and he's still holding my gaze as he snatches it up and then glares at the screen.

He makes no effort to answer.

Holy hell.

If there was ever a cue that it's time to go...

I really should.

Get out of here while I still can, but I'm breathing too hard to speak, much less stand.

He's still staring at his phone with a grimace. I don't know if it's something on the screen that's upsetting him or the fact that I'm still here.

Once I've refilled the air in my lungs, I say, "Brock—um, Mr. Winthrop—I should go." I turn my back, moving as briskly as I can without breaking into a full run. "I'll have more for you tomorrow! I mean—not more of this, but more work."

"You turn into a pumpkin at midnight or what?" he growls behind me.

"No. But you might turn into a bosshole when you come to your senses." I don't mean it. It's hard to even get the words out.

He snorts, but gives nothing back.

My legs are jelly.

I'm having a hard time walking as I head for the elevator.

What did he say earlier about leaving this late? Something about a driver?

But I'm still reeling and stupid after that kiss.

God, how was it *better* than the first time when I tumbled into his arms?

I'll just take an Uber home.

I need to get out of here ASAP.

But when I get off the elevator, there's a large older man with greying hair standing by the wall in a princely blue-and-gold shirt.

I should be a little freaked since everyone else supposedly left hours ago, but this guy looks like he's waiting for me in a place crawling with cameras and security monitors.

Plus, something about the grey hair reminds me of my dad.

"The boss said I'm to escort you home. Come," he says with a hint of a foreign accent I can't pin down. It sounds Eastern European.

"Oh, wait, you're his driver?"

He nods. "And from now on, yours. I pick you up and deliver you to and from work. I have strict instructions not to let you walk alone after dark."

*Whoa.*

I want to argue, but the stern look he gives me says the odds of letting me do anything else are zilch.

"Umm—you really don't have to walk me to the car." I shrug. "I mean, you're already here waiting, so that's fine for tonight. But in the future, it's hardly necessary—"

"Mr. Winthrop says I mustn't leave you alone in the dark. I walk you," he says, thumping his chest.

Oof.

“Uh, right. Is this area that unsafe or something? Is Winthrope afraid of the dark? Is *he* allowed to walk alone?”

“He’s bigger than you. And richer. And the boss.”

Dang.

Who am I to argue with Ivan Drago’s impeccable logic?

Mostly, I don’t bother because it’s late and I’m tired and still seeing my life flash before my eyes after that kiss.

It’s not worth fighting a free, easy ride home, so I follow him to the sleek black Range Rover SUV waiting outside.

“Fyodor, but you can call me Fyo.” He opens the door for me.

I hold out my hand.

He shakes it with a grip like a garlic press.

“I’m Piper. Piper Renee.”

“So I heard. He also says you’re sweeter than honeycomb, which is why you cannot be left alone.”

My jaw drops.

I have a hard time picturing Brock saying that. *Like ever.*

And after he made such a big deal of me mentioning what happened in Lanai to Jenn, he’s been talking about me to this mafioso dude?

Though maybe that’s why he seems to have no regrets about lying to me in Hawaii.

He didn’t expect me to be anything but helpless, too fragile to survive a twenty-minute trip across town after sunset.

If I wasn’t so drained and confused, I’d be offended.

As the vehicle pulls up my driveway the next time I look up, I say, “You don’t need to pick me up tomorrow. I’ll go to work with my friend, Jennifer. She’s on the same team.”

“I will come. If you don’t get in, that’s on you,” he says bluntly.

Great.

Once I’m walking into the quiet house, I realize I have a new text. I tap the screen with a sigh.

***Good night, Miss Piper Renee.***

Oh, Brock Winthrope.

If only you knew how much you make me wonder whether or not I’ll ever have a good night again.





## OUT OF SERVICE (BROCK)



**T**he breezy Hawaiian sky is black and the stars twinkle like shredded tinsel over the ocean.

*But all I can see, breathe, and taste is my Sunshine.*

*So warm.*

*So alive.*

*So full of soft whimpers and wanting moans and hot breaths made to tease.*

*Fuck, if I slide my hand up her dress, I know she'll be soaked and so ready.*

*And she is.*

*Her head tumbles back in a mess of blue-streaked blond curls, a sheen of sweat on her brow like a halo, her jade-green eyes narrowed and pleading don't stop.*

*Not this time.*

*My hand has the shakes as I grab my zipper, yank it down, and start to push between her legs, ready to devour every last bit of her and find out how she sounds when she—*

*A swell of deafening violins never lets me find out.*



MY GODDAMNED ALARM starts blaring like a dental drill to my skull.

I jerk up in a tangle of sweat-soaked sheets with a hard-on ready to hit a home run.

Growling, I rake a hand through my hair.

I know what this is.

The fucked-up stress of these shitty, slaughtering reviews.

I've never had a crush since high school.

I've never kissed a woman in my office, much less came two seconds away from having my fingers inside her while I was on the clock.

Apparently, she's put my brain through the shredder and she's barely been on payroll for a solid week.

Don't get me wrong.

I'm not a goddamned monk.

I've bedded my fair share of women like a bear scratching an itch. Quick, one-off flings, and nothing more.

That isn't what this feels like.

So what the hell is it? What's going on?

"You're going to self-sabotage, you buffalo-brained fuck," I mutter. "*Focus.*"

For less than an hour, I manage.

About the time it takes to stomp through the shower, rub out a bone-jarring orgasm that has me grinding my teeth, and stuff myself into a clean suit before Fyo shows up outside my place—with a beautiful sunny smile from hell waiting in the back of the vehicle.

"Here. Peace offering," she whispers, shoving a coffee cup into my hand. "I had Fyodor stop at Wired Cup. I hoped it'd make things less awkward and he said this was your favorite."

I nod a thanks, pretending to keep my eyes glued to my phone as I sip my double shot of espresso.

I'm grateful she doesn't make much small talk and takes the hint to leave me the fuck alone.

Nothing good can come from more chitchat unless it's focused on business.

After that dream, after beating off to her to keep my own sanity again, I don't trust myself around this office nymph.

Not even on the way to the office with my driver in the front and the privacy screen deliberately left down.

So I barely acknowledge her until we're pulling up to the main entrance of the tower with Winthrop International's global headquarters inside.

"Thank you for the pick-me-up," I say. "If you hoped to bribe me into a better mood today, it's working."

For a second, our eyes connect.

Damn her, why does she wear that bittersweet smile?

"Of course. You're welcome." She bounces with that adorable little pencil skirt flapping too.

I start chugging coffee so fast it burns my tongue and I swear.

Fyo looks up with concern. "Mr. Winthrop?"

"Nothing, nothing. Mind your business," I grumble, stabbing up the privacy screen even though I step out a second later.

Piper fucking Renee is going to dismember me without even laying a finger on me.

How the hell do I ever behave around her?

There's no way around having multiple encounters a day with her in outfits designed to drive a man to his blue-balled madness.

I'd love to shove her into a utility closet and rip that damn skirt off.

Fortunately, I forgot what a busy asshole I am until Keenan warns me how full my schedule really is.

I barely see Miss Sunshine in my office for several days, and more than once I stay seated when she comes to touch base on the review investigation.

Neither of us mention that blasphemous kiss. Our banter dwindles when I'm dismissing her in ten minutes.

Business as usual.

Everything a sensible man should do, ignoring how it leaves my blood molten and my heart drumming every time I watch her delectable ass sauntering away from me.

Fuck everything about this.

I shouldn't care.

It doesn't matter. We work together, and I am *not* blowing myself up for an office fling.

It's easy to keep insisting that's the case until we're due for another late-night conference call with Winthrop Europe's head based in Paris. I need her to join so she can soak up anything valuable.

I text her. ***Come to my office promptly.***

It takes her less than a minute to see it and start giving me hell.

***Piper: Most bosses ask. It wouldn't kill you to pretend I have a choice.***

***Brock: Most employees like me continuing to sign their checks. Come now.***

***Piper: God, you suck.***

I'm making a fist under the table before she even walks in a few minutes later with a notebook. "What's up?"

"There's a conference call tonight with our Paris lead, and I need you on it. It'll be a late night, so freshen up or catch a nap before the meeting if you need it."

Her face goes ashen.

I sigh, leaning back in my chair. "Miss Renee, if you're still worried about what happened last time, let me assure you I will be on my supremely *best* behavior."

Her eyes flash doubt, but the shock on her face lingers.

"It's not that, but I... I can't stay tonight. There's something going on. Something important." She shifts nervously. "I mean, maybe I can Zoom in from home? Would that work?"

*What's this?*

She's practically down on one knee begging, and begging isn't in this woman's makeup.

"If you can do it from home, why can't you do it here? We have access to everything you could need in the office, plus a chance to immediately assess any new ideas or feedback."

"I just—I can't, okay? Not tonight."

What's the big damned secret?

She can trust me.

I didn't kiss and tell last week, even if I suspect Fyo has his suspicions. The man has a sixth sense and sometimes I think he's Rasputin's bastard great grandson.

Is she really so afraid of me? Did I fuck up that much when I let my dick do the steering?

"I need to ask you something, Miss Renee."

"Sure." She beams that contagious smile.

“The attraction between us can’t be denied. Are you afraid to work late with me again because you think I can’t control myself?”

She shakes her head. “Absolutely not. It takes two to tango and I wasn’t completely passive when you...yeah. But tonight, I have family obligations. And just so we’re clear, you’re not remotely my type,” she adds.

Fuck.

I feel like I’m sitting here with a shot blown in my chest.

“First off, Piper Renee, we’ve had two scalding kisses that say very differently.”

I know I shouldn’t say it. Especially when she blushes and bites her cherry lip.

I wish like hell she was biting *mine*.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up. Sorry,” she whispers.

“Don’t be.”

“But—”

Enough of this bullshit.

Before I can slow down to think, I’m next to her, cupping her face.

She closes her eyes and sighs.

All hopes of resisting another bad decision fade with a rush of hot breath.

*Do something drastic, woman.*

*Slap me. Bite me.*

*Give me one good reason why I’m so fucking radioactive.*

Instead, her lips curve into a soft smile and she tilts her chin up. An open invitation.

I meet her mouth with a groan spilling out of me, pulling her arms around my chest.

We’re ravenous as I slam her against the closest wall, fumbling her legs around my waist. My hips crash against hers, pinning her down roughly as my mouth works, grinding her into willing submission.

Then I move us to the couch, settling her in my lap so I can kiss her thoroughly.

Her tongue traces my tongue, nice and slow and sweeter than molasses.

If these walls weren’t so thin, I think I’d already be jackhammering her on my desk.

Thank God for small favors.

Framing her face with my hand, I hold it still as I pull away. “Now tell me I’m not your type so we can stop this nonsense.”

“Gladly, you jackass.” She glares at me, all green-eyed fury.

“You like human donkeys. Noted.”

“No way!”

She slides off me but I grab her wrists, anchoring her next to me.

“And yet this keeps happening, liar,” I whisper, brushing my lips over hers again, refusing to melt into another kiss sure to turn my vision red.

She opens her mouth like she’s dying to say more, closes it, and opens it again. “Well, I’ve never kissed you *first*.”

I chuckle. “That’s your defense? I’m glad you’re not in Legal.”

“Better than yours. You’ve got the self-control of a kitten in a catnip field.”

“I never denied the attraction. I tried to do the adult thing and talk about it honestly,” I point out.

She shrinks back, batting her eyes at me.

“You call *this* talking? Also, don’t flatter yourself. You lied to me from the second we met about who you were.”

“Will you ever drop that?” I flare, anger mingling with the simmering lust.

“We’ll see. It’s a pretty big deal.”

“It’s not. I was simply trying to protect my reputation and Winthrope’s.”

“Yours, yeah. The company’s? Um, no. At dinner that night I gave you the perfect chance to come clean. You didn’t. You still lied,” she says, turning away from me.

“You can’t stay mad about that. You just want to so there’s one more reason to keep our distance. Tell me I’m wrong.” I’m growling again, this jagged edge in my voice.

She faces me again, her eyes heated. “Okay. So you might be a billionaire and about as friendly as a flaming cactus, but you do not tell me what I’m mad about, Winthrope.”

I stare at her.

“You’re still looking at my mouth.”

She jumps and inhales sharply. “Not anymore!”

“Nice while it lasted, huh? I prefer brunettes, historically, but you, Miss Sunshine, are a lethal blond exception.”

“Lethal?” she spits back.

Then she glares at me and kicks me square in the shin.

It’s so light I barely feel it.

“You’re too cute when you’re mad. I hate you,” I grind out.

“Oh, you have no idea what hate feels like, you shameless, overgrown —”

“Back to the important part.” I cut her off mid-insult. “I need you to stay tonight unless it’s truly life and death. Also, we’re going to Winthrop Chicago this weekend, so pack your bags.”

She turns pale.

“Tonight’s a stretch, but *this* weekend? Are you sure?”

What the hell is her deal?

She has no problem kissing me and chewing me out. Yet the second I mention a business trip away from home, it’s like I’ve handed down a prison sentence.

“I thought you enjoyed travel? What’s wrong with this weekend? You’re paid at the rate you are because nights and weekends may be necessary.”

She nods. “I understand that, it’s just—”

“Family issues again? The ones you won’t specify?” I’m annoyed and suspicious but I try not to sound bitter. “The company will pay for whatever you need, Miss Renee—babysitter, fruit basket, get-well-soon card. Whatever. I need you free to work, and I need you focused. If there’s anything you need to do your job better, the company will provide it.”

“Brock—Mr. Winthrop—you can’t help with this. Really,” she says harshly.

I raise a brow.

Somehow, she doesn’t know she’s talking to a man with near limitless resources and vast connections to corporate royalty.

I can help with damn near any normal problem imaginable, short of sending a rocket to the moon. And with a man who rhymes with tusk on speed dial, I can probably even manage that.

“Try me.”

“No, it’s—it’s nothing. It’s just a private family thing. Maybe ‘problem’ isn’t even the right word,” she says weakly.

I need to pull it out of her, whatever it is.



She hinted at some family pressure back in Hawaii, too. Wasn't that her reason for not being able to travel more?

"Tell me, Miss Renee. I can't help you if I don't know."

She shakes her head like it's solid stone. "I have to help someone. It isn't your problem."

"Sunshine—"

Shit.

I didn't mean to say that out loud.

"I need you to come to Chicago this weekend and I *will* move whole mountain ranges to make it happen. You just need to untie your tongue and tell me how."

Her cheeks redden as she looks away. "I'll think about it..."

Then she walks to my door and puts her hand on the knob.

"You'll be here for the meeting at eleven o'clock sharp, yes?" I ask.

She looks back at me and nods.

"And this weekend?"

"I'll try. I'll figure something out—"

"You could let me help."

"No. I don't want to go there. No offense. You're already paying me pretty fairly, so it wouldn't be right." She sighs. "And you're my boss."

Why do I have a feeling the words *not my boyfriend* are hanging in the air? Hell, I'm not even interested in changing that.

I just need her at this work event, preferably without defiling her.

"I'm well aware. And I'm not sure what you're trying to imply, but you can give it a rest."

"Don't," she snaps. "Can we not go there?"

I fold my arms and shrug.

With a deflated glance, she disappears out the door.

If she won't tell me, I'll just find out myself.

A dozen ways to pick apart her life rattle in my head, all of them unprofessional and possibly illegal.

Goddamn, what does she mean when she keeps saying family, though?

If she's hiding a husband or kids while she's kissing me and giving me hell for lying to her months ago, I'm going to go nuclear.

But if her trouble is anything else, I'll fix it, whether she damn well likes it or not.



*Knock-knock!*

“Come,” I call at the door.

It’s late when Fyo pushes into the office. “You wanted to see me?”

“Shut the door behind you and grab a seat.”

He does, falling into the seat across from me. He’s almost as bulky as I am, even if he’s over ten years older, and the chair sinks beneath his weight.

“You’ve been picking Miss Renee up and dropping her off?”

He nods. “On schedule. Occasionally, she has me stop to pick up Miss Landers.”

“So, she’s enjoying this.” I roll my eyes and scoff.

He shrugs.

“I get the feeling this is a novelty for her, sir. She wasn’t enjoying it at first, and she thought it was weird you wanted her to have an escort after dark.”

I shake my head.

“I would have done it for any woman. You know that.”

Fyo nods heavily.

What kind of fuckass does she think I am?

“Tell me this, have you ever noticed a man or kids at her house?” I ask carefully.

His big, broad shoulders shake as he bursts into rolling laughter.

“Fyo, that’s not a joke,” I growl. “What’s so damn funny?”

“Boss, please understand, you’re asking the wrong man.”

He’s not wrong. I should have asked her point-blank.

I twist in my seat, thinking about it quietly.

“No,” he says a minute later.

I’m so lost in my head I have no idea what he’s talking about. I raise an eyebrow.

He smiles coldly. “I’ve never seen a man or kids at the house. There is another girl, but she’s too young to interest you.”

“That’s not the point.” I wrinkle my nose and steeple my fingers. “Miss Renee keeps telling me she can’t do this or that when I ask. All because she

has some mysterious crisis but refuses to elaborate on what it is. I want to help her, but I have no idea how when I'm effectively blind."

"She's important to you," he says thoughtfully.

I sigh. No use in hiding it. "She's the best marketing mind in this building. I can't afford to have her distracted."

He smiles again. "You know I started business not long after I came to your country, yes?"

"I remember you mentioning it."

Where's he going with this?

"I had this amazing employee. She could fix any glitch in my dispatch system in a matter of minutes and always gave great customer service. Then some dickhead from a bigger limo company tried poaching her. I thought this *suka*—this bitch in his three-piece suit—was going to succeed one day. I knew I couldn't lose her."

"And? What did you do?"

"Followed him out of the building one night with a broken bottle and made sure he knew he wasn't welcome. That if I ever saw his ugly face again, I'd take him apart limb by limb—"

"That's hardcore."

Blunt, but effective. Though I still see his point.

Fyo nods. "Then I went back inside and told that woman I would *die* without her. And if she didn't marry me this instant, my death would be on her hands."

Holy shit.

It's my turn to laugh. "Fyo, no thanks. It's not like that at all with—"

"It is," he says sharply. "The way you look at her alone. You can't lie to me, boss."

I ignore his observation.

"Just out of curiosity, what did she do?" I ask.

"She slapped me in the face and told me to stop being a jealous psychopath. If I wanted to marry her, she said I needed to do better."

I grimace. "Sorry. How did you get over that?"

"Easy. I started taking her out for dinners, emptied my savings account, bought a big ring, and rented a carriage. I took her downtown and told her it shouldn't have taken some douchebag in a suit for me to get serious about her and that she was right. My first proposal was not worthy, but if she'd

give me a chance, I said I'd work like a dog every single day to make her happy."

Impressive.

I had no idea Fyo's relationship was this intense.

"Sounds like a romance movie," I say.

"She cried. She didn't think I loved her that much and all of this was a damn pissing contest to impress her. But then, she knew." He leans forward. "Boss, I know your situation is different. You can't go after women without everyone watching and reporters in your face or your grandparents giving you an interrogation. Still. Sometimes all you can do is be honest. Ask Miss Piper what you want to know."

"I tried several times," I tell him.

"Did you ask the *right* way? No, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

I scowl at his logic.

"I was hoping you could find out for me, even just by watching."

He chuckles and shakes his large head. "Sometimes you feel like a little brother, Mr. Winthrope. But some things I cannot do. Some things, you must do yourself."



IT'S about time for the meeting with Winthrope Paris when Piper sails in carrying two disposable Winthrope cups. She sets one on my desk and sits down on the couch with her coffee and her notepad.

"Another peace offering?" I ask, twirling the steaming cup in my fingers.

She nods.

Damn. She's not making this easy.

Then again, when the hell does Piper Renee ever make anything easy?

I move closer and sit beside her.

"I didn't mean to pry earlier. If I overstepped my bounds, I'm sorry."

"Forget it, no need to apologize. I'm the one with the complicated life." She won't look at me.

"I just thought I could help."

“But you don’t *have* to. You’re already taking a huge chance on me with the instant promotion and an assignment I’m clearly in over my head with, honestly.”

“I don’t believe that for a second, Miss Renee. Find your confidence and wear it,” I say sharply. “Also, you’re still ignoring the fact that I *want* to help you.”

“I know, and that’s not what I meant.” She sighs. “Can we just not talk about it, please? I came here for the meeting like you asked.”

She did.

And somehow, I think I’m beginning to understand.

“It’s important to take care of whatever it is on your own, isn’t it?”

When she doesn’t respond, I know I’m on target.

“A very smart woman once reminded me why honesty is important,” I say, my eyes assessing her.

“Funny. A very dumb man once told me he managed a gorgeous resort in Lanai. You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

“Will you always bring that up whenever you want to change the subject?”

“Possible but not plausible.”

“Liar,” I growl.

“Takes one to know one.”

There we go again, devolving into grade school quips. I hold my tongue and open my laptop.

“It’s time for our meeting,” I say, logging into Zoom and connecting with Antoine.

The meeting moves at a crawl.

Antoine is nothing short of painstakingly detailed, and with the advertising minutia and his thick accent, she has to ask him to repeat things multiple times to take notes.

It’s almost three a.m. before we’re done.

Thankfully, Winthrop Europe seems unaffected yet by the onslaught of horseshit reviews plaguing my American resorts.

Once the meeting ends, I decide to take another stab at smoothing things over with Piper.

“In the future, when you tell me you have private matters, I’ll be more understanding. The PR situation is getting worse by the day, and I need

your talent.”

“You’ll be more understanding?” she echoes.

I nod.

“And will you hold it against me?”

I scowl at her. “Never. However, if you ever decide you can trust me with your family problems, I’ll be happy to help.”

“Have you ever helped anyone else with a personal problem?” she asks cautiously.

“A few times,” I say, my mind flicking back to places I’d rather not tread.

“Oh. I guess that’s slightly better. I wondered if it was just me because we—never mind.”

“The well-being of my people has nothing to do with whether or not we’re on ill-advised kissing terms, Miss Renee. Also, we’re sharing a ride tonight.”

She finally smiles. “Oh, yeah? Why?”

“Because I’m fucking beat, and Fyo can drop me off after he drops you. You’ll have to put up with me for another half hour.”

“It’s your driver and you run the whole company. You should go home first.”

I shake my head. She’s only seen me picked up from the condo I own downtown.

“My main residence is a drive from Seattle, and you look more tired than me.”

She nods slowly and listens for once.

I stand, helping her up from the couch. “Let’s go.”

Her hand lingers in mine as we walk.

A minute after we’re in the SUV, she’s falling asleep.

I don’t wake her until Fyo stops in front of an A-frame house in a residential neighborhood.

It’s an older part of town, but it’s clean and well maintained. Though her house is the only one without a car in the driveway, and I don’t see any back-alley parking like some older homes around here.

Odd.

“Should I wake her?” Fyo asks quietly from the driver’s seat.

“Leave it to me.”

I slide out of the vehicle and gather Piper in my arms, ready to carry her inside.

Halfway to her doorstep, she stirs, grabbing at my shirt collar. “What? Wait. Put me down.”

“You’re exhausted and we’re almost there.”

“Yeah, thanks. I can walk five steps on my own,” she insists.

But when I set her down, we’re right in front of her door.

She gives me a longing glance over her shoulder before I walk back to the vehicle. I leave the window open once I’m in the back seat.

“Should we go?” Fyo asks.

“No, I want to make sure she’s inside before I leave.”

I watch her fish keys out of her purse and let herself in. I don’t exhale until I see the light switch on and her curved silhouette moving behind the curtains.

“Drive,” I say, punching the window up.

“I take it your talk went well?” Fyo asks with a snort.

I stare into the night without meeting his eyes in the mirror.

He nods. “Sorry, Mr. Winthrope.”





## MIND YOUR BEESWAX (PIPER)



The next day, I find Maisy crumpled in a nest of blankets like the kitten she is.

She cradles her phone with both hands, her thumbs flying across the screen as she texts with all her focus. Her tongue pokes out the corner of her mouth.

So adorable.

So innocent.

It's one of those rare moments where you can't forget she's still a kid at heart.

And she looks up from her screen and smiles, finally noticing me. "Pippy, what's shaking?"

God, this is hard.

I fiddle with the knob of her open door so I don't have to make eye contact.

"Big news. I have to go to Chicago for work this weekend."

"Chicago!" She bolts up, wide-eyed and beaming. "That's hella sweet. When? Are they paying for it? I hope you get me a job that pays for me to fly everywhere!"

I hold up a hand. "Not quite everywhere. It's just the Windy City, and yes, they're paying."

"Then why do you look like you have to go to a freaking funeral?" Her gaze sharpens.

Crud.

Now comes the hard part. I try not to grimace.

“I don’t think you heard me the first time. It’s *this* weekend.”

It takes a few seconds to sink in.

Then her face falls. “Oh. But the soccer game—”

I sigh out my soul.

“I know. I’m sorry.” I pause, her kicked puppy look killing me. “Actually, forget it. I’ll call Winthrop and tell him he’s covered with Jenn. I originally signed on as an entry-level employee without these travel demands. If he needs more, let him demote me. You’re not missing your game.”

“Pippa, you can’t!” She pulls her knees to her chest and hugs them. “I’ll stay here and watch Dad.”

“Not happening. Maisy, you’re growing up, but you should still get to be a kid sometimes.”

“I’m not a kid!” she throws back with teenage indignity. “I’m *seventeen*. Old enough to move out in a lot of places. Just go do your job—”

“But your game—”

She shrugs. “It’s no big deal. It’s not like I’m playing. Trina and I were just going to watch and ogle her, um, crush.”

I raise a brow.

That tone of voice says it definitely isn’t just Tina’s crush.

“I feel awful for cramping your dating life. You deserve a better one than I had at your age.”

“Oh, sis, it’s no big. I promise.” She holds up her fingers like she’s being sworn in.

Yeah, I’m not convinced.

And even if I was, a seventeen-year-old girl shouldn’t shoulder the emotional burden of taking on a disabled father alone. I still have a life—in theory, anyway, whenever Captain Grumpmuffin isn’t working me to death—even if I’m covering the finances.

*But you did your time. And took care of Maisy too.*

That’s not the point.

“It’s settled. I’m staying. Tell Trina you’re planning to have fun. It’s your weekend.”

“What’s going on?” Dad barks over my shoulder.

“Jeez!” I jump at his voice and then laugh nervously. “Don’t make me put a bell on you, Dad. Did that last hospital stint give you stealth powers?”

“I could’ve walked in with a chainsaw with the way you two were carrying on. Now, what’s got you so riled up?” His eyes search mine.

It’s so hard to hold his gaze.

No matter how much his health spirals, nothing dulls his brain. He’s the same sharp man who braved the literal sea to raise us for years, never taking a single ounce of crap from anyone.

“It’s nothing,” I lie. “Just boring girl stuff.”

He glances over me to Maisy. “What’s going on, Margaret?”

“Pippa’s trying to wiggle her way out of a free work trip to Chicago.”

My expression ices over as I glare at her.

“Pippa?” Dad urges.

I turn to face him.

“You’re finally making your videos again?” He grins widely.

“No, Dad, this is just work—my day job. We’re supposed to go to Chicago to suss out problems with some reviews. And I guess my boss wants to spend thousands feeding conspiracy theories.”

Dad chuckles. “So he’s your typical stuffy suit with an ego? Everyone gets crappy reviews. Why investigate? The Green Mermaid takes flak yet they’ve still got millions lining up to drink that swill they call coffee.”

I roll my eyes. Dad never misses his chance to rag on Seattle’s biggest national coffee chain.

I have no idea how to explain it’s not the same clientele and reviews matter way more with luxury brands.

“We know. You’re a Wired Cup man for life. You need your morning brew tasting half-burned to enjoy it,” I say.

“And damn proud of it,” he says with a nod. “Now why don’t you want to go to Chicago?”

Silence.

I don’t know how to answer without lying through my teeth.

“Piper, what’s wrong?” he asks again.

I’m flipping speechless.

I rack my brain for excuses but I don’t dredge up anything that sounds remotely believable.

I'm waiting for Maisy to jump in and save me—as sad as that is—but she makes no effort, turning her attention back to her phone.

“I see. You two are busy conspiring again about how to take care of me without making me feel as useless as a greyhound with two legs,” he grumbles.

“Dad, no!” I say.

Maisy looks up and shakes her head. “No way. Pippy just got boring since she took the nine-to-five.”

“Girls, I appreciate it, but I don't need you tied down making sure I get three square meals. I'm your dad. *I take care of you.*”

And he always has.

That's what makes this so hard when your father's as stubborn as he is kind.

It's why I can't let him down.

I wave my hand. “Oh, it's not that. I just don't like my boss that much. You were right about the ego part, and I don't want to be stuck in Chicago with him for a weekend.”

“Make her go, Dad,” Maisy says. “She hasn't been anywhere for months.” She meets my eyes. “Is Brock going to be glued to you the whole weekend?”

“Brock? Brock Winthrop? You're on a first-name basis with him?” Dad asks.

“Not exactly, but, um, yeah. He's the big boss.” I glare at Maisy to *shush* before looking back at Dad and smiling. “He's a really friendly guy. Everyone calls him Brock.”

Biggest lie ever, but I'm sure the only thing Dad knows from the news is that the Winthrops are filthy rich.

Dad nods. I'm not sure he believes me.

His eyes flick from me to Maisy and back to me slowly.

“You ladies need lives. I won't have you sacrificing when you've got the whole world in front of you.” He pauses and sighs. “I know. I know you want to take care of me, and I love you both for it. But I'm a grown-ass man. I can take care of myself, and when I can't, well, that's what the nurses are for. I'm not gonna be your ball and chain, and I won't be your excuse for skipping out on life neither.”

“Dad,” I whisper, reaching gently for his hand.

“No, Pippa. I fought hurricane winds in the Alaskan crab season to pay this house off when you were still in diapers. I can handle this damn annoying autoimmune crap—”

“But your muscles—”

“They still work, don’t they? Just not like they used to.” He forces a smile. “As long as I’m breathing and able to walk, I’ll take care of myself. I’ve got my prescriptions. I know what to do when I’m having an episode and need to go to the hospital. That’s why you set me up with the alert.” He reaches for the little emergency alert unit on his necklace and holds it up. “Go to Chicago, Piper. You wanna help me, then make me proud.”

*Ugh. Low blow.*

His stubborn ass knows I’ll do it, too.

Part of me wants to say, *fine, but Maisy has to go to the soccer game*, but I can’t. I don’t want Dad home alone.

After the better part of a minute where they’re both looking me over, I sigh and turn around.

“I guess I have to pack.”

I walk away, leaving Dad standing in Maisy’s room.

Then I start picking out clothes for Insta worthy photo ops, wishing grump-zilla knew half of what I do for him just to keep getting paid.



“PINCH ME, Pippa. Pinch me right freaking now.” Jenn downs her second cocktail in the lounge, grabbing my arm so fast I think she’ll tear it off. “A private jet! Are we dreaming?”

“Nope.”

Part of me wishes we were.

She takes a massive gulp of something pink that smells like grapefruit.

“Hol-y shit! That’s good.” She claps her hands together loudly.

I sip my Shirley Temple and stuff more toast into my mouth.

We’re not even on the plane yet and I’m already feeling queasy.

But I’ve learned the hard way that Brock Winthrop, travel, and alcohol are a recipe for misplaced kisses and fighting. No point in adding fuel to the fire.

“Why do you really think he’s so obsessed with these bad reviews? Is it deeper than money?” I ask.

“Who knows?” She hiccups loudly. “Who cares?”

“Okay, let’s slow down a little.” I grab her glass and pull it away from her. “But really, do you think he’s worried about his grandfather’s legacy? Is it just an ego thing?”

Who am I kidding?

We’re talking about Brock freaking Winthrope.

It’s *always* an ego thing.

“As far as I’m concerned, that’s his problem. We’re getting paid to sleuth our little hearts out and traveling like queens. Just smile and accept it.”

Sage drunken advice.

I nod.

“Oh, I do have a question,” she asks before raising a glass of water to her lips.

“Okay? And at least you’re staying hydrated.”

“What’s really going on when Lucifer invites you to his throne room for those late meetings with the people overseas? And why am I always exempt?”

She gives me a knowing look.

Ugh, if only she knew.

But telling her our psycho boss kisses me like I’m Aphrodite reincarnated wouldn’t be wise, especially when she’s inebriated and loud.

“Boring ad stuff. I sit there taking notes while he rakes people on other continents over the coals. Only, they seem a lot more capable than anyone here,” I say. That much is true.

“Ouch. Are you sure?”

“Unfortunately.”

“So he just has you playing secretary?” Jenn wrinkles her nose. “Why doesn’t he have me help? Surely, three heads are better, and I could take some pressure off you. You’d have an easier time at home...”

*Because he doesn’t want to shove his tongue down your throat, Jenn, I think glumly. And you’re smarter than me because you’d never let him.*

I shrug. “Well, I appreciate it, but maybe he doesn’t want both of us cramping his style. We both annoy him.”

“It’s just weird. We’re on the same little team he’s cobbled together and we’re salaried.”

I drain the rest of my glass, hating the bitter truth.

The man pays me in heart-thieving kisses.

He tortures me with the eternal temptation to let him do more.

Heat pulses under my cheeks, and I stifle a messy giggle.

Jenn looks at me. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Like hell. You’re all red. Now you have to tell me.”

I shake my head fiercely.

“Pippa—”

“There’s nothing to tell!”

“Clearly, it’s something. Let me guess—he hasn’t forgotten about your Hawaiian excursion?”

“Jenn, would you shut it? You’re so loud,” I hiss under my breath.

Her face drops like I’ve slapped her.

“Sorry. It’s just—the whole thing is awkward enough. I promise you it’s just business.”

I also promise I’m a terrible liar. Good thing she’s too buzzed to notice.

“It’s cool. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just teasing. But seriously, if Winthrop’s still making kissy faces—”

“Jenn, it’s fine. Don’t worry about me,” I cut in. “But I think we should go. It’s almost time to board the plane.”

We grab our carry-ons and follow the rest of the small Winthrop crew to the jet, waiting just outside the exit to the tarmac.

I’m surprised the plane is so lavish. Unlike most rich guys who probably use fancy jets to compensate for their micro-peens, he has nothing to worry about in that department.

This thing is a flying cabin of sleek ivory and gold. Every surface sparkles and it smells like ten new cars inside.

I’m about to pinch Jenn and myself just to make sure we’re not dreaming when we find our seats.

We’ve barely started rolling toward the runway when Brock appears in front of us.

My eyes almost pop out of my head.

Stupid man and his stupid sexy outfits.

Stupid black vest hugging his massive chest.

Stupid scowl that roils my blood.

Stupid glacial stare.

“Come sit with me, Miss Renee. There’s a lot we can review over three hours,” he says.

For a second, I glower, but then stand reluctantly.

“Bring your laptop,” he says over his shoulder, already plodding back to his seat.

I grab my messenger bag.

Jenn grins at me and waves.

“Have fun in detention!” She winks.

I don’t bother replying.

I just follow him to the plush chairs closest to the front and sit down beside him.

“Don’t tell me you’re drunk too?” he growls as soon as I’m in my seat.

“Would you let me nap if I was?”

The grim look on his face says *hell no*.

“I figured you needed one of us sober. She’s not a big drinker, normally. She just got a little carried away by the free cocktails.” Then I remember he’s our boss. I shut up. “Don’t worry about Jenn. She’ll be fine by the time we land. She’s kind of a nervous flier—”

“You worry too much. I’m not half the tyrant everyone says, and I only expect *you* to work on this flight. Not Miss Landers.”

Oh, peachy keen.

“How generous,” I spit back. “What are we reviewing, anyway?”

“I’ve forwarded you all the negative publicity for the Winthrope Chicago. It’s a new hotel, barely three years old, and impeccably designed. None of it makes any damn sense unless we’re being ratfucked.”

Here we go.

More conspiracies.

I should have brought my tinfoil hat to block the radio signals the reviewers are beaming directly into his head.

I open my laptop and start reading what he’s sent.

Another dismal review calling the restaurant slow and disgusting.

A supposed case of food poisoning from an order of duck eggs.

A review whining about 'shabby' towels with three loose threads.



*The horror!*

So maybe he has a few reasons to be annoyed, even if everything except the towel review seems sadly plausible after the mix-up in Lanai.

“Thoughts?” he asks about twenty minutes later.

“Well, hear me out,” I say, meeting his eyes. “What if this amazing hotel just isn’t as great as it’s supposed to be?”

“Excuse me?”

This is obviously a sore spot for him. I read up on the planning and expense that went into developing this place.

I make my voice as gentle as possible. “I’m sure the building itself is gorgeous. But is it possible there’s a problem with management? Maybe you just need to retrain some staff?”

“This was my grandfather’s goodbye project. He made sure everything was unimpeachable, including the staff, because he thought it might be his life’s capstone.” He drums his fingers on the armrest like a big cat slapping its tail in irritation. “Believe me, Miss Renee, he spared no detail. Yet somehow, the menu developed by world-renowned celebrity chefs is apparently causing food poisoning. The facilities are a Beatrice Nightingale Brandt design. Yes, the famous architect. My grandparents wouldn’t have put A-list ads in every high-profile magazine in North America and Europe if they thought there was a chance anything about this hotel might be less than breathtaking. I’m a hundred percent sure of it.”

I don’t know what to say.

He’s vibrating pure rage like a confused beast with its paw caught in a trap.

Humans still make mistakes, I want to point out, no matter how good they are. But he’s already seething, defensive, and grumpier than ever, and it’s not even lunchtime yet.

“I’m sure it’s a masterpiece. Look, I’ve never seen a Winthrop resort that didn’t look fabulous, but if we do find real kinks in the armor, you’d be willing to work them out, right?”

He studies my face so intently I almost squirm in my seat.

“Of course. You really think there’s something wrong with the hotel?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been. I just think if you’re not willing to consider all possibilities and you get caught up in this, um...cloak and

dagger stuff, it could be hard to steer the reviews back on track. At least with factors you *can* control.”

I’m surprised he nods, stroking his chin like he’s actually listening.

“I don’t think these disasters are real. The head manager oversaw our Times Square property for more than a decade before coming to Chicago. He was selected because that property had rock-solid ratings and led the whole Winthrop pack for years. It was a well-oiled machine, easy to leave in new hands, and my grandparents believed he could bring the same magic to Chicago. Still, on the off chance we find a genuine problem, I’ll handle it.” He goes quiet, but doesn’t close his mouth.

“But?”

“I don’t think it’s likely, Miss Renee. I know you’d have me committed if it was up to you for going on this quest—you and Keenan both—but I’m certain these shitty reviews aren’t natural. That’s why we’re going there personally to find out.”

His eyes skim over me. I shiver.

Honestly, I hope we find something for his sake.

He’s slowly driving himself crazy over this.

“Another thing,” he bites off.

“Yes?”

“You never sent me whatever it was your family needed,” he says sternly.

I laugh. “Oh, no. Not this again. I told you I wouldn’t.”

“You did, and your modesty is admirable and annoying. Let me help,” he rumbles.

It’s shocking how easily we slip into another staring contest.

But my eyes don’t waver as I say, “Seriously, don’t. It’s none of your business. I don’t need my boss charging to the rescue every time my father —”

Oops.

I almost bite my tongue off.

He cocks his head, his eyes softening.

“I need you focused, Miss Renee. So, yes, I’m happy to take care of whatever it is you—or your father—need.” His gaze drops to my lips. “Just think about it.”

Oh, boy.

I can't believe I'm living every forced proximity rom-com fantasy.  
I grip the armrest.

His gaze is magnetic, impossible to glance away from. He looks at my mouth like he could devour it right here.

My toes curl at the thought. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

*Not here, Brock.*

*Not on the plane in front of everyone.*

*Because if you kiss me again, you know I won't stop you and I'll enjoy it so much it'll ruin us both.*

I swing my head around to look away—breaking our connection just in time.

Thankfully, the flight attendant who stops by helps.

He sinks in his seat after ordering a coffee while the woman asks if I want anything. I take an ice-cold soda.

Anything bubbly and caffeinated to save me from the unholy temptation beside me.

An hour and two sodas later, the gaping silence is just as awkward as having his intense stare fixed on my lips.

“So, did you spend a lot of time with your grandparents growing up?” I have no idea why I ask, looking up from my laptop.

It seems like a safe subject and I need to break up the monotony.

“They practically raised me.” He glances at me slowly. “Why?”

“You're just...very protective of the work they left behind. It's kind of cute, honestly.” I smile, deciding to test my limits. “What about your parents? Were they part of the Winthrop empire too?”

“I've always gotten along with my grandparents better than my folks. The hotel business wasn't for them—or business of any kind that didn't involve fluff speeches at auctions for wildlife preservation or gambling. In my circles, the workaholic gene skips a generation.”

Dang.

I didn't expect him to be so open. It's actually a little refreshing to hear that his parents were just unambitious and not responsible for some tragic backstory.

But why does he have such a heaping chip on his shoulder then?

“Were you always next in line?” I venture.

“No. I was still in the Air Force when my grandfather approached me about it. I sensed he was about to pull strings to end my duties early. I was flying missions in Syria and Iraq, and my grandma was freaking out. I asked him to let me finish my contract and we could go from there—” He studies my face and snorts. “What? You’re looking at me like I’m mad.”

“I’ve never met someone who *wanted* to go to war.”

“I owed it to my men. We trained together. Wouldn’t be right to let them risk their asses while I slinked off to board meetings. Money buys virtually anything, Miss Renee, but I’ve never let it lure me into an easy life.”

“Wow,” I mouth slowly. “So, under the egomaniac, there’s actually a guy who isn’t a colossal dick.”

“Don’t tell anyone. I don’t need you ruining my reputation—or implying I’m anything less than a centaur below the belt.”

I don’t know whether to blush or burst out laughing, so I do both.

“Did you like it, though?”

He blinks at me. “Like what?”

“The military?”

“The discipline was useful. If Gramps hadn’t asked me to come back and start working with him, I would have stayed for another term. At first, I was going to stay anyhow, but then—” He pauses, his face falling like he’s pushing away a memory. “He reminded me he couldn’t live forever and needed to train someone to take the helm. I couldn’t turn him down. It was almost like my birthright to preserve his legacy.”

“You being in the military makes sense. No wonder you’re such a hardass—”

“Careful. Most people don’t call their boss an ass of any kind to his face.”

And most people’s bosses probably haven’t kissed them so hard they were left winded, but I don’t dare say it and pump him up more.

“Anyhow, USAF training definitely helped me shore this business up.”

I smile. “Seems like Winthrop International was a rave success before you were born. I’m not sure you can take credit for that.”

“I know, which is why I won’t be responsible for fucking it up.”

“Mr. Winthrop, you can’t blame yourself for the negative reviews, wherever they’re coming from.”

“Who else would I blame? I’m the leader, last I checked. And it’s happening too frequently now. Only a jackass would blame some lower-level employee.”

This man was stark naked when I met him and still knew he was in total control. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand his thinking.

“We’ll figure this out,” I say.

“We’d better. Keep up the confidence, Miss Renee. It’s a good look on you.”

I try not to blush again. “Yeah. But you have to keep an open mind, and if we need to take a look at honest changes—”

“We will.” He’s cool and confident again. “Enough about my family and my problems, though. Now we have to talk about yours. What’s troubling you and your father?”

My lips pull into a line.

“Come on, Miss Renee. Humor me, damn you,” he whispers, leaning so close to my ear his breath feels like a campfire. “You’re not secretly married, are you?”

“What? No!” My mouth falls in horror. “And even if I was, does it matter?”

His jaw clenches. “You know it does.”

“Why?”

“Technically, your involvement with any man isn’t my business.”

“Technically, you hate it every time I use that phrase—”

He ignores me. “I’d just wonder why you had to hide the loser.” He’s quiet for a minute before he brushes his lips against my neck and says, “And I’d also wonder why the hell you let me touch you, and how much better I am at it than him.”

*Oh. My. Gawd.*

My cheeks go up in flames.

If he wants more than this conflicted office relationship, he should just say so. Two can play at this game. I tilt my head so my lips are against his ear.

“Y-you don’t need to worry about that. I’ve only ever had to hide kissing *one* loser.”

“Who?” His eyes glow with a jealous glint.

I stare at him smugly until he figures it out.

“Oh. Right. If you had to hide it, I hope you at least enjoyed it.”

“Eh. I mostly just kept wondering when it would end.”

“*Liar brat.*” He scratches his stubble, hiding what looks like a wince.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Tell me what I did to deserve you being sent to torment me.”

I smile at him and look away.

A sigh rolls out of him. “If you’re not hiding a man, then what the hell is this problem you’ve sewed your lips shut over? Tell me.”

“You’re growling again.” I lean my head against the back of the seat and look straight ahead.

“Miss Renee—”

“Try Piper before you get so personal,” I throw back.

“And you could stop playing games with me, Pied Piper.”

I steel myself, ignoring the hot chill slashing up my spine.

“And you could just respect the simple fact I keep telling you—it’s none of your business, *boss.*”



## PRINCE OF HOTEL DARKNESS (BROCK)



Once I've had time to settle in without breaking something over the shit she put me through on that plane, I text Piper.

***Come to my room and bring your friend.***

***Piper: How about I just send her?***

***Brock: What? More trouble you won't tell me about?***

That wins me a red-faced angry emoji.

***Brock: Will you ever trust me, Miss Renee?***

I watch the dots swirling several times as she types out a reply and stops. Then silence.

Enough of this crap.

***Brock: Ten minutes.***

I'm almost looking forward to more snark, but it doesn't come. *Too bad.*

Less than ten minutes later, there's a light knock at my door.

Piper walks in first with Jennifer Landers right behind her.

"We're here, your highness. What's your command?" Piper sits on the edge of my bed, crossing her legs. The last of the blue has faded from her hair, or maybe she's brushed new gold highlights into it. Her green dress matches her eyes, alive with what looks like hummingbirds all over it.

Damn.

Did she have to give my cock a new appreciation for feathers?

I've had fever dreams about having this woman in my bed, preferably naked and alone with her legs open and her hot little pussy waiting.

I could send her to the goddamned birds.



I could make her *soar*.

Turning, I subtly tug on my belt, hiding the hard-on behind my pants.

Her friend grabs the chair across the room and sits quietly.

“It’s nice feeling needed. I’m glad you brought both of us along this time, boss,” Landers says. “Lay it on us.”

I lift a brow.

“Can you both keep a secret?”

They stare at me, look at each other, and then slowly nod.

I hope like hell I can trust their mouths.

“You two are my secret weapon,” I say. “Everyone else on this trip has stayed at this hotel before. If I used them to gather information, they could be spotted by any bad actors working from the inside.”

“Okay?” Piper brushes her hand through her gold hair.

“You two haven’t ever stepped foot in this place.” At least not that I know of. I look at Piper. “Have you? No Chicago misadventures I’m not aware of?”

She shakes her head. “No. The only Winthrop property I’ve ever been to is Lanai.”

“Excellent.” I glance over at Miss Landers for good measure. “This your first time too?”

She nods.

“Alright. I need you two posing as ordinary guests. I’ve paid for your rooms with a card that’s not in my name or the company’s. I don’t want anyone knowing you’re affiliated with me or Winthrop. We’re going to find out what our guests are truly experiencing here, without any unseen saboteurs noticing.”

The women share a suspicious look before they turn to me again.

“I mean, having secret meetings in your hotel room will definitely keep anyone from noticing we’re together,” Piper says.

I roll my eyes. “We’re on a private floor, Miss Renee.”

“And there’s no security camera between the elevator and your room?”

Fuck.

Why does she have to think of everything?

I sigh. “You may need a new disguise tomorrow. Can you dye your hair black?”

She grimaces, darting me a dirty look when she realizes I’m joking.

“Whatever. We’ve got this, one way or another.”

“I’d like it if you could find out whatever you can about the negative reviews. I’ll keep an open mind to real problems. If there are holes in our services, you’re far more likely to find them than me or anyone else in my senior circle.”

“Right,” she whispers.

“We’re on it, Mr. Winthrop!” Jennifer chimes in.

“Anything else?” Piper asks.

I shake my head. “I’ve got another engagement across town this evening. I’ll leave you two to plan out your spy games.”

I see the girls out and head downstairs where the driver I’ve hired from Fluff Rides waits. Ridiculous name aside, it’s supposedly the best in this city. The company was started by Nick Brandt’s wife, once a driver herself.

“Where to?” he asks.

“Oasis Springs.” Those words taste like mud.

It’s barely ten minutes across town. Still too long.

My blood boils a few degrees hotter on the ride over.

The car stops in front of a tall, older hotel that proclaims itself historic on every welcome sign, but this place is no Palmer House.

How the fuck are the same people who keep review bombing my hotel reviews praising *this*?

It’s nothing special.

Hell, I never expected anything owned by Apollo Finch to be glamorous—no matter how much he pays media jackals to kiss his ass—but my grandparents put time and love and brains into Winthrop Chicago.

When I saw Oasis Springs had a higher rating than we do now—north of four stars—I had to see it for myself.

I wish I fucking hadn’t.

It’s tired, a frozen snapshot of hotel glamor from the early 1990s.

Even the outside looks dusty, old, and dark.

This place hasn’t been remodeled or updated or probably deep cleaned in years.

Whatever. I stomp through the lobby into the dimly lit bar and order a shot of straight vodka.

“Comin’ right up,” the bartender says.

Even the marble counter doesn’t have a shine.

Yeah, no.

This shabby hotel beating my ass to a pulp doesn't add up.

It's not just the glaring fact that they magically have better reviews.

The industry award conference will be coming up soon, and Finch is flogging this horse into the running.

Winthrop won the last fourteen years in a row. If I don't claw back our reputation soon, we're not making it to fifteen.

I can't let that happen, much less lose to a clown like Apollo Finch. The last time he was nipping at our heels, his life spun out. Everyone heard about his messy divorce, the abuse allegations, the stint in rehab he had for months after Gramps stole the trophy he was expecting that year.

Another reminder my grandparents left me in good hands.

What the hell will they think if we fall on our face the instant their coattails wear off?

A shot glass slides in front of me from the other end of the bar.

*Finally.*

I toss it down and order a brandy, the same drink I had with Piper in Lanai.

If only this trip was just another carefree adventure with her. Not this glorified spy game that's got me chasing my own tail.

In another life, I'd get to the bottom of her problems. I'd run them the fuck away, no matter how difficult.

Then I'd give her so much more than a bittersweet kiss and a sky lit with cold stars.

This time, I'd damn well finish the job in my room, even at the risk of making our lives a hellscape.

*Idiot. She's not why you're here,* a voice reminds me.

I drink my brandy and order one more to banish my wishful thinking.

That voice in my head is right.

I wish like hell I could listen long enough to keep my mouth off hers.

"Something on your mind, pal?" The bartender must notice the thunderhead hanging over me. "Hey, hold up. You look familiar. Don't you own the Winthrop hotels? I watch the business shows."

Shit.

So much for spy games.

I should have kept a lower profile, but the guy seems decent enough.

No point in lying.

“Yeah, that’s me. Just came here for a little peace without my own people falling all over me. I can always sense the stress rolling off them when they realize who I am. Here’s an extra tip if you help me find it—and keep quiet.” I pull a crisp hundred from my wallet and slide it over.

He grins like I just passed him a winning lotto ticket.

“You want another brandy? On the house.”

“Sure.”

“That stool draws success like a magnet, you know,” he says as he slides the glass back in front of me.

I look up at him, waiting.

“It’s Mr. Finch’s favorite seat every time he’s in town too.”

Aw, shit.

I don’t want to share anything with Finch, not even a fucking barstool.

My phone pings and I fish it out of my pocket. One new text from Piper.

***Where are you? We need to talk. Like now.***

I down the drink, letting its warmth blanket my brain before I type,  
***Back soon. What’s up?***

***Piper: The restaurant downstairs doesn’t sell duck eggs. No restaurant on the property does.***

Maybe it’s the brandy, but I’m lost.

***Brock: Okay?***

***Piper: A reviewer claimed they got food poisoning from the eggs, but that’s never been on the menu. Not once.***

I frown at the screen.

That’s something, all right, even if it’s proof we’re being fucked over.

***Good work. I’m heading back now. We’ll talk when I get there.***



I STAND on my private balcony overlooking Lake Michigan.

A few lazy yachts slip through the summer night, their lights twinkling in the descending darkness like my own ghostly thoughts.

The best view of the lake in this city is a nice backdrop for meditation—even if it’s not getting me anywhere tonight.

A gentle rapping echoes through my room.

I turn toward the glass door. My blood flares a hundred degrees hotter when I see she's changed into this sleek onyx-black dress, elegant and still cut too low where it counts.

And *anywhere* is too low on this woman, considering a single inch of her skin turns me into a drooling beast.

Then I notice Miss Landers standing behind Piper, and my lust deflates. I gave them both cards to get in, but if I had my way, only one of them would be surprising me now.

I cross over to the door and slide it open.

"Duck eggs," I say as soon as they're outside. "Tell me everything."

"It's not just the eggs," Piper says.

That grabs my attention.

"There's more?"

"Yep. You remember that review I mentioned where someone whined about threadbare towels? They had pictures, all ivory towels without the W for Winthrope. Well, the housekeeping manager told me they don't circulate towels without the letter. It's how they keep yours separate from guests' towels, and old ones are donated and replaced monthly."

I suck in a cutting breath from the cool night.

"I knew it was bullshit," I tell her.

"There was also that one-star review about the flat Coke," Jennifer says.

I glance at her.

Flat Coke?

*Flat fucking Coke?*

Someone wasted the brainpower and several minutes of their short life on this rock to knee me in the balls over flat soda?

"Even I don't think there's anything deeper there," I say. "It happens sometimes. The suppliers aren't perfect."

"Actually..." Piper bites her lip. "The hotel only sells bottled drinks everywhere but the downstairs restaurant. The restaurant has fountain drinks, but they're never sent up for room service. If they got a flat Coke, they opened a can and let it sit too long. I'm pretty confident you can't blame the restaurant for that. There's also the one-star review about the bitchtastic manager—"

"Bitchtastic manager?" I repeat. Now there's a new one.

“Sally Ettinger,” Piper finishes.

The name doesn’t register.

I shake my head slowly. “I don’t understand. There’s no one here by that name. No one I recall.”

“Exactly. Yet there *is* a one-star hell review about a manager named Sally. They even claimed she’s the head of operations,” Piper says, tapping her pointer fingers together.

If I weren’t so shocked, I might relish the fact that she’s confirming I’m sane.

My sabotage theory isn’t a baseless conspiracy, and it’s killing her to admit it.

“Javier Sanderson is the lead manager. He has been since the day Gramps transferred him from our flagship in New York,” I bite off, each word burning more than the last.

Piper nods. “I know. I spoke to him.”

“What? You weren’t supposed to—”

“Relax. We acted like normal customers,” Landers cuts in. “He doesn’t know we’re with you.”

Anger knifes through me.

I knew it.

*I fucking knew it all along.*

My gut never steers me wrong.

Someone’s paying people to lie about my properties, and after my little visit to Oasis Springs today, I have a damnably good guess who that someone is. Especially when the grim reviews aren’t hitting our properties outside the US.

But why?

What would motivate that cock-weasel to go out of his way to slash my throat and piss on my grandparents’ legacy?

What did we ever do to him besides smoke his greedy ass, fair and square?

The damn award, I think wretchedly. Is that what’s behind this?

“Are you okay?” Piper whispers, concern flashing in her eyes.

“Absolutely,” I lie. “Fantastic work, ladies. I’ll take it from here.”

Piper’s face pulls tight. Jennifer stares at the floor.

“What?” I bite off.

Dammit, I've got to get a handle on my temper, even if they have no right to prod at me.

"You could let us help," Piper says quietly. "We've helped you get this far, right?"

"Your assistance is appreciated. Both of you. However, we may be dealing with an active fraud case and corporate liable now. I'll need my legal team for that."

"Let's hope you treat them nicer," she mutters.

"Excuse me, Miss Renee?"

Piper meets my eyes with a defiant look. "You intimidate people. I think that's why you needed us to get to the bottom of this."

Jennifer nods. "A lot of people are a little afraid of you."

Oh, great. It's two on one and I never asked for their opinions about managing my staff.

Still, what if they're right?

What if this blind spot has cost me months of precious time where we could've stopped this fuckery in its tracks?

"Miss Renee," I stop.

She bites her lip. Something about that gesture I've seen her do countless times puts me weirdly at ease.

"Finish your thoughts," I say, swiping a hand through the air. "Your honesty is an asset and you might as well finish breaking my balls."

That makes her blush like a fire engine.

"While you're in a tizzy about your reputation, maybe you should consider the perception that you're kind of a tyrant. Your people might be more honest and motivated to help if you'd stop being a porcupine," she says softly.

Damn. She's right and the little black dress she's wearing fits her like a glove, grinding down what's left of my pride.

"I should go," Jennifer says nervously. "My DoorDash is probably in the lobby by now..."

My eyes flick to Piper, sure that she'll use the excuse to escape with her friend.

She swallows so hard it's visible. "See you later, Jenn."

She wants to finish this?

Interesting.

I watch Jennifer skitter out the door with a hand pressed to her mouth like she's trying hard not to laugh—or vomit.

When the door clicks shut behind her, I say, “Miss Renee, you're a beautiful woman with a terrible mouth.”

“And you suck at compliments.” She steps closer, her eyes a green brushfire.

“My personal relations aside, I appreciate everything else you did today. I mean that sincerely.”

“Do you?” she whispers softly, her eyes cold and assessing.

There's a silence before I sigh.

“Am I really such a fucking dragon in a suit?”

“Fire-breathing,” she bites off. “Which makes it more amazing that the man I met in Hawaii wasn't. He knew how to have fun and treat a lady—or at least he did a really good job pretending he did. I like to think you have an actual human side, but you don't show it much. Why?”

“Why?” I clip. “If I handled my entire staff the way I treated you in Lanai, you know where that would get me.” I don't need to say *trouble*.

“Sucks. Because I *really* liked that Brock.”

I tilt my chin up, staring her down.

What the fuck does that mean?

She doesn't like this one? And why does that feel like such a hornet sting?

I'm a competent manager for a company this size. Women would throw themselves at me in legions if I'd let them.

Yet somehow I'm still standing here, captivated by this green-eyed medusa, dazed and pissed off.

“You have nothing to say to that?” she asks quietly.

“Go out with me.” It flies out of my mouth like a bullet.

I'm fucking bristling.

She stands there like a startled deer, her mouth parted and too inviting.

“Um, what? Why would I—”

“Tomorrow night. After we're done for the day, I'll give you a proper night in Chicago.”

She sucks her bottom lip, making that red target brighter.

“Like...what do you mean? Another date?” Her voice is so soft I barely hear her.



Fuck, I don't even know how to answer that.

If I admitted what kind of jackass thing I'm craving, I'd talk myself right out of it.

"A business meeting, Miss Renee," I offer. "To show you I can appreciate my people without sending them off to die in the salt mines. And to reward you because your sleuthing skills are invaluable."

"A business meeting?" Her face falls.

*Fucking idiot, saying the wrong thing again.*

Why couldn't I have Gramps' charmer gene? Apparently, that skips a generation too, and I wound up with foot-in-mouth syndrome.

"Call it dinner or hanging out or having me as your tour guide. Whatever. I don't care. There will be exquisite wine and a fancy new dress waiting for you before we go," I promise.

She smiles so wide her teeth shine like a string of pearls.

"That's not necessary. But I guess I won't turn down the chance to see Chicago."

"I'm glad you agree. Also, I won't have you thinking I don't know how to dress you up like the sexiest woman alive."

Her face heats as she looks away.

"...Mr. Winthrop, I don't need fancy dresses. Really," she insists.

She still won't look at me.

I take a step forward until we're toe to toe and I'm peering down at her. "Will you keep calling me Brock?"

Her eyes swing up to mine. "Depends. Will you ever drop the Miss Renee thing?"

My lips curl up.

"If you're just Piper, that sounds like a date, and I don't think you want it to be."

"Um. I can't answer a question I haven't been asked, can I?"

"You're impossible," I snarl.

"And you're Satan. Hell is just another Winthrop property with legitimately sucky food and no air conditioning. One of these days, I know I'm going to feel the horns poking out," she spits.

I chuckle. "That would require touching me again. Though if your little hands wind up on my head while I teach that goddamned mouth some long

overdue respect, I'd be the last to complain. Especially if I make you ride my face."

She falls back with a startled gasp.

She's so flushed now, her chest rising in shallow breaths that highlight her cleavage.

I'm so hard I think my brain is operating on dregs, all the blood lost below my beltline.

*Minx.* I wonder if this night on the town might be suicide after all.

How the hell will I survive a few hours with her alone without making good on every reckless, awful urge that grips me every time I'm in her presence?

"You could try to keep this professional," she whispers, her breath falling against my throat.

"What makes you think I don't just enjoy riling you up?" I reach for a loose lock of that spun-gold blond hair.

The way it threads through my fingers like silk feels obscene. So does the way her eyes flutter shut as she inhales deeply.

"I think you're just trying to hedge your bets by dancing around what 'dinner' means," she tells me.

"I don't need to hedge a damn thing. If I asked you out, I'd make sure you couldn't say no."

"Why? Because I work for you?" She opens her eyes and glares at me.

It's like a bucket of ice water. "No. Way to ruin the moment, by the way."

"Then why?"

I bend so we're eye to eye now. "Because, Piper Renee. If we were dating, you'd be hoarse from moaning my name and then skipping off into the sunset planning our wedding."

She makes a strangled sound, then throws her head back and laughs wildly. "You're so conceited! Oh my God."

"I thought I was your Lucifer?"

"You're proving my point."

I don't have a snappy comeback as my eyes slide down the curves I'm aching to trace with my tongue.

I just know when a beautiful woman implies you're the king of all evil, you want to act the part and show her how atrocious you can truly be.

“Brock?” Her voice is featherlight.

“Yes, my green-eyed angel?” I rasp, brushing my lips over hers.

“I hate you,” she whispers. Her body betrays her true feelings no matter how sincere she sounds.

“Why?”

“You called me *yours*.”

“Huh?”

“You said ‘your Lucifer.’ And ‘my green-eyed angel.’”

Fuck.

“Slip of the tongue,” I say, tearing myself away from another white-hot kiss.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“I’ll never hear the end of it now, will I?”

“No, but—” Her voice trails off.

“But?”

“You’re totally wrong. I’m no angel.” Then she lurches up on her toes, leans in, and smothers her lips against mine.

Instant heaven.

She thinks she’s caught me off guard, and she has.

Of course, I’m not about to let her win.

I flick my tongue against her lips, pulling her open, looting what’s mine in slow, fevered gasps that rattle out of her.

*Give me strength.*

If I was a weaker man, I’d throw her against the wall and fuck her right here. Or hell, maybe I’d drag her out on that balcony and strip her naked for all of Chicago to see.

She’s got me this mad.

This crazy.

This desperate.

“Piper, fuck,” I rasp, snarling against her tongue.

“Oh! Oh, Brock,” she whimpers through parted lips.

I see the opportunity to attack her again, running my tongue along the length of hers.

She moves one hand up to cup my face.

I gather her closer, holding her belly against my raging hard-on, making her feel what she does to me as our tongues play like wild dogs.

When I'm fully breathless and barely tearing myself away from her, she stares up at me, her lungs working overtime.

"Now who's evil?" I whisper darkly.

"Still you. A thousand percent." She stumbles back with a smile, though, wiping at her bottom lip where my teeth tug into her flesh. "So, it's all a game? Is that it?"

"You started it," I say with a shrug.

With one more heavy look, she whirls around and starts for the door.

I'm done.

I reach out, grab her waist, and yank her closer to me again. "For the record, Miss Sunshine, I wouldn't have kissed you like a maniac if I was just playing. I promise you, I don't have time for childish games."

She leans back in my arms with a longing glance.

Yeah. She isn't making this hellish urge to shred that black dress any easier.

"I should go anyway," she says softly. "If I stay—"

"You should," I admit, releasing her like it's the hardest thing in the world.

She glances over her shoulder. "Brock?"

"Yes?"

"You're a fun boss to hate."

"And you, Sunshine, are fucking merciless. That's why you'll get no mercy from me."

She giggles. "Big praise, coming from the Prince of Hotel Darkness."

Fuming, I scan her body and the way that black dress hugs it.

"You're still wearing what I pick tomorrow. If you show up to dinner in that thing, I *will* turn it into confetti in ten minutes flat," I vow, holding up a fist to my chest.

Her breath hitches and she smiles like the little tornado she is.

So cute, innocent, whip-smart, and yet somehow perfectly capable of blowing my entire world to the stars. Her soft laughter draws my arms back around her like a magnet.

She kisses my chin, my cheek.

I turn her to face me again, because I want—no, *I need*—her mouth one more time.

So I press my lips to hers, stealing her breath, twining her tongue.

When her phone goes off, I add my teeth.

“Ignore it,” I order, following her movement to steal another kiss.

“I can’t. That’s my sister.” She pulls away from me, fishing her phone out of the black bag hanging over her shoulder. “Ugh. You made me miss the call.”

“The cost of those forbidden kisses. We’re right back at the family problems you won’t explain.” *The thing you can’t trust me with*, I mean.

Without a word, she flees through the door to the elevator with her phone pressed to her face.

Fucking hell.

Even the world’s most torrid kisses can’t break through to her.

I’d do well to remember that tomorrow night and keep it casual, no matter what happens.

There’s clearly something she doesn’t want me knowing about her life, and trust is a scarce fucking commodity.

It’s also a good reminder why I’ve managed to avoid getting mixed up with anyone—until now—if we’re mixed up in anything besides a flash in the pan mistake.

Walking into the bathroom, I throw my clothes on the ground and take a cold shower before I turn in early, ignoring the biting need to jerk off to her for the tenth time this week.

If only my discipline extended to my dreams.

I know it’s a fucking fantasy the second it starts, and I still don’t care.

We’re naked in my bed, her nipples as rosy as her mouth and aching for my touch.

She squirms as I pin her down, ravishing her neck and shoulders. I splay a hand over her bare breasts. She sucks in a deep breath and exhales like mad.

“If you don’t stop now, you *will* have to make love to me,” she whispers.

I pull her closer. “Is that supposed to be a threat? There’s only one thing in the world I’d rather do.”

“What’s that?”

Growling, I tilt her face and bring her mouth to mine.

I kiss her long and slow before I push inside her, claiming her with a groan, this voice in my pulse drumming the fact that she’s not the only one

being claimed.

I don't want to think about what that means.

Just before I move my hips, pulling a rough orgasm out of her, the violins from hell erupt in my ear.

I lurch up in a cold sweat, without bothering to swipe my alarm. I throw my phone against the wall instead.

"She doesn't trust you, you donkey," I mutter. "Whatever you do, don't let your dick do the thinking."



## GOING CAVEMAN (PIPER)



“Pippa, *hold up*. Is this a date? You have to tell me everything!” Jenn squeals before catching herself. “Sorry.”

Winthrop Chicago has a popular brunch. We’re nowhere near the only people in the room. I scan the light crowd to see if anyone heard us.

“You’re blowing this whole secret agent thing.”

She winces. “But *tell me*.”

“He said it isn’t a date. Not technically.”

She laughs. “Yeah, right! I saw the way he was looking at you last night. Pippa, those were textbook bedroom eyes. I had to dash away so you guys could get a room. Literally. I figured I’d see you again with sex hair or in handcuffs.”

“Handcuffs?” I snort at her.

“Yeah. After you killed him. You were doing a pretty good job of laying into him and that only ends one way.” She smiles as I look at her. “Sexy time or *murder*.”

“What is wrong with your brain?” I stuff a bite of my omelet in my mouth while she giggles. “I don’t know where this is going—probably nowhere good—so don’t get too excited. He really is bad for me. He said he’d send me a dress, but I told him not to. I probably won’t even wear it.”

“Ohhh. That’s so *Pretty Woman*. I like it!”

“Can we not compare my life to movies older than we are?”

“Yet you still get it,” she points out.



I snicker. “I doubt he does it. I told him no way. Of course, he sucks at listening.”

“I can’t wait to see what he sends,” she muses.

“I’d be more excited if we didn’t have this review thing hanging over us. Or at least if he’d cut us in on his theories now that he has some hard proof,” I say.

Jennifer sips her coffee before she says, “He probably thinks it’s an inside job or something. A disgruntled employee with some mad skills for sticking it to the man. Maybe even a former chief exec. He must have enemies. The boss is an ass in a top hat.”

“Usually. But not all the time,” I admit.

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to insult your—”

“Jenn. He’s not my anything. A nightmare boss, yeah, but he’s not a total villain. I’m just saying.”

“Wow. You might be the first person I’ve ever heard say that.”

“People just don’t know him—”

“Like you do, right?” She grins. “Understandable.”

I kick her lightly under the table. “Since the company’s paying for this meal, can we talk about *work*?”

“Oh, fine. You’re no fun. Why would someone go after Winthrop reviews? How bad would he have to piss them off?” she asks.

“I did some digging last night. It’s a pretty common black hat technique called review bombing. It usually happens when there’s some kind of business policy somebody doesn’t like. The one stars just pile on, whether they’re from paid drive-bys or automated bots.”

Jennifer frowns. “I don’t think that’s the case here though—”

“Yeah. I don’t think it’s true review bombing in the usual sense, and not from somebody with a point to prove. The reviews are all over the place—they’re not policy driven—and they touch on experiences. Even if they’re totally fake. This feels too personal.”

“They are pretty detailed. Written to provoke a response,” she agrees. “Like no one who reads a review about a lady and her four-year-old getting food poisoning over nonexistent duck eggs doesn’t get upset.”

“The disgruntled employee theory... Could it be a former copywriter?”

“They’d have the skills,” she says with a nod.

“Or maybe a competitor,” I say, chewing my hash browns.

“Hmm. Which one? I wonder who else in this space feels threatened enough by Winthrop to go dark...”

“A lot of other ego freaks, I bet. Winthrop has been on top forever.”

I wish I knew more about potential suspects.

After brunch, we decide to check out reviews of the pool. It can't compete with Lanai, but as far as sleek indoor pools go, this is gorgeous. The vivid green landscaping around it makes it look like a secluded swimming hole rather than an elegantly tiled pool, and there's a huge fountain cascading down from a makeshift waterfall.

“Whew! It certainly does the job,” Jenn says.

“It's a Beatrice Brandt design. Winthrop Chicago took off running the day it opened because she and her grandsons helped with the features.”

“Fancy!” Jenn beams.

We hang out by the pool for a while in the long lounge chairs, enjoying the generous sunlight streaming in through the glass until she feels like she'll get burned if we don't pack it in.

“Probably the least productive part of our trip, but definitely the most fun. Just wish I'd brought my swimsuit.”

Jenn smiles. “Yeah, we should get paid to hang out in the pool more often.”

After she disappears to her room, I get in the elevator and push the button for the thirty-second floor.

One floor up, Brock gets in.

I almost forget we're not supposed to know each other.

His eyes roam my body, lingering in all the wrong places.

Fire rushes under my cheeks. I notice I'm still a little sweaty from the pool room.

His gaze burns me, urging my temperature higher.

Oh my God, this is *torture*.

I have to pretend not to know him—an almost impossible task.

I want to say something so bad, but it's better I don't with the wild directions my mind keeps spinning. I don't breathe again until he steps off on another floor with a lingering glance that melts through my clothes.

Will he look at me with that same intensity tonight?

Will I even be able to do anything but stutter if he does?

And if he kisses me again like last night, knowing we're alone and meeting secretly—

*Yikes.*

I'm so hilariously screwed.

Possibly literally.



I FLOP down on my bed and call Maisy to settle my jitters.

It takes a few rings before she answers.

“Hey, sis. Why aren't you out enjoying Chicago?”

“I'm doing that tonight. How's Dad?”

“He's fine. He was ready to go to the game with me, but it got rained out. Then he pushed a trip to the art museum to make up for it, but I didn't think it was a good idea for him to be fumbling around in the rain.”

“Good call, Maisy. I'm sorry you have to deal with this. Are you still hanging out with Trina?”

“Her crush from the team took her out to a movie, so all's well that ends well.”

“Is Dad taking his medicine, though? Do either of you need anything?” I hate that even good news makes me worry.

“We're fine, mother. Grabbing Indian food for dinner from that place you love. I'm definitely blaming you for creating a monster with Dad and his palak paneer kick.” She laughs, and so do I. “Are *you* okay, Pippa? You sound...off.”

Ouch.

Am I that obvious?

“It's been a long trip. Very busy so far. It'll be nice to just kick back and have some fun. So, if you need me, I'll have my phone, but I might not be checking much unless it's an emergency.”

“Sweet! You must be doing something juicy tonight. Is he hot?”

“Maisy!” I hiss. “...I actually don't know what I'm doing yet. It's still technically a business meeting my boss and—”

She bursts into wild laughter like the chipmunk brat she is.

“Keep telling yourself that! Oh, I promise not to bug you unless the house burns down. Go have fun with your freaky boss.”

I wrinkle my nose, wondering how much she overheard me and Jenn.

“Mais, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but he’s my *boss*. That thing in Hawaii was just a crazy mishap, and I—”

A loud knock at the door chokes me off mid-sentence.

“Hang on,” I say. “There’s someone at the door.”

“Probably NIH.”

“NIH?” I cross to the door, playing dumb.

“Naked In Hawaii. Jenn said that’s her code.”

*Shoot me now.*

As I’m crossing the room, I wish I had time to figure out why my bestie decided to spill secrets with my little sister who gets easily obsessed with my razor-thin dating life.

I open the door after a quick look through the peephole.

There’s a woman in a hotel uniform standing in front of me, holding a garment bag.

“Mr. Winthrop sent this up. Could you please try it on? I’m able to arrange minor adjustments, or if it’s the wrong size, I’ll bring you other options.”

“Other options? Um...”

“He wasn’t sure about your exact size, so I helped him make the best selections.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“Please try it on. Let me know if you need help,” she says, holding up her offering.

I nod and pull the bag into the room.

“Hey, Maisy?” I say into the phone.

“I know. You have to go because NIH sent you a Cinderella dress. I heard, and I’m jealous. Your life is so cool.”

“No—not cool. We met—”

“When he was naked in your room. I know. Hella wild story to tell people someday when you’re married and rich.”

“Maisy.” I grit my teeth while she laughs it up.

Sigh.

There must be some way to explain to my little sister why dating your boss isn't remotely cool. I don't want her getting the wrong ideas.

Like any big sister, she should do as I say, not as I do.

Also, we're not technically dating.

...are we?

It's a meeting. Dinner. And probably more soul-stealing kisses with a man who can make or break my entire bank account with a simple call.

"Maisy, I love you, but grow up." At least I can still rock my scary adult voice. "One of these days, you're going to meet a boy and I am going to hound you until you deliver your firstborn. Payback is a bitch."

"Come on, Pippa. If I didn't give you crap, who else would? Jenn's way too nice."

"Whatever. I have to go. Say hello to Dad for me. Love you both."

"Love you too." She hangs up.

My eyes flick back to the garment bag dangling from the hanger in my hand. I slip into the bathroom and start unpacking it.

Hello, fairy tale.

The dress is bright blue with a satin bodice embellished with tiny diamonds. The strings tie around the neck. There's an opening in the back and the skirt is more flowing blue silk.

The whole dress is crisscrossed with neat lines and long rounded shapes.

*Feathers*, I realize.

I smile until my cheeks hurt.

I'm not sure I'm worthy.

I've never worn anything this expensive with a designer label.

I almost hate that it fits me perfectly, and I'm instantly in love with it, turning in the mirror to see myself from every angle.

When I exit the bathroom and open the door, the seamstress is still waiting outside.

She presses her hands together and smiles. "Excellent fit. Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful! Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything."

"Do you know if—I mean, did Mr. Winthrop pick it out himself?" It's a tad more conservative than what I would've expected, but it's absolutely

gorgeous.

“He did. He left a card. It should be inside the bag somewhere. Since the dress works, I’ll see myself out.”

I head back into the bathroom and fish the card out of the garment bag. I’m not sure how I missed it the first time.

It’s just a Winthrop card with the trademark W with Brock’s handwriting on the back.

*YOUR PROOF I know how to treat a woman—particularly a beautiful one obsessed with flying poop factories. I’ll see you at seven.*

I CAN’T HELP but laugh.

It’s either laugh hysterically or die on the spot.

A dress like this calls for makeup.

But I hadn’t planned on doing any content this weekend, so I packed pretty light. Against my better judgment, I call Jenn and ask for her makeup kit.

She’s in my room a few minutes later, staring all wide-eyed. “You look like a sex-sicle! Someone’s decked out for prom night. Rich people prom.”

“Hardly.” I wave my hand.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “My prom dress wasn’t a hundredth this nice.”

“Should I do your makeup too?”

“I’ll take care of it.” I really don’t want her here when Brock shows up.

“Everything you need is right here.” She hands me an insulated lunch box.

I stare at it, trying to figure out why her makeup would be in there.

“Easy storage. Plus it keeps everything from melting,” she explains with a shrug.

“Uh, thanks.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t wait up for you—”

“You could. It’s no big deal.”

“Oh, yeah. Because I always dress up like Miss America when it’s no big deal too.” She winks at me. “Have fun. I’ll annoy you more when you get back.”

Just like that, she scurries out the door.

I go to work dusting my eyes with silver shadow, glossing my lips, and applying mascara and blush.

There’s another knock at the door while I’m twisting my hair into a bun. I barely finish just before I walk over, my heart drumming faster with every step.

When I open up, I’m not sure who looks more surprised.

We’re both speechless.

Frozen.

Barely breathing.

Brock stands in the doorway in a silver suit with a vest and lavender tie.

The outfit highlights his chest and abdomen like it was cut from pure granite.

“You look—that’s a really fantastic—” I stammer before I finally settle on, “—umm, nice suit.”

“Thank you, beautiful. I knew you’d look goddamned ravishing in that dress. Do you like it?”

I can barely mouth out, “Yes. It’s amazing.”

He studies me for a moment, his head cocked and jaw angled. “Are you wearing makeup? Shit.”

I nod.

“You didn’t need to. I like you better without it.”

I’m almost glad for his dumb male honesty. It helps ground me with the reality of who I’m going out with.

“Thanks! Just what every woman needs to hear in the first five minutes of a d—business meeting.”

“What? You should be happy knowing your face looks better naturally.”

I narrow my eyes. “I see we’re off to a great start.”

“Should we go before I piss you off? The chariot’s waiting.”

“Will you carry my phone?”

“What?” He flashes a surprised look.

“I don’t have a purse to match this dress, and I’m not taking my normal ratty purse around. But I can’t leave without my phone—”

His face grows serious. “Your family trouble again? Damn you, when will you tell me?”

I stop and stare at him. “If you don’t like a woman who has her secrets, we can always take a raincheck...”

“You promise me you’re not hiding a man. Is it really your father? You owe me that, at least.”

I laugh. “That’s absurd. I’ve had *two* boyfriends in my life, and none of them were very serious.”

“No secret kids whose father is still in the picture?”

I laugh harder and shake my head. “Nope. Unless you count my smart-ass little sister.”

“Give me your phone.” He holds out a hand.

I open the door wider. “You’ll have to come in so I can grab it.”

He follows me to the bed in the center of the room, where I retrieve my phone.

I watch him slide it in his jacket pocket.

“You do realize if we go on future outings after tonight, the time will come where you’ll have to quit hiding eventually?”

“But this is the first—um, outing—we’ve had. So I’m well within my rights to hide anything that isn’t your business,” I say matter-of-factly.

That wins me a grumpy scowl.

“You want me to work for it. Fair enough. Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

He slides an arm around me as we walk out the door.

“Where are we going?” I ask once we’re inside the elevator.

He hits the button to take us down. “Not until we’re there. I’ll reserve my right to secrecy too.”

I frown at him. “Not fair. And you hit the wrong button,” I say when the elevator stops on the third floor.

Glowing, he shakes his head and leads me out of the elevator.

“We’re taking the private exit out so no one sees us.”

“So, does every place you own have a secret passage?”

He chuckles. “My family’s suite is on a private floor here. My elevator goes straight to that exit, but since we left from your room, we’ll get off here.”

Insane.



This whole situation is insane and feels like a disaster in the making.

“I have to wonder why a guy like you keeps chasing a fisherman’s daughter with a liberal arts degree.”

“She’s beautiful and brilliant. It would also be a crying shame to let that mouth go untamed,” he says, gazing right through me.

I swallow thickly. “I believe the last part.”

“Only because you don’t see yourself like I do, woman.”

Yeah.

I think I might be floating as he guides me through another private exit like the one in Lanai.

Time for another shock.

There’s a limo waiting on the curb.

“Keep moving. It doesn’t bite,” he whispers, placing his hand on the small of my back to urge me forward.

He’s about to open the door for me to get in when his head jerks in the direction we’ve just come from. That half smirk he’s been wearing since we stepped outside vanishes like he just stepped in dog poop.

“Fuck, what’s he doing here?” Brock snarls.

I glance over to see what he’s upset about.

This tall string bean-looking dude with coppery ginger hair—not quite red or blond—comes strolling forward at a steady clip.

“Mr. Winthrop himself! I thought I was dreaming.”

He slaps Brock on the arm with a high-pitched laugh.

Brock shirks away from the movement, but he also spins me in the process.

Now I have a shoulder to Mr. String Bean, and he’s standing between us like this weird scarecrow.

“Finch,” Brock spits the word like a curse.

“Bad time for chitchat, huh? That’s fine. I heard you were in town and stomping around my properties. I thought I’d catch you here. I couldn’t resist the urge to drop in and say, ‘hi.’”

Silence.

The look Brock gives this man isn’t his usual grumpybutt glare.

It’s downright hateful and disgusted.

“We should have drinks while you’re in town,” the man continues, unfazed by the stink eye. “We have a hell of a lot of catching up to do. Hell,

the last time we talked, you were just back from the war and still all shaken up about that—”

“Finch,” he bites off. “You don’t have to bother.”

“Oh, right. Not in polite company, I suppose. I’m used to you sulking around all by your lonesome.” The stranger—Finch—slowly turns to me with a disarming smile.

Ick. Why does it feel like I’m being eyeballed by a snake?

Before I know what’s happening, he grabs my hand and kisses it, then looks back at Brock.

“Who is this beautiful creature, Winnie? You never told me you had a sister.”

*Holy hell, what is happening?*

My face heats.

I should probably never leave Seattle again and rethink this whole travel thing.

At least then I won’t fall into my hot billionaire boss sending me dresses or have this guy who rocks the Dahmer look getting all touchy-feely—and apparently trying to piss off Brock, too.

And I think it’s mission accomplished.

Brock’s vicious expression lasts for a nanosecond before he jabs his palm against Finch’s forehead and shoves him back.

The stranger staggers backward with a dirty look. “What the fuck? Jeez, man, territorial much? I didn’t know she was yours. You could have used your words instead of asking for assault charges.”

Brock reaches past me, yanks open the limo door, and shoves me inside.

“Touch her again and die,” I hear him snap, just before the door slams shut and his voice muffles. “I don’t have time for this bullshit.”

Welp, so much for tonight going well.

Brock steps closer to Finch.

His chest is bowed out and he’s already unbuttoned his jacket.

Holy crap. We might be here for a while.

I open the limo door.

Brock glares at me. “What are you doing?”

“It’s hot in here and you two look busy. I think I’ll just go back inside and wait.”

“Lovely idea,” Finch says. “Maybe we could all get a drink together and settle this like civilized people.”

“Stay,” Brock barks. He looks at Finch. “If she leaves that car, I’m blaming you.”

“Your threats are so very tedious. You really want *more* bad blood?” Finch scowls.

“You know what? You’re right.” He opens the door wider and slides in beside me before slamming it again. “At least I got to slam it in that asshole’s face twice that way.”

“What was that all about? Who is he?” I ask.

“Apollo Finch. A jackass not worth wasting breath on. He owns another hotel in town.”

“He walked up to you like an old friend—”

“Finch has no friends. He’s backstabbed damn near everyone. And he’s had some weird obsession with outgunning my family ever since Oasis Springs started losing bids to my grandfather in major cities and we swiped an award he was sure was his.” He pauses and turns furious blue eyes on me. “I think that cock is behind the review slaughter. I realized it after you pinpointed anomalies. He’s why you and Jennifer were working like hell, finding proof.”

“Him? What makes you think that?”

He shakes his head. “I went to his hotel yesterday. The same people leaving shitty low reviews for Winthrop give Oasis Springs five stars. But it’s a dusty, tired property with nothing new, and just now he came out of the private entrance. How did he even know it was there?”

Anger rolls off him in blistering waves.

I slide away to give him some space. “Are you going to be okay?”

He glares at me.

“You seem upset.”

“I’m *fine*. I just don’t like him probing me. It’s like he wanted me to *know* he was here snooping. Fucking maniac,” he grinds out.

Oof.

I have no clue what to say. This is so not how I ever wanted to go on an ill-advised date with my thunderhead of a boss.

“If you’re upset, we can always do this another time...”

“No. Who knows when we’ll both be free in Chicago again.” His gaze softens as he rakes a hand through his thick dark hair. “Why do you keep looking at me like I’m about to chomp your head off, Piper?”

I try to suppress a giggle, but it slips out.

“I don’t know why you’re laughing.”

“Sorry.”

“For looking at me like I’m going to bite your head off or laughing when I mentioned it?”

“Second one.”

“Apology accepted. Now tell me why,” he demands.

“Umm—maybe because I’m not sure you won’t? You’re freaking steamed. There’s obviously more to this than I know, and that’s okay. But if you’re not up for it, it’s really okay. We can do this another night.”

“Consider it forgotten. Apollo Finch is not fucking ruining this,” he vows, his voice so low it vibrates through me. “I’m out with a beautiful woman, and that’s all that should matter. Will you let me give you an enjoyable night off, Sunshine? You’ve earned it.”

The question hangs in the air.

I swallow, knowing I’ll probably regret this.

But how many times in your life does a man ever go full caveman for you?

So I answer by sliding my hand into his and smiling as his strong calloused fingers grip mine.



## LUXURY PACKAGE (BROCK)



The stars are twinkling for us again just like they did in Lanai, even if they can't shine through Chicago's cloud of light pollution.

I might give them more than a passing glance as we sit in a private room overlooking the lake—if only the vision in front of me wasn't claiming all of my attention.

I'm convinced Piper Renee was sent to drive me stark raving mad.

Every movement.

Every laugh.

Every soft green-eyed glance and curve of her throat as she samples a high-end food selection she's never tasted.

"Oh my," she whispers, falling back in her chair with a mouthful of scallops. "You weren't kidding. It tastes like butter."

"Are you still pissed at me for ordering for you?" I throw back, tucking into my salmon.

"God, no. If the food is this delicious, you can be a huge overbearing pigman anytime."

Pigman? I turn up my nose and let out a loud oink.

That gets me a startled laugh that sounds like music to my ears.

"Way to make zoo noises in a place this fancy." Piper rolls her eyes but her smile says everything.

"You invited it. Don't tempt me to try bird calls next."

Slowly, she meets my eyes. "For the record, I think you're right."

"About?"

Her smile fades. “Not to keep bringing it up, but... Jenn and I think this isn’t a traditional smear campaign with nasty reviews. We thought it might be a competitor, but we had no guesses which one. If this Finch guy has a personal grudge, it makes sense why he’d throw so much energy into slamming you with crappy reviews.”

I sigh. I’ve been doing such a good job of not wasting any mental energy on that prick.

“I know,” I say, stuffing food into my mouth. “But we can talk about his shit at work, Piper. Let’s keep it focused on us.”

She smiles at me. “I like that idea.”

“Why did you quit your travel videos? Don’t tell me it’s just the job,” I say, taking a pull off my cocktail.

“But it kind of is. This job took over my life and there’s no time for anything else.”

I roll my eyes. “This is the first long weekend you’ve worked since you started. Don’t pretend you aren’t sitting on a mountain of content from old trips you can post.”

“Yeah, well, that’s pretty hard during the week. And I have other obligations on the weekend.”

“How old is your sister again?” I ask.

“Seventeen, but it’s my turn now. If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be?”

“I’ve been everywhere,” I say bluntly.

“So what was your favorite place?”

I pause, rolling the question over in my head.

“Cairo, maybe. The pyramids are impressive. The Australian Outback has its charm, too. My grandfather used to unwind from work on long hunting trips there. Or maybe I’d visit Lanai again since I’ve made a few fond memories there.” I look at her. “The place is a magnet for beautiful women.”

“Ugh, you’re too good at this. I bet you use that answer on all the girls you meet there.”

“Just you,” I growl back honestly. “Are you raising your little sister?”

“Nope. Maisy was always a good kid and she takes care of herself, mostly. She just comes to me when she wants typical boring big sister advice.”

We finish our main course making small talk about her sister's habits. She barely mentions her father, which piques my interest even more.

The server comes to our table. "Have you two had time to look over the dessert menu?"

"I'll have the vanilla bean creme brulee with sugar cookies and a double cortado," I say.

"What about you, ma'am?" The server looks at Piper.

"Oh, no. I'm stuffed." She holds up both hands.

"Bring her something good. If she doesn't eat it, whatever."

"He's a keeper!" the waitress says with a smile. "Is there anything else you'd like?"

"Do you have a dessert coffee for my lady?"

"I do. I'll be right back." She walks away.

Piper stares at me, her green eyes dancing. "I can't believe you ordered the sweetest thing in the place."

"I didn't."

"There's something sweeter than cookie dipped in creamed sugar with more toasted sugar on top?"

I hold her gaze like the devil I am. "The sweetest dessert isn't on the menu, and it's already in front of me."

It takes a second to sink in before she grins and bites her bottom lip.

"Goddamn," I mutter. "You know that drives me certifiable, right?"

"What?" she asks.

"You don't know? The way you bite your lip. It makes my teeth jealous they're not there instead."

And she does it again, fully intent on turning my cock into a blue cucumber.

"I didn't know, but I do now."

"Brat," I throw back.

"You asked," she says matter-of-factly.

It's damnably hard not to dive across this table and seize her lips.

The server returns soon and sets our dessert course on the table with coffee.

Soon, she's focused on me dipping my cookie in crème brulee, and I feed her a few. There's a smear of cream on the corner of her lip.

I can't fucking not take the invitation.



I gently brush my thumb against the seam of her lips and she opens like a good girl.

Her lips draw me in for the fiercest second, sucking slowly, her eyes glued to mine.

Goddamn.

It's like she's trying to make me explode in my pants. I pull my hand away with a snarl, brushing my thumb through the cream on my plate before I hold it up and bite the tip.

Yeah.

I'm going to devour every fucking bit of her tonight, lips to tits to clit.

We barely speak until we're piling in the limo again.

This time, I pull Piper onto my lap, making her feel how hard I am.

Her breath hitches when she feels it. And she presses her spine into my chest, her body arching with delicious tension.

"I guess you win. You really know how to pull off a perfect evening," she whispers.

"You haven't seen perfection yet, woman. Trust me." Stroking her hair aside, I kiss the back of her neck. "Thank you for trusting me enough to hold your fire for one night."

"I enjoyed it. Almost as much as Lanai," she admits.

*Almost?*

*Not good enough.*

By the time I'm done dousing her in flames and sending her off sore the next morning, that Hawaiian kiss will be a faded dream.

Still, she makes me wonder.

Could we have more nights like this?

More days like Lanai?

I'm not cut out for serious relationships. Finding the perfect match like Gramps did early in life seems as alien as a week doing absolutely nothing. But an ongoing under-the-radar tryst?

That could work.

Possibly far too well.

My lips can't stay off her, roaming up and down her neck with a deepening hunger.

"Oh, God, Brock." She sighs.

Growling, I turn her in my lap so I can see her face.

Her cheeks are so red, her eyes narrow slits full of green witchfire.

I catch her bottom lip with my teeth, and she opens her mouth, sighing hotly into mine.

*Goddamn, this woman.*

My tongue goes to work, swiping deep, drinking her in so thoroughly until she pulls away, sighs, and lays her head on my shoulder.

“Are you tired?” I ask, threading her hair.

“No. Just comfortable.” She wraps her arms around my neck.

Maybe it’s just how keyed up I am, but there’s something wickedly erotic about her resting on me. Don’t ask me to explain why.

I close my arms around her, dropping a steaming kiss on her forehead just as the limo slows to a stop in front of the hotel.

“Time to go.” I tap Piper’s hip.

“What if I don’t want to?”

With a dark look, I bring my lips to her ear and whisper, “Then you’ll be missing out on an orgasm that splits you clean in two, Piper Renee.”

I love how she shudders, her eyes flickering with excitement.

And when she brings her lips to mine—begging without words—I’m hellbent on making good on that promise.

Her tongue leaps hungrily against my mouth, caressing my lower lip and then my tongue, goading me to give chase.

I pull her closer as I consume her.

Her grip on my neck tightens.

The kiss deepens until I’m fucking her mouth.

Too intense.

Too hot.

*Too undeniable.*

Piper trembles in my arms again as I clasp her chin.

She falls away with a ragged breath, her heated eyes slashing back and forth, beaming so much need into mine.

“You win this round. Now I’ll move,” she whispers.

My lip curls as she slides off my lap.

I don’t wait for the driver to open the door for us before we’re flying out together, her arm hooked in mine. I keep her near my side like she’s all too breakable as we walk together.

Dammit, she is.

Why else would I need to guard her this closely?

“Are you sure you want to walk in like this? Someone could see,” she says quietly.

“I’ll call down later to wipe the security footage. I’m walking you to the damned door,” I grind out.

“There he is,” she says with a buttery laugh. “My 1950s gentleman again.”

“Fuck no. I just can’t keep my hands off you.”

I don’t allow an inch of space between us as we march through the private entrance and beeline for the elevator.

She pushes the button and it dings open a second later.

No wait this time, thank God.

I turn her around, so we’re facing the mirror at the back of the elevator.

“Look,” I say.

“What am I looking at? Is there something between my teeth?”

I smile at how adorably clueless she is.

This is why I have to help her see it.

“I need you to see how balls-on-fire sexy you are,” I whisper, my grip tightening around her waist. “Need you to understand why my girl has me so obsessed. Do you see it now?”

“You said it again,” she says, her eyes so bright green and her face so pink.

“What?”

“Called me yours.”

I nod briskly. “I’ll keep on saying it, Sunshine. There’s no goddamned way I’m ever sharing. Earlier, when that clown tried to kiss you—”

I don’t finish that thought.

Apollo Finch is not worth the brain power when I’m staring at the living fusion of every ancient sex goddess combined.

“I think you worry too much.” Her voice is barely audible.

“And I asked you a question earlier. You never answered me.”

She closes her eyes and exhales slowly.

Her eyelids flutter open, and she stares back into the reflection of my eyes.

“Brock...”

I cup her chin with my hand and gently hold it firmly. “Tell me you see her. Tell me that woman isn’t too beautiful for life.”

Just when I didn’t think she can’t feel hotter, she does.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “But with this fairy-tale dress and the male model beside her, any woman could be runway material.”

“Male model, huh? And just what would I be modeling?”

She smiles. The rosy hue on her face sharpens to deep crimson.

Enough flattery.

I shift so we’re facing each other again, moving my hand from her chin to her cheek. Leaning down, I kiss her with the total reverence she deserves.

Fuck, if she still doesn’t understand that she’s meant to be savored—*worshipped*—she will by dawn.

She welcomes the invasion, matching my pressure with her own intensity, gasping against my tongue.

Goddamn.

I move my hand from her cheek so I can close my arms around her waist and draw her closer, pinning her to my body.

Any gap between us is too much.

My desire flares hotter by the second. My trousers strain to their breaking point.

Can she feel how hard I am?

How badly I need to fuck her to keep myself grounded?

The way her arms wind around my neck again and pull says *yes*.

She clings to me, this creature of pure passion, shifting one small hand from my neck to my shoulder.

Her palm glides down my chest, my stomach, and stops on my lower abs, lingering just above my beltline.

Every breath feels torn.

“Pippa, fuck,” I rasp. “You murder me.”

“Brock,” she whispers, struggling for her breath just as much as me.

This is new.

Intense.

Scary.

With all the women I’ve ever been with, I’ve never been unraveled by the slightest *touch*.

The hand resting on my abs slowly slides back up to my shoulder and dives underneath my jacket. Her free arm releases my neck.

Then her fingers move to the other side of my jacket.

She starts to lower it down my back, staring at me like she's daring me to tell her no.

*Sunshine, you've watched one too many old black-and-white movies, I think. This is happening. I'm not half the gentleman you think I am.*

I shrug out of the jacket and drape it over her shoulders. I use it to urge her in tighter before I lean down and take her mouth again.

My tongue works deeper now, thieving another moan from her lungs.

Growling, I reach down, helping curl her leg around mine as her delicate fingers go to my tie, fighting to loosen it.

There's a *whooshing* of metal doors closing.

Shit.

I didn't even notice the elevator had already stopped on our floor, the doors hanging open so long they're closing again.

With a dissatisfied grunt, I tap the button to open it again and break away from her, fishing the keycard to my room from my pocket.

"Let's go," I say.

But she pulls back with her hand still in mine as we step off the elevator, grazing her lower lip again.

"So presumptuous. Do I have a choice?"

"Not when you kiss me like that. Also, we both know your pussy will hate you for life if you back out now," I challenge.

She gives me another smile that's all emerald-eyed seduction.

How the fuck can a smile be erotic?

I decide I don't care when my lips land on hers again, our tongues swirling like mad.

"Brock, I—I have concerns..." she whispers as she pulls away.

"What concerns?" I bite off.

I swear to fuck, if she's having second thoughts—real ones—I'll drop dead on the spot.

"What if someone saw us on the elevator? Or in this hallway—"

"Private floor," I growl back, cutting her off with a kiss.

She cups my face with her hands and sails back. "But the security footage... Someone could find out—"

“We’ll deal with it then,” I rush out.

And it’s my turn to bite her lips.

“Oh,” she whimpers, her eyes fluttering as they shine up at me. “But if we keep this up, people *will* notice. They’ll talk. They’ll think I’m the office slut and you only hired me because we’re—”

“Wrong. Anyone stupid enough to pull that shit is getting a private meeting with me and Legal. No one will *ever* fuck with you, Piper.”

She giggles.

I steal another kiss before I search her eyes for an answer.

She grins.

“It’s cute how you get so protective.” Her fingers move to the top button of my shirt, and she pops it out of the hole.

“Only because we’re done talking.” I reach down and pick her up, throwing her over my shoulder.

She squeals, laughing and throwing her arms around my neck.

“Hey!” she says. “Who said you get to carry me off like a war prize?”

I chuckle.

“I just don’t want to walk into a wall with you. My patience is gone, woman.” I shift her weight so I can wave the keycard in front of the door.

As soon as the door pops open I ease it apart wider with my foot.

I step inside, kick it shut, flip the lock, and press Piper’s back against the door, pinning her between my bulk and the door.

I’m moving in for another bruising kiss again when I catch her jade eyes dancing in the dim light.

I’m frozen. Goddamned mesmerized.

Lost in a moment that’s greener than Rainier Park in the summer.

She sucks in a breath so hard her chest swells. “Well? Don’t tell me you’re bored with kissing me?”

Snarling, I take her lip between mine, and I hold on until she whimpers.

Her legs wind around my waist.

What little sanity I have left shatters.

The way her body grinds against mine tells me she’s ready.

Warm and wet and greedy.

Fuck, she’s pressed so needy to my shaft it’s a struggle not to dry hump her and blow myself up instantly.

Even through the layers of clothes, I *feel* her heat.

“Look at me, Piper Renee,” I order, my eyes blazing into hers as my hips lunge forward, making her feel every seething inch of me.

Her lips pull into a breathless O.

Her legs tighten.

And her fingers dance down the neat row of buttons on my shirt, shaking as they go.

She pulls my shirt from my pants where it’s tucked in. I have to help her undo the buttons, always a frigging chore when you’re too riled up to breathe.

Once my shirt hangs open, she reaches in, sliding her hand down my bare chest.

I’m fucking electrified, breathing so hard, my heartbeat roaring in my ears.

“You’ll be the death of me, Sunshine,” I say, meeting her eyes again.

With her eyes closed, she traces a finger up and down my chest to my abs. “Or I could be your spark of life.”

I grind into her again. “In case you hadn’t noticed, you’ve got me *very* alive right now.”

Her head bangs the back of the door lightly from the force and I shift my body so I can cradle her head in my hands.

“Sorry,” I mutter, even if everything in me howls to break her.

She pushes my unbuttoned shirt over my shoulders and it hits the floor.

“Oops.” She grins. “Me too.”

*Little minx.*

And I drink her in as she tilts toward me.

Fuck, it’s impossible not to grab fistfuls of that dress and start shredding.

I don’t want to ruin a four-thousand-dollar dress, but I can’t wait with her warmth blanketing my entire being.

My hips slash against her again.

This time, I’m careful to cradle her head, buffering it from the impact with my hands.

She starts moving her hand to the straps of the dress and pulls the bow—until my wrist pushes her away.

“Let me,” I whisper, waiting for her hand to fall.

I've waited too damn long for this gift and I'm unwrapping what's mine.

Her halter top falls forward, revealing two round, pert, suckable breasts behind a red bra. Each one's covered in the middle with a rosy flower.

I move one hand, leaving the other cupped behind her head. I trace the flower outline with my finger, inhaling slowly.

"You know the whole innocent girl-next-door look makes this worse, right? It also doesn't fool me worth shit."

She turns a new shade of flaming red and laughs. "Um... I didn't have a bra that worked under this getup."

Slowly, I continue tracing a petal. "She loves me—" I pause and peel it back. "She loves me *not*."

Her eyes sharpen, pure green hellfire engulfing my soul.

I reposition us so her weight feels firmly supported, putting me in the perfect position to take a nipple in my mouth, sucking and licking.

She melts against the door, her hands above her head as I have my fill.

Every movement, every sigh, every sultry moan spilling out of her hollows me out.

I need to fuck this girl more than I need my next breath.

But first, I pull her bud between my teeth, lashing my tongue against it again and again, mauling her other tit with my hand.

Somehow, she manages to find her bra clasp. When I come up for air, the shell falls to the floor.

"Stay," I whisper, circling her other nipple.

"Brock... Brock!"

My name becomes a slow, rising mantra.

My cock feels like a loaded weapon, jerking angrily every time she whimpers my name.

Unholy fuckery.

Nothing else she's said all night affected me like this.

I've reached my limit.

I want her so badly I'm crawling out of my own skin.

I could end the anticipation right here, right now.

As much as we're starving, though, I can't take her against the wall like some crude bar hookup.

Not Piper.



*Not our first time.*

I need this woman bedded down properly so I can appreciate her and explore. So I can find the spots that make her sing and take her through every level of heaven and hell.

Breathing raggedly, I press my forehead to hers, beaming a question into her eyes.

*Are you ready for me?*

It's like she reads my mind when she nods so slowly.

So I grab her again, carrying her through my suite like a bride in my arms.

The second we arrive at the bed, I toss her down, loving how she laughs. I set to work unzipping her dress.

Her hands move to my belt and I push them away.

“Patience.”

“But why?” she whines.

I answer by yanking her dress to the floor, exposing those long sleek legs and a pair of panties redder than her face.

“Sweet payback,” I whisper.

“P-payback?”

“You remember the night we met?” I kneel on one leg, slipping a finger down her waistband, inhaling her scent.

“How could I forget? You were naked in my room.”

I hook my fingers through her panties and start pulling. She makes no struggle as I remove them, angling up. “Yeah, you got an eyeful. Now, sweetness, it's my turn.”

I tumble her back across the bed with her pussy exposed and waiting.

Of course, it's beautifully pink and enticing, a tight promise already hounding my dick.

She squirms back, grabbing at the blanket and trying to pull it over her.

“Fuck no. This is not the time you get to be shy.”

She's so red it makes me want to sink into her even more as she says, “No fair. It's not the same and you know it. We were strangers. It wasn't intimate like this...”

“So this is intimate?” I echo, grazing the back of my fingers down her bare belly, teasing her as I hover just above her clit.

“...don't make me answer that.”

“Tell me, Sunshine. Not with words.” I cup her mound and stop, leaving her wanting.

“God. You make me *crazy*,” she forces out between searing breaths.  
*Crazy? You have no earthly idea, lady.*

Eventually, she scrambles on her knees and crawls toward me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I whisper.

She doesn’t answer, just smiles as her hands reach for my belt. Before I can say anything, she starts working it loose.

“I’m squaring us up. I need another eyeful of the man I met in Lanai.”

I should stop her, stick to my guns, but she’s too good at brushing my dick through my pants as her nimble fingers work.

Soon, I’m unbuttoned. I let my trousers fall to a heap around my ankles.  
*The man she met. I think I like that.*

“You remember what that man looked like naked?” I ask.

“God, yes.”

I step out of my shoes so I can get my pants fully off.

For a hot second, she grabs my boxers at the waistband, her eyes searching the massive bulge poking through the thin fabric. Then her hand flicks down, freeing the hard-on from hell.

“Holy...”

She stops and stares at me in full salute.

Her cherry-tinted face goes a little pale.

It’s not the first time I’ve had a woman wondering if they can handle me, but when it’s Piper—fuck.

“What are you thinking, Sunshine?” I demand, grabbing my cock at the base and squeezing.

She traces her finger over the tip and shudders.

I steady myself, gritting my teeth at the sensation.

She won’t unravel me now.

Not before I’ve fucked her through the floor.

“I’m thinking that I hope this doesn’t hurt.” Her voice is barely audible as she licks her lips.

She cups her hand around it—rather, she tries.

I smile when I see her fingers won’t fully close around my girth.

Hell, I want to wreck her in all the best ways, but pain is one thing I’ll never give this woman.

“I won’t let it hurt,” I say, grabbing one of Piper’s legs with each hand to angle her back down on the bed.

She collapses on her back with a soft laugh. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure you’re ready for the most magnificent fuck of your life,” I say.

And I sink to my knees, crawling forward, spreading her open so I can bury my head between her thighs.



## BIG PROMISES (PIPER)



**H**is tongue is a feather wrapped in a growl.  
It flicks against me, traces down my opening and back up again,  
tormenting me with the most exquisite touch I've ever felt.

And when he finds my clit and starts circling—  
I'm gone.

"Brock," I whimper for the hundredth time, the only word my brain can  
process.

He only stops to press a finger against my clit, applying this devilish  
pressure as his tongue circles the very tip.

He starts kissing down my opening without moving away from the  
magic spot, dragging me to the brink of madness.

My hips are begging with every desperate switch of my hips. I don't  
care.

I need him.

I need him to stop teasing and—

Oh! His tongue thrusts inside me.

I'm a gasping mess, my body pulling tense like a cord.

I'm not sure what I was expecting.

Definitely not this burn, this sweeping pressure, this sweetness as he  
shoves his mouth against me like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted.

Holy hell.

He holds me in place with one hand and a growl while his finger works  
at my clit, his tongue sweeping in and out of me.

“Oh. Oh, Brock! God!”

Right now, I’m blasphemous.

I can’t tell where heaven ends and this man begins when they’re one and the same.

And his whole face presses into me as he shoves my legs apart.

Everything intensifies.

I’m not sure when he sold his soul for this black magic spell he’s working on me, but I love it.

Every rumble.

Every lick.

Every punishing tongue thrust.

Everything goes black for a minute before all I see is red with swirling pinpricks of light.

*All the stars.*

A wave of pure euphoria erupts in my belly, hurling me higher and slamming me down. Shaking, panting, gasping, I’m—

*Coming!*

And I come so hard for him I wonder if I’ll ever find my way home.

I’m still a spinning mess when my senses finish short-circuiting. I feel his light kisses on my inner thighs and I look down.

Brock pulls away from me, still sucking his fingers.

“Sweet Jesus. I need a minute.”

“You have two,” he says, explaining why as he grabs a very angry pulsing cock. “Catch your breath, Sunshine. Keep your legs open. I can’t fucking wait much longer.”

He sits next to me impatiently, waiting for me to re-enter my own body.

I swallow as I give him a look that tells him I’m ready. He reaches for a condom I didn’t know he had, tears it open, and rolls it over his enormous length.

I’m still petrified every time I stare at his dick.

The man is a walking cudgel with an ego attached—and soon there’ll be nothing left between me and every brutal stroke.

“Breathe, Piper,” he growls, moving so his swollen shaft touches my clit.

*Oh, God.*

His eyes close and his teeth appear as he beats the tip of his cock against me.

Then he cranes his neck, pressing a sultry kiss to my forehead, and I feel his weight shifting between my legs.

He's at my entrance now, slowly pushing forward.

He bares his teeth as he enters me, an animal glint in his eyes.

Even through the nerves, he almost sets me off again.

"K-keep going," I whisper, raking my nails down his shoulders.

"You're okay so far?"

"I'm burning up. You're the only thing that can put this fire out," I confess. "But please go slow."

I can tell he doesn't want to.

The beast in his lightning-blue eyes protests, but I trust him to restrain the monster I hope to tame soon.

And now I understand.

I moan as he sinks in slowly, one inch at a time, bringing my knees up to force us closer together—I don't want to know where I end and he begins—but also to deepen this sweet insanity.

His arms tighten around me as he pushes on.

Deeper.

*Deeper.*

I don't expect it when he bottoms out with a low grunt, his eyes searching mine to check for anything broken.

Nope. Only in my head since I'm having fever sex with my boss.

"I'm fine," I force out.

He moves so slowly, caressing my face, looking down on his work with blue-eyed pride.

We ride this timeless moment where I adjust to him, and he tries so hard not to tear me apart.

He leans his head down and brushes my lips.

I open my mouth and our tongues move together.

The kiss becomes more frantic—*desperate*—and even though he's fully in me, I still need *more*.

He breaks away, gasping for air and raising me with him.

Just when I think he's going to pull out, though, he thrusts, this time faster.

My whole body stretches, taking the impossible.

*Heaven.*

And then he does it again and we're moving together, finding our rhythm, all jousting breaths and mad desire.

His hips switch up and down several times before he kisses me again, shoving his tongue against mine with a fury like never before.

I'm so close.

So agonizingly close to the end.

And I push my face as close to him as I can with the way he's frantically moving, sucking at his tongue, becoming this sex-starved thing I don't even recognize.

Another growl explodes in my mouth as he takes me.

We're connected in the wildest ways, my body tightening around him with each stroke.

Nerves I never knew I had ignite.

Pleasure grabs me by the throat and reaches up inside me, impatient, insisting I come on this bull charging my depths.

But his eyes demand a thousand times more when he pulls back and stares down at me.

Two midnight-blue flames bore through me, demanding my ruin, screaming *let go*.

"Fucking. Come. For. Me," he grinds out each word. "Pippa, I need to *feel you*."

Holy unholy.

And my vision blurs as we become two leaping torches of white-hot ecstasy made flesh.

I come just a split second ahead of him, and the way his cock swells and releases catalyzes my explosion.

We melt into the release, fully surrendered to pleasure.

And through the haze, I watch him as his head snaps back, chest heaving, teeth bared as he empties himself, using me so sweetly to give up the one thing that might be his religion.

*Control. Precious control.*

It feels like an entire age passes before I blink my eyes open and realize he's next to me.



I giggle softly as his mouth closes around mine again, taking me into his arms.

“I hope it’s not my performance. No man cares to be laughed at after *that*.”

But I’m still laughing. “Sorry. It’s just—holy shit—I’m not laughing at you, I swear. I just loved that.”

He strokes his hand down my side. “Can I ask you something?”

“We’ve just shared skin. So, yeah, shoot,” I say.

“Was that your first time?”

My whole body grows even hotter than it already is.

“Was I—I mean—did it not—”

He chuckles, low and confident and combing his hand through my hair. “It was the hottest fuck of my life. Without question. That made me wonder.”

“...because I didn’t know what to do?” I squeak.

“You were so worried it would hurt.”

“You know you’re huge, right?” The smirk curling across his lips is a big fat yes. “I may have tried it once or twice with other guys, but it was never like this.”

“Like what, Piper?”

“Um. Never a human earthquake.”

His smirk blooms into a real smile.

Good Lord, it’s glorious.

Seeing this man sincerely happy feels as rare as a double rainbow, and I’m grateful I had a lot to do with it.

I’m about to bury my head on his chest, but he cups my face and kisses me again before I can.

“Is that nerdy? To tell you I totally lost control—”

“It’s fucking adorable. And if you still have a brain after that, I haven’t done my job well enough.” He runs a hand down my back.

“Let’s hit the shower. Together,” he adds when I don’t immediately follow.

Somehow, it’s even more intimate with three waterfall showerheads blasting down on us than the gravity-defying sex we just had.

That’s where I notice a huge faded scar crossing Brock’s shoulder down his chest.

I didn't see it earlier when I was so preoccupied.

"What happened here?" I trace my finger over the thin red line as he kisses my neck.

"Old combat wound. Nothing serious."

I nod. "Does it hurt?"

"No, not for years." He smiles at me. "Hell, when you're touching it, the damn thing feels pretty good."

I laugh, even if I get the impression he doesn't want to say much about it.

He washes my hair and my back before his hands find the rest of me. I sink into his fingers as he rubs this apricot-scented body wash all over my skin, focusing on my breasts.

Soon, he's ready for me again, and I'm so flushed and aching I grab the base of his shaft, greedily pulling him in.

"Against the wall, Sunshine," he commands, grabbing my ass for extra support.

Our second time in under an hour throws me into a whole new realm of crazy.

This time, there's no warm-up.

Just Brock buried to the hilt, crashing into me again and again, his hips driving like a hammer on an anvil.

His teeth sink into my shoulder, alternating love bites with low curses.

"Jesus. You keep that up and everyone is going to know," I whisper. "I'm going to need a turtleneck up to my face if you—"

His next thrust cuts me off.

"Let them. In case you hadn't figured it out, I'm *trying* to fucking mark you. I want you wearing me for the next week after we get back," he rasps in my ear.

Fair is fair.

I rake my nails down his back, playing his game, marking him up just as intently as he claims me with more lunging strokes and animalistic bites.

I don't think it lasts another five minutes before we're breathless dust in the wind.

His wall of a body bows and explodes with a guttural, "Fuck!"

I cling to him for dear life, the storm of his release battering my own, dangerously in love with all of this except that condom.

I can feel his raging heat through it.

In the crazy moment, I wonder what it would be like to feel him skin on skin, to be left leaking him for *hours*.

But we ride out our last wave together, two hot messes thrown together.

Deliciously ruined.

Sated—for now.

The hot water brings me out of the trance as I dig my nails into his shoulder and whisper, “Brock, don’t move. Not yet.”

He presses a rough kiss to my forehead, the first of several sticky sweet kisses for the next minute.

“Where the hell have you been all my life?” he whispers before attacking my mouth again.

I don’t know how to answer.

With the hot water running thin and exhaustion setting in, we finish showering, towel off, and head back to bed.

“I should probably go back to my room,” I say a few minutes later. “Just so...you know. So no one sees us walking out together and there isn’t anything else to worry about.”

“We have the private entrance. We’ll time it so there’s nothing to explain,” he says gruffly.

“But—”

“Piper, *stay*.”

My heart jumps in my chest.

That settles it.

My legs turn to mush and I start to actually relax.

When his arms reach out and pull me closer, spooning me against him, I’m floating.

And that’s how I drift off to a deep sleep to an orchid-scented night bright with stars and pretty bird calls.



I DON’T WAKE up until a faint chiming sound bleeds into my dreams.

*Huh? My phone?*

I lift the overly fluffy blanket stretched over my naked body.

The bear next to me makes me smile. I'm a little glad he can sleep through the incessant noise, at least.

Is it morning?

Probably Jenn wanting to go downstairs for brunch.

Damn, can't she just go by herself today?

I'd like to just bask in Brock flipping Winthrop sleeping next to me and still snoring before life gets too real again—before I have to deal with the glaring fact that I *just slept with my boss*.

Big yikes.

But where is my phone, anyway? My eyes scan the darkness.

I gave it to Brock last night before we left my room. He put it in his jacket, I think.

So, where's his jacket?

I start replaying last night in my head. The suite is so huge it has a large sitting room and a fireplace outside the bedroom.

Even though he's sleeping, I'm suddenly shy again. I think I only survived being naked with him last night because I was so lust-drunk.

In the faint blue morning light, without the adrenaline rush, I'd be *mortified*.

So I creep to the edge of the bed and stand up slowly.

Damn, it's cold.

I snatch the throw blanket from the bed and pull it around me for warmth. As I move around the bed, it comes off Brock.

"Sorry," I whisper.

I'll put it back in a minute.

He starts to stir, and I really don't want him to wake up before I'm dressed.

I grab the robe I left on the floor before our last round and throw it on before I toss the blanket over him.

Somewhere in the distance, my phone goes off again.

He's still asleep. Thank God.

I scurry through the open door, searching.

Where is his fucking jacket?

He draped it over me in the elevator. I survey the floor, but I don't find it, even with the ringtone getting louder and not stopping.

A lump builds in my throat.

What if it's not just Jenn pestering me at the crack of dawn?

Where is that stupid coat?

I stoop over, but there's only one thing on the floor.

A shiny white keycard. I pick it up, open the door, and laugh.

There's a grey pile on the floor between the elevator and the suite.

Bingo.

In all the excitement last night, it must have fallen off before we got inside and neither of us noticed.

I lift the jacket and find a black heel under it. Oh, I lost a shoe last night too?

That wine must have been good—or maybe it was all boss snarlypants and his sexy whispers.

Heat throbs through me.

I grab the heel and slide the jacket over my shoulders just to have a free hand before I dig the phone out of the pocket.

A number I don't recognize flashes across the screen. I swipe the green icon.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God! Finally!” Maisy screams. “Pippa, where are you? Can you come home early?”

“We're leaving tonight. What's wrong?”

“We're...we're at the hospital and they're asking if Dad has a DNR, and I don't know what that means, and—”

I fall back and bang the wall.

Everything starts spinning. My heart tries to beat right out of my chest and I'm instantly nauseous.

“Why would they ask you that?”

“Because he needs emergency surgery! And with his meds and the anesthesia—”

“He doesn't have a DNR, Maisy. Go tell them.” I'm trying not to scream. “Jesus, what happened? Have they cut him open? Is it his heart?”

“No. Nothing like that yet.”

“The medications again? I swear to God, if that quack didn't give him the right dosage—”

“He had a fall. An accident,” she says quickly, sniffing back tears. “I woke up really early and must've made too much noise, so he got up too.”

He went out there when it was still dark for the morning paper. I was making coffee when I noticed he was gone too long... I found him on the sidewalk. Banged up and barely breathing. Those stupid stairs, I *told him* we should have gotten the railing fixed and so did you.”

“Yeah,” I say weakly. “So he’s still in one piece, though?”

“He broke a rib, I think, and passed out from the shock. They said a lot. Something about muscle damage too, I dunno. They had to look through a lot of records and sort out his meds before they could do anything.”

My hand flutters over my mouth.

God, I knew this trip was a bad idea.

I should have stayed home, Brock Winthrope and his caveman charms be damned.

And there I was in bed—waking up from the time of my life with my boss—while my dad was flat on the cold ground suffering.

I’m a craptacular daughter and a fail of a sister.

Maisy bursts into tears I know she’s barely held in then, rubbing salt in the wound.

“Mais, are you—”

“I’m fine,” she lies. But she starts crying harder, turning my heart into gravel. “Pippa, I’m just *scared*.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I should have told Winthrope to go to hell and stayed home. I knew something would happen if I wasn’t there—”

“What would you have done that I didn’t? I did the best I could!”

Shit. She’s right.

I sigh.

“Maisy, this isn’t your fault, and you shouldn’t be alone. Can you call Trina and her mom? I’m sorry. I’ll get home ASAP. Let me pack and check my flight options.”

“I thought you weren’t coming back until later?”

“I’ll find a commercial flight if I have to.”

“Are you sneaking out on me?” a masculine voice says behind me.

“Who’s that?” Maisy asks.

I whip around and see Brock’s silhouette in the doorway, rubbing his eyes, yawning like the tiger of a man he is.

“I’ll call you back in a few minutes, okay? Just make sure they know he doesn’t have a DNR.”

“DNR?” Brock says sharply.

I sigh. My life is a cosmic joke.

“I have to go. Just make sure he’s okay.”

“Piper, what the hell is going on?” Brock demands, scratching his chin.

I turn around to face my executioner, who’s dressed in nothing but boxers.

If it were any other morning, I’d be at his total mercy. But now...

“Good, you’re awake. I think I forgot my keycard last night—”

“What?”

“And I’m not sure where my other shoe is.”

“It’s in the bedroom doorway—but what’s happening?”

“Would it be a problem if I took a regular flight home soon? And can you call someone about my room key? I just need to get a new one ASAP so I can—”

He closes the space between us and snatches my hand so quickly I gasp.

“Piper, what the fuck? Who were you just on the phone with? And who do you need them to take care of?”

“My little sister,” I say distantly.

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah. But...but my dad isn’t.” My throat stings when I say it.

He closes his arms around me, all bright-blue eyes searching mine.

“What happened?”

“He had a fall. He’s in the hospital now. He has some issues—a lot of medications—so they asked Maisy if he has a DNR. She understandably freaked, assuming the worst, but I’m hoping it’s just standard procedure. But I can’t be here—”

I stop, watching him tear away and march through the room. He picks up the phone on the table and calls the front desk.

“This is Brock Winthrop. Have Piper Renee’s room packed and her belongings brought to my suite immediately.”

Someone on the other end must say something he doesn’t like.

“Just do it, I said. Don’t make me ask twice. I’ll expect everything in ten minutes. Move your asses.” He slams the phone down and guides me over to the couch.

“Um, there goes our cover,” I point out.

“We’ve found what we needed to here. And I’ll need to make a few more calls. Do you want to wait here?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I just need to get home.”

“I’m going to get you there. Your belongings probably won’t be here for a few, so come sit.” He motions to the couch and disappears into the bedroom suite.

I collapse on it under the weight of my own dark thoughts.

*Will I ever see my dad alive again?*

I totally get why Maisy was having a nervous breakdown.

Hot tears come pouring down my cheeks and I’m not a seventeen-year-old kid.

I can’t believe I did this.

*Any of it!*

If something happens to him, she’ll hate me forever.

And she should.

I let my selfishness take over. I let them talk me into thinking it would all just be peachy.

Oh, I can tell myself I left Maisy home for the weekend because I had to work. But that’s a cop-out.

If I’d just been honest with Brock, he would have let me stay in Seattle.

He’s not the dragon everyone thinks he is. And if I hadn’t come here, maybe I would have thought a lot harder before we upset our working relationship forever.

...I don’t even know how to process that in the middle of this crisis.

I’m still trying when he comes out of his room in khakis and a pale-green shirt that offsets his sapphire eyes.

“Green looks good on you,” I say numbly, as if he could choose the wrong color.

He walks up to me and wipes my tears away with his hand.

“Did something else happen while I was out of the room?” he asks.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m just—yeah.”

He sits down beside me and wraps an arm around me. “You don’t have to apologize. You’re right to be worried.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” I say miserably.

“You mean in my room?”

“In Chicago.”



He levels a sympathetic look on me. “I’m sorry. If I’d known about your problem—”

“I know! You gave me all the chances and I blew it. I’m so stupid!” I hiss.

“Stop it,” he growls, grabbing my face gently with both hands. “You would have heard her calling sooner if I hadn’t dropped my jacket in the damn hallway. This clusterfuck is nobody’s fault.”

“Okay,” I say weakly.

He taps his phone and presses it to his ear. “I need my jet ready ASAP. Change of plans. How soon can we leave?” He’s quiet for a minute. “And that’s the earliest there’s a runway?” He pauses. “Whatever, I’ll take it. Personal emergency. Yes, I’ll make plans for the rest of the team. I’ll be returning alone plus one person. Just be sure you have the plane restocked with coffee and a couple of those giant cinnamon rolls from the *Sweeter Grind* in town.”

A colossal cinnamon roll can’t fix this, but I’m smiling inside, even if it doesn’t show on my face.

He looks at me.

“We’ll leave in two hours. Is that fast enough?”

Before I can thank him, there’s a knock at the door, and he’s calling someone else.

I walk to the door and open it.

Two uniformed employees stomp in. One carries my duffel bag, and the other has a Winthrop-branded suitcase.

“Everything in your room has been packed, ma’am. We checked under the bed, and all the closets and drawers for good measure.” Thing Two hands me a black folder. “We just need you to sign acknowledging receipt.”

I do and watch them walk out immediately.

I should be happy as I stare at the luggage and the man pacing the room, making frantic conversation with someone—probably Keenan.

He’s surprised me again, charging to my rescue when I didn’t ask him to.

If there was ever any question about him earning my trust, it’s been answered with a shout.

But now that he has it, after all this is over, what will that mean?



## EMERGENCY EXIT (BROCK)



“**W**hat’s up, boss?” Keenan answers on the first ring.

“There’s been an emergency. I’m escorting an employee back to Seattle in the next two hours. I don’t think everyone else will be ready and packed, so I need you to find another charter flight for them.”

“Is Piper okay?” he says flatly.

Fuck.

Am I that obvious?

I glance over at her. Tears stream down her face in harsh red lines and she’s on the floor, holding her duffel bag.

“She’ll live,” I say coldly.

“I’m serious, bossman. Is she hurt?”

I go into the other room and shut the door. “Her father had a medical event. You don’t need to know more than that,” I snap off.

“Jeez, fine! I’ll find a charter.”

“Got it.” I toss the phone on the bed and peek out the narrow slit in the door.

She’s still on the floor with her luggage, looking so lost it hammers me in the chest.

“Sunshine?” She looks up at me as I step out, her green eyes glistening. “Do you want to change clothes? That robe isn’t ideal for the trip home and the dress from last night won’t be comfortable.”

“Right, yeah...” She nods. “Oh, the dress... How do I pack it to make sure it’s safe?”

“I’ll get you the garment bag.” I try to think of how to bring her back to reality without triggering a breakdown. “What hospital is your dad in?”

“Seattle Memorial.”

My next call is to Fyodor. He misses the first call, and I have to try again.

“Boss. You’re not back early, are you?” he asks over some Russian rock music blaring in the background.

“Not yet, but I will be arriving this afternoon. I’ll need a ride to the hospital immediately—”

“Hospital? Is everything all right?”

“Miss Renee’s father is at Seattle Memorial. He had a serious fall from what I can gather. I don’t know his first name, but he has two daughters. That’s where I need you. If you don’t find anyone under ‘Renee,’ then call HR and find out who her emergency contacts are. Tell them I authorized it. I need to know everything about his condition and a list of the best doctors for dealing with it.”

“Just in Seattle?”

“*The best, Fyo,*” I clip. “I don’t give a shit if you need to call Mayo and Johns Hopkins. Make sure they know I need them soon. Spare no expense.”

“On it. This may take time.”

“Get it done ASAP. I get the sense he’s not in the best shape, and Miss Renee will be devastated if he degrades more.”

“Yes, sir.”

I cut the call.

Then I walk to the nearest closet and find an empty garment bag. When I open the door, she’s still on the floor, but her gown is strewn over her luggage and she’s wearing a yellow sundress.

“Can you stand?” I ask, offering a hand.

She takes it and scrambles to her feet. “Maisy isn’t answering.”

“Maybe she’s busy visiting your father,” I suggest. Anything to ease her nerves. “I’ll have you home soon. Let me pack the rest of my crap and we’ll leave.”

“You’re coming?” Her eyes swell with surprise.

“I won’t have you flying home alone while you’re upset,” I growl.

“That’s a nice gesture, but... I don’t want to be a burden. And I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Good, because I’d make a shitty one.”

That gets an amused snort out of her.

Five minutes later, I’m collecting our bags and rolling them to the elevator.

“Let’s go,” I say.

She looks dazed as she gets up from the chair where she’s been sitting. “I can carry my stuff. There’s no reason for you to handle everything.”

“I’ve got it. You just worry about keeping up,” I say.

We head down the elevator and out the private entrance to the waiting limo.

The driver jumps out immediately and starts helping me load the bags before I slide into the car beside her.

“The ride to the airport isn’t long. We’ll be boarding the plane soon,” I promise.

She nods woodenly.

It’s a half-hour drive to the airport through dense Chicago traffic. We ride in silence.

The tension rolling off her makes the air so thick it’s hard to breathe.

Once we’re on the plane, I pull out my laptop and open my email as an easy distraction.

There’s plenty to do, even with a crisis hanging over my head.

Still, I don’t get much done.

Every time I glance over at Piper, she’s slouched down in the seat across from me, looking every bit like a downtrodden kitten dragged in from a storm.

Fucking miserable.

I can’t stand it.

So I walk to the back of the plane and fetch a pillow and blanket from the closet next to the flight attendant.

“Please freshen up Miss Renee’s coffee,” I tell her. I have no idea if it will help, but it’s what my grandparents always did. Grandma thought helping digestion was good for the heart.

I return with the stuff and sit down next to Piper. “Are you cold?”

She shakes her head.

“Neck pillow?” I offer, holding it up.

“I’m fine, Brock.”

My eyes sweep over her. “You don’t look fine.”

She glances away from me.

“I’ll live. This isn’t the first time he’s been through this. It’s just too soon, especially after the last time...” She trails off and shrugs. “His muscles are deteriorating. I have to believe that’s what caused the fall. But it seems like every time is worse—”

She talks like she doesn’t think he’ll be alive when she gets off the plane.

Goddamn, I hope Fyo has the best help money can buy on a plane to Seattle before we touch down.

“I wasn’t there,” she continues. “Not only was I gone, I missed seven calls from Maisy. *Seven.*”

The implication is clear.

Her sister is out of her element and scared shitless.

Looks like I’m a jackass after all. I shouldn’t have pushed her so hard to come with after she kept hinting at family problems.

“I’m sorry, Piper,” I say numbly.

“I feel horrible.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“You told me you needed to be home. I’m the guy who insisted you get on the plane.” I pinch my jaw, adding *you selfish prick* in my own mind.

“Do your other employees skip business trips because they have family issues?”

I nod. “Caring for a chronically ill parent is a valid excuse.”

She shakes her head. “It’s still my fault.”

“Why?”

“Because. I didn’t tell you. I went out of my way to keep it secret.”

Before I can respond, the flight attendant comes by with a carafe. “Here’s your coffee.”

“Coffee?” Piper asks. “I didn’t order more—”

“Drink it. You’ll feel better,” I say.

She lifts her freshly refilled cup with a sideways glance.

“Have you eaten today? I had them bring a few of those head-sized cinnamon rolls aboard,” I say, still trying to play it cool.

“They’re awesome, but...too much sugar.” She sips her coffee and waves a hand. “I’m just not hungry yet. And you’re being way too sweet.”

I say nothing.

I hate that I can’t hide how much I care.

“How long has your dad been sick?” I ask, slurping my own coffee slowly.

“About ten years.”

“Since you were fourteen?”

She nods.

“Does your mother help take care of him?”

“She—umm—she isn’t around. She left after Maisy was born. She said Dad didn’t view her as anything but a nanny, and she had to find herself. So she ran off to this organic farm in California. Basically at the expense of ever giving a crap about her family again,” she says bitterly.

Damn.

Now I get it. Piper has always stepped up as a surrogate mother, all while she’s been tied down caring for her old man on top of it.

“That must have been hard,” I tell her.

“It is what it is. I’m just sorry for Maisy. I always wanted to save her from my stress. I hoped she’d have the most normal life possible, but now with Dad’s health, she’s just as stuck—and practically alone.” She sighs.

I wish I could grab the invisible weight crushing her and throw it the fuck off.

“Maisy has you,” I say firmly.

She looks at me blankly, her green eyes dark.

Fuck, I’m not good at this whole gentleman thing. Why am I trying so hard to play Dr. Phil?

“I should get back to work and stop bugging you. Try to get some sleep,” I tell her.

For a moment, she’s quiet, keeping her eyes on me.

“Brock...”

I look at her and she blushes, hiding a pixie smile. The first hint of the real Piper Renee I’ve seen today and it’s a small relief.

“I always make it out of this one way or another. But I appreciate your help. It definitely makes everything easier,” she admits.

“Good to know.”

I move back to my seat and pretend not to care.

Yet, as I'm checking my email, I keep one eye trained on the beautiful, broken creature across from me, wondering what the fuck happens next if I can't get my inner nice guy back on his leash.



I WAIT in the town car while Piper walks into the hospital to see her old man.

She'll need a ride home and she deserves some privacy.

"Boss, you should open your laptop," Fyo says, his dark eyes looking back at me in the rearview mirror. "She'll believe you were working when she returns."

"What did you find out?" I ask, ignoring the suggestion.

"Not much. Harold Renee has a degenerative muscle disease related to an auto-immune condition. The name is—I can't even pronounce it in Russian, much less English. It's affecting his heart. I found a research nurse who's helping locate the best doctors for this, but you must send her his files. To get his files, you need a signature—or if he's in the hospital Miss Piper can sign. I can't sneak through HIPAA barbed wire."

"Understood. Thanks, Fyo," I add.

He nods back at me in the mirror.

Almost two hours pass, and I'm growing more anxious by the minute. If no news is good news, this is fucking torture.

"Boss, if you want to go home, I'll pick her up whenever she calls. No need for you to linger after a long flight."

"You don't enjoy my company?" I bite off, glaring.

It takes him a second to realize I'm joking.

Then he shakes with big, bearish laughter. "Like hell. A busy man like you doesn't have time to kill in the back seat."

"Regardless. I need to stay," I say.

That surprises even me.

Why do I really need to be here?

I don't know Harold Renee from Adam. I just shared one sheet-ripping night with his daughter, a reckless decision that's bound to cause



aftershocks.

“If this is too forward, forgive me. But you really seem to care about her.” Fyo looks back at me carefully.

I snort. “That’s too fucking forward, and it’s not like that. She’s new to the company and rather important. I want her to know she’s supported.”

Fyo chuckles with that bone-rattling laugh.

“Supported. Whatever you say, Mr. Winthrope.”

“Oh, please.” I roll my eyes. “Did you ever think you’d be handing out love advice when you were sitting on a Soviet tank in Afghanistan?”

“No,” Fyo says sharply. “However, I was training a new tank driver once. I waited outside his tent while he was taking his written test. Just so he’d feel supported as good comrade.”

“Really?” I blink at him.

“No. But I thought you’d enjoy how stupid that sounds if I say I did the same thing you’re doing with her.”

My jaw clenches.

“You know I sign your checks, right?” I growl through my teeth.

“*Da*. Like you know you’ll never find another driver willing to break laws to dig through your woman’s father’s medical records, yes?”

“She’s not my woman,” I say with a sharpness that betrays me. “Stop calling her that. She’s just a VIP on a critical assignment, and I’m protecting her mental health.”

“Whatever helps you sleep,” he throws back. “When you’re ready to treat her like a real man, I know this new Italian place in Ballard that’s very romantic—”

I’m so done with his shit.

I punch the button to pull the privacy screen up, slumping back in my seat.

Thankfully, Piper emerges then, walking toward us with a tall, younger blond girl. The sister, I assume.

I climb out of the limo and get the door for them.

She smiles when she sees me. “You’re still here? I would have called an Uber. It’s been hours.”

“I told you I’d wait, Miss Renee, and I’m true to my word.”

“But we’re back to ‘Miss Renee?’” she whispers, leaning her lips to my ear.

I bite back a smile and shake my head.

“Thank you, though,” she says.

“Just get in.” I wave my hand in front of the open door.

“You go first, Maisy,” she says to the shy young thing behind her.

The girl looks like a gazelle as she walks past, still rangy and growing into herself, but I see the resemblance in the strawberry-blond hair and forest-green eyes.

Piper slides in behind her and I follow.

“What’s the verdict? When will your father be released?” I ask.

“Maybe as early as tomorrow. He’s banged up pretty good, but it’s manageable. They just don’t know if the fall means there’s a bigger problem. Everything depends on the next round of tests. He has to stay through tonight.” Her face is tight.

“What happened?”

“He could’ve missed a step and taken a tumble—or maybe he’s losing muscle control faster than they said. Honestly, they don’t know yet. They said the muscles in his stomach were affected from the blow too, so it’s hard for him to eat.”

Shit.

This old man has it bad.

“I’m sorry, Piper. Let me know if I can do anything.”

“We’ll be fine from here. You’ve already done so much,” she promises with a nod.

I lower the privacy screen. “Fyo, take us to Miss Renee’s place, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

The smug way his eyes flick back remind me he hasn’t forgotten our little skirmish earlier. For the sake of the girls, I’ll hold my fire.

“Wow. If Dad wasn’t sick, this would be so cool!” Maisy whispers to her sister. She inhales deeply like the leather-scented interior rivals a pie shop.

“What?” Piper asks.

“Your company ride, Pippy! Pretty badass.”

“Pippy?” I ask.

Piper’s face turns into an oversized tomato before she answers.

“When Mais here was learning how to talk, she couldn’t say my name. It came out as Pippy, and it just kind of stuck. She still calls me that

sometimes, and so does Dad when he thinks I won't slug him for it. But it's Pippa to everyone else."

"I'm calling you that now, Miss Pippy," I say, my face deadpan.

"You're *not*."

The shit-eating grin I aim at her says I've just found a fun new way to annoy her.

Maisy giggles, pressing a hand over her mouth. "He's cool already. I don't know why you're always saying your boss blows the goat."

"I heard that," I clip. "So she talks about me at home, huh? And I promise I've never blown *any* goats."

"Maisy!" Piper hisses.

"Eh, she's just afraid I'll tell you I know how you guys met." Maisy turns bright red like her big sister, as if she's said too much, and puts both hands over her mouth. "Um. Never mind."

"Your sister knows about Lanai?" I raise a brow, my eyes snapping to Piper.

"Jenn has a big mouth and no filter." She shrugs.

"What all did you tell her?" I'll admit I'm fucked in the head when I enjoy making her squirm this much.

"You really want to know?" she huffs. "I said you broke in planning to murder me in the middle of the night, but you were too big a hygiene freak to finish the job. So you decided to shower instead."

"She said you were hot," Maisy says point-blank.

I think I like this kid.

Piper's face goes scarlet and she tries to form words, waving a hand. "He knows he's—well, not unattractive. Not exactly breaking news to anyone with a beating pulse, Maisy."

"I believe hot was her chosen word," I say. "Otherwise known as handsome. Fire. A dream come true, sent down from Olympus and wrapped in a stack of honed muscle and blue eyes I borrowed from Zeus."

"Can we change the subject, Mr. Winthrop?" she bites off. "You're a stack of honed *something*, alright. I'll agree with that."

I scratch my cheek, hiding a smile.

Considering the circumstances, I'll let it go this once.

When we get to her house, I lower the screen again. "Fyo, please help Miss Maisy out first."

“Yes, sir.”

He gets out and holds the door open.

“Mad cool!” Maisy chirps again. “It’s like I’m a girl in one of your books, Pippa.”

“What books?” I ask after I step out of the car, so Piper can get out on my side.

“Oh, um...there’s this whole genre of sexy books she likes. That’s been her jam since she was ten and started reading Jane Austen. Pretty sure watching the movies on BBC got her hooked on her dumb bird stuff too,” Maisy says with a grin. “Do help Miss Emma down from the carriage,” she says in a fake English accent.

I chuckle, leaning closer to a mortified Piper. “I’m not sure why you worry so much. There’s a kid with too much time on her hands. She could already do voice acting.”

Piper shakes her head.

“Nope. That’s a kid who missed too many electives and had to find new hobbies. All because I’m not home enough.” The guilt in her voice is palpable.

Maisy races up the short flight of stairs to the porch, and Piper is about to follow, but I catch her arm.

She meets my eyes.

“You’re her sister, not her mom. You know that, right?”

“I’m the closest thing she gets.”

“You shouldn’t take on the entire burden of raising a teenage girl,” I say. This isn’t what I wanted to talk about. I swallow thickly. “On second thought, change of plans. Pack your stuff and stay with me.”

She jerks to a stop and stares at me.

“Wait. What?”

“Bring your sister, too. We can catch up on the work we should have done today. You’ll be closer to the hospital if you need to get to your dad quickly. You’ll also have Fyo at your service around the clock. He lives in my guesthouse with his wife, so he’s always there.”

Is she hyperventilating?

Her chest rises in shallow waves. I barely resist the urge to reach out and steady her, but I know she won’t want to hand her little sister more ammo to torment her.

“Brock, I... I appreciate the offer. I really do. But I don’t think it would be right.”

You know what?

Fuck optics.

I pull her tight to my chest, closing my arms around her.

If I’m being honest, it’s not all empathy. I’m letting my selfishness take control.

Work is just an excuse.

I want her with me.

I want her protected, especially when she’s hurting and vulnerable.

I want to know she’s okay at all times.

Yes, that’s fucked up.

We barely know each other outside the banter and demented monkey-sex that’s left me craving more.

Once I had her, I thought she’d be out of my system.

I was dead wrong.

She finally relaxes, laying her head on my chest and giving me a subtle squeeze back.

“Well, we were supposed to talk about countering those reviews while you go after the Finch angle. But are you sure? Like positive-positive?” she asks softly.

I stroke her hair, flashing her a look so hot my eyes burn.

“Yes.”

“And your bachelor pad has enough space for Maisy and me?”

“Absolutely. Space isn’t a concern,” I say.

She’s so innocent. If this weren’t so serious, I’d double over laughing at her question.

She glances at the porch, where Maisy has already run inside, leaving the door hanging open.

My gaze follows her eyes.

Piper looks back at me slowly. I can practically see the wheels turning in her head, all the questions and fears and hopes tangled together.

I get my final answer a minute later when she leans up on her toes and gives me those lips.

It’s supposed to be sweet. Chaste. Grateful.

With her, it can never just be innocent.

I'm growling when my tongue finds hers. I kiss her tenderly, digging my teeth into her lip, and only pulling away when I sense Fyo's wandering eyes trained on me the entire time.

*What the fuck ever.*

Let him gawk and throw endless shit at me later.

Before Piper, there's no way I'd ever kiss an employee. Especially not here in the open with my right-hand man staring.

But I just did.

I inhaled her and I'm still doing it.

She places a hand on my arm, shaking as she pulls away.

"Why don't you come in? Packing might take Maisy a while."

I nod and start to follow her when I hear a window pull down.

"Boss?" Fyo calls from the car.

"Stay. We'll be back in half an hour or so," I say, hoping that's long enough for the teenager.

I study him. He's looking past me, watching Piper, none of the smarmy look I expected on his face.

"What?" I ask again.

"You remember that tank driver? The one I waited for?" he asks distantly.

"The one that doesn't exist? Yeah." I'm not sure where he's going with this.

"Something else you should know. I also French-kissed him like our ship was sinking," he says gruffly. "You know. Just so he'd feel supported."

"Fyodor?"

He looks at me, biting back his laughter.

"Drive yourself straight to hell, you miserable fuck," I snarl.

There's that laughing fit.

Hell of a time to be everyone's joke today.

"Boss, wait. I've been with you for years." He stifles a laugh, trying so hard to keep a straight face. "Haven't I done my time in hell?"

"Old man, you're lucky I like you and you're good at what you do," I say. I also know I'll need his skills for this showdown with Apollo Finch, even if his sense of humor resembles a flaming bag of dog crap.

"You're lucky I drive you," he says seriously, tapping the wheel.

I start walking toward the house and shoot a middle finger behind my back.

“Do it again and I’m telling your grandmother!” he shouts.

I turn to face him, hellfire in my eyes. “If you do, wave goodbye to your Christmas bonus.”

Fyo chuckles, undeterred.

“What? What’s so damn funny?”

“You’re thirty-one and still afraid of *babushka*.”

“I’m not afraid.”

He mutters something in Russian behind his laughter. “Okay, yes, and you also don’t have a girlfriend you’re moving in.”

Prick.

As I head into the small house, I just hope the entire world doesn’t start thinking the same shit.

There are still a thousand reasons why Piper Renee can’t ever be mine.

She doesn’t fit into my life, and I’m just blowing gaping holes through hers with each passing day.

I’ll help her and drag her body into sin, but I know damn well this strange, infuriating, impossible thing we’ve fallen into can’t last forever.

All good things must end.





## PLUS ONE (PIPER)



I swear we've been driving forever and we still haven't reached Brock's place.

"How is this closer to the hospital?" I hope I don't sound bitchy.

I've been fidgeting with my hands for so long my fingers are covered in half-moon indents from my nails.

"Fyodor takes this route to avoid the worst of rush hour. Give your fingers a rest, Sunshine. He'll be fine." He reaches over and takes my hand, stopping me from doing more idle damage.

"You think so? I wish I had your confidence..."

Maisy stiffens beside me.

Oops. I shouldn't have blurted out my thoughts.

"I'm sure, Piper. Especially if they're already talking about discharging him like you said this morning."

"But there'll be a ton of follow-ups," I say weakly.

Brock nods. "Absolutely. And he'll be home, ready to handle the care he needs."

I side-eye him. Why does he sound so certain?

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I've dealt with hospitals before," he tells me, looking out the window.

"Your parents?" I ask.

"No."

"Your grandparents—"

"No."

“Pippa, get a clue. Boss dude doesn’t want to talk about it,” Maisy snaps.

I shoot her a dirty look, hating that she might be right.

My face heats.

She’d better hope Dad comes home ASAP. She might need to beg him to intervene before I choke her.

Maisy looks at Brock and says, “How long have you guys been dating, anyway? She’s hid it pretty well if you’re already used to taking that much crap from her.”

Oh, God.

Brock chuckles. “I’m her boss. Nothing more.”

“Um, okay? But I saw you guys kissing from the window,” she says under her breath.

“You were watching us?” My voice is shrill, panicked.

Brock gives me a stern look.

“I saw it, too,” Fyo chimes in from the front.

I’m so flipping dead.

“Never mind him. He has the vision of a vodka-drenched mole.” Brock taps the controls at his side, raising the privacy screen.

I bury my face in my hands.

“Kindly leave her alone,” Brock says. “Your sister’s got a lot on her plate.”

What? I drop my hands.

He’s talking to Maisy, but the way he looks at me scrapes me so raw.

Until my brat of a sister giggles.

“What?” he asks.

“You’re just funny. You think I need your permission to harass my sister?”

“Fine. I’ll pay you to be quiet then,” he clips.

Maisy’s eyes go wide. “Seriously? How much?”

“Twenty bucks,” Brock tells her.

Maisy wrinkles her nose.

Oh, boy. Are we really negotiating over my sister’s stupid jokes?

“Thirty,” she counters.

Brock chuckles. “Thirty it is. I left a stack of three-dollar bills somewhere.”

Now it's my turn to laugh. It comes out so sharp and unexpected my belly hurts as Maisy realizes she's been beat.

"Keep laughing it up, chucklefreaks. You guys suck. No *wonder* you're together," Maisy says bitterly. "Should I tell him his nickname, Pippy?"

Brock's smile fades as he looks at Maisy again. "I have an alias?"

*Crap.*

"She gave you the nickname, not me. Her and Jenn..."

"This kid is going to be hell in the boardroom someday," he says. "Do I want to know?"

Maisy looks at me and must sense I'm about to explode.

"I'm Venmoing you five bucks for coffee now. Will you shut it?" I snap. "And for the record, I'm twenty-four and I can kiss any man I want, thank you very much. Especially when I'm all emotional and my boss is just trying to be nice. But I don't want *you* getting any crazy ideas, Mais. If you mention kissing again, I'll—" I stop. *I'll what?* There's not much I can do. "I won't buy you pizza. Ever again."

Maisy gasps.

I guess the big stick works sometimes.

"I'll buy it. I'm enjoying the show too much," Brock says. I give him a glare that could melt the paint off this car. "Or maybe I won't."

Maisy's phone dings and she glances at the screen.

"There's my cash! No more BS, I promise. I need pizza." She grins. "Pleasure doin' business with you, sis." She tips a hat she isn't wearing.

*Ugh, this girl. How are we related again?*

"In my next life, I'm going to be the youngest," I say. "And I'll make sure you're my mother so I can turn you grey by thirty."

Brock is still grinning beside me. Even when he's being a dick, there's no denying I love that.

"You two should be grateful you have each other. Being an only child sucks more."

Maisy leans up in her seat. "See? Listen to him. Be grateful, Pippa."

When I look up from the jousting, we're on a private road, pulling up to a lush green hilly yard peeking out at us from the openings in a tall rod iron fence.

This isn't a house.

It's a freaking compound.

An old-school *estate* in every sense of the word.

Fyodor pulls up to a keypad with his window down, enters a code, and the gate swings open.

A minute later, we're stepping out of the car in front of the most picturesque mansion I've ever seen, complete with crawling vines and palatial white modern vibes. There's even the guesthouse behind it he mentioned, an acre or two away from this castle.

"Holy..." Maisy rubs her eyes.

She's not the only one. I'm so awestruck I can't blink.

"Problem, Sunshine?" he whispers.

"I'm just surprised. I always saw you as more of a sleek, urban penthouse kind of guy. More minimalist."

He shrugs. "Too much time with my grandparents growing up. Guess their tastes rubbed off. My grandmother is an American country girl who always loved the rustic look."

"I thought your grandparents were English?"

"Gramps, yes, but Grandma came from upstate New York originally. She's half-English now though. Her accent is mostly English socialite and with a touch of pure Yankee," he tells me.

*Interesting.*

Hearing about his family is a nice distraction from my own troubles.

We follow him toward the house while Fyo grabs the luggage. As he leads us through the yawning door, Maisy asks, "Has anyone ever gotten lost in here?"

I want to tell her to mind her manners, but honestly, I'm wondering the same thing.

This place looks more like an art museum or some kind of imposing government building than an actual home.

The floors are pure striped marble.

The ceilings might be fourteen feet high, and even taller in the entryway.

A crystal chandelier dangles in the foyer, a fusion of regal old-world glasswork and modern edges.

Then I hear it.

This high-pitched yelping noise—and it's coming straight toward us.

Gah.

Surely he doesn't have an ex-wife locked in the attic...

I scan the room, trying to find the source, just as the squealy sound spills into high-pitched barking.

"You have a dog?" I'm still surveying the room, questioning my own ears.

Brock claps his hands and whistles. "Andouille!"

Something clatters on the staircase.

There's the distinct sound of little nails slapping the floor, and then more high-pitched barking as a long, fat sausage shape lumbers toward us.

I'm already laughing when the panting black-and-brown wiener dog comes bouncing off the last stair and slams into Brock's leg. It's definitely the biggest dachshund I've ever seen.

He bends over it and picks it up.

"Andy, you okay?" He strokes its head as a long pink tongue wags out and slurps his face. "You're breathing hard again. Don't tell me it's time for the doctor again."

The panting gets worse and the dog coughs a few times.

Andouille breaks into another happy bark a second later as Brock strokes the dog's back.

If his goal was to slaughter me with cuteness, it's a done deal.

"He has asthma," Brock explains. "I have to be careful with him when he's overly excited."

"This cute little guy?" Maisy asks. "Awww!"

She reaches up to join in the round of petting, and so do I.

"I'm still caught up on the fact he has a wiener dog named after a sausage," I say.

"He's technically a doxador—mostly dachshund with a dash of lab mixed in." Brock holds his head up. "My grandma thought I needed a friend when I got home from Afghanistan. Andouille came from a litter she raised herself in London. The puppy came home with me on a transatlantic flight."

"Your grammy named him? I love it," Maisy says, laughing as the dog licks her hand.

I look at Brock as a slow, tight smile appears in his halo of beard.

"No. The name was all me."

Oh my God.

I can't help giggling.

“Thank you for having us,” I say, squeezing his hand. “Even Maisy’s bad jokes are a decent distraction.”

“Sorry,” Maisy says. “I wouldn’t have teased you this much at home, but—” She stops mid-sentence and her face scrunches up. I can see her struggling for words.

“It keeps your mind off Dad. I know. It’s fine, you brat,” I tell her.

My big little sister comes up behind me and gives me a quick hug. “Can I hold the pup?”

Brock nods. “Just be careful. If it seems like he’s panting too much, tell me.” He hands her the dog like it’s an overgrown baby.

I smile. “You’re one protective dog father.”

“I’m no dog father. Andy’s my best friend.”

Andy yowls his agreement.

“Your best friend is a dog?” I say, still laughing.

Well, that explains a lot. I’m not surprised a grumpmuffin prefers nonhuman company.

“In his younger years, he’d travel with me often. This dog has more hours on planes than some pilots,” Brock says proudly. “Now, with the asthma, he usually hangs back in good care when I’m busy.”

“Adorable!” I’m still about to fall right over at the fact that Brock damn Winthrop is an animal person. *Who knew?*

My phone vibrates against my hip. I grab it from my pocket.

*Please don’t be the hospital.*

Nope. Just a text from Jenn.

***Jenn: Hi, are you okay? I heard you left Seattle with Mr. Unnameable. Some emergency?***

***Piper: Dad’s in the hospital again. Sorry, it’s been hectic and I didn’t think to text you. Brock got his private jet to take me back early.***

Her response is immediate. ***How’s he holding up? I’m so sorry, Piper.***

***Piper: He’s okay for now. I’ll call you later.***

I drop the phone back in my pocket and lean toward Brock’s ear. “So, not to worry you, but I think everyone else is on the way home from Chicago right now...and our absence was noticed.”

“Don’t worry. I told Keenan what was going on before we left. He’ll handle it,” he says with total confidence. “Let me show you girls around the house.”

Fyo comes in with the rest of our bags.

I turn to face him. “Sorry. I forgot we had so much stuff in the trunk. I would have brought it in myself.”

The big man smiles and shakes his head, glancing at Brock. “Guest wing or your wing?”

*Wing? His house has entire wings?*

I should be screaming, but I still can’t get over the weenie dog, who’s sniffing my feet now.

“See? That’s so Emma,” Maisy squeaks, yanking on my shoulder.

Dang. I’ve really got to get her back into soccer to burn off some energy.

Brock looks at me. “My wing would make it easier for us to work together. I assume Miss Maisy is old enough to pick her own room?”

I nod.

“Good. I’ll take the bags up, Fyo,” he tells his driver.

“Wait.” I rush after him. “We can do that ourselves—”

“Let me.” Brock cuts me off, lumbering toward the grandest elevator I’ve ever seen in a house—actually, I’ve never seen an elevator in a house at all—before I can say anything. “You can follow us up, so you know your way around,” he throws back.

O-kay then.

I shrug and follow him with Maisy and a bouncing Andouille trailing behind me.



SO MUCH FOR focusing on work.

I keep checking my phone with my stomach in knots to see if the hospital called or even Dad himself. Neither happens by evening the next day.

Maisy is so enchanted with her room she’s much happier. The entire place, really, and the dog is just the icing on her Mr. Darcy fantasies.

Her private bathroom is bigger than any room in our own house. There’s a small dressing room in front of the closet.

Andy hasn't emerged since he followed her back inside after breakfast, and Fyo brought her a new TV and a laptop.

I'm so never living this down.

Not when my boss slash dirty secret is spoiling my little sister with goods that are going to make her head bigger than a hot air balloon.

I owe it to him to try to work—however insanely elusive it seems.

We're sitting in his library-like office for what seems like hours, but it's unproductive. Without Jenn, I can only slog through so much, picking at old ads and ideas for video shorts that'll make Winthrop more than its trash reviews.

I check my phone again and sigh.

"That's the eleventh time," he growls suddenly.

I jump in my seat.

"You don't have to push yourself so hard, Piper. Take breaks. Don't let the worries swallow you," he says.

Of course, in his royal-blue button-down shirt and a pair of reading glasses I've never seen before, he looks every bit like a hot professor.

*Not helpful.*

"We're on a deadline," I say.

"Are we? I'll let your tyrant boss know you need a break."

I shake my head. "He won't care. He's kind of a big dick, and I always meet my deadlines."

"He'll appreciate you for remembering the big dick," he says, trying not to smile. "And I know you take deadlines seriously, but it's okay to be human. You've got a lot on your mind. I'd rather have you working efficiently than rushing through this."

"I'll do a good job. I've got this."

"Pick up your laptop. We're going for a change of scenery and fresh air."

I stare at him.

What could *ever* be wrong with this scenery? This room is like every librarian's dirty fantasy with bookshelves soaring to the ceilings and a pleasant wood scent tinged with old books.

But I don't protest.

When he stands and starts heading for the door, I pick up my laptop and follow.



The small study just outside has tons of sunlight. It's all glass, overlooking the Puget Sound. I'm so stunned I sit on the edge of his massive desk.

A few small round chickadees go soaring off a branch, dancing around the manicured trees closest to the windows.

Those little birds always make me smile, and I guess it's too obvious. I'm not expecting his hand when it falls on my shoulder.

"Explain the bird thing," he growls in my ear. "Was it really just too many documentaries like your sister said? I don't see the appeal."

I look up at him. "You're missing out. I guess it started when I was young—Dad used to have a boat and I was so scared of the water. But then one day this little finch landed next to me while we were out sailing. He wouldn't leave. The little guy just kept singing his heart out, and before I knew it, we were out on the water, halfway to Bremerton where I'd always get scared."

"A comfort animal," he says with a nod.

"Yeah. And I just thought maybe if that little bird was brave enough to be out here sunning himself, totally fearless, why not me?"

"It's a nice story," he whispers, rubbing my shoulders.

It's also nice sharing it, something I've never done with anyone else. I look up at him and smile, stealing a kiss.

When I look back at the window, something moves in the shimmering water—a harbor seal, I think.

"Jesus," I breathe. "Is every part of this house heaven?"

"It's gorgeous scenery. Relaxing. Even an oversexed asshole needs to unwind," he explains. "Whenever I feel like I'm about to wreck my company and make my grandparents disown me, I work from this room."

"I can see why," I say, turning slowly to take in the panoramic views.

And then I realize what he just said.

"Oh. Would your grandparents really turn you out if you tanked the company?"

He sighs.

"No—and that makes it worse. If I destroy their legacy, they'd be too understanding."

"I mean, evil reviews aside, I don't think you have to worry about much. You're a hardass, but the company runs well for the most part. And

even if you left, I'm sure people would keep working out of fear you'd return."

He glares at me.

"There's more to leadership than having people tell their children you're the monster under their bed, and the negative reviews—"

"Aren't your fault," I finish. "We'll take care of them as soon as we can."

He flops down in his leather chair and taps his desk, gesturing to the seat across from him.

"Only if we get to work," he says, turning back to his screen.

I sit down and work for thirty seconds before I'm staring out the glass wall at the Puget Sound.

Yeah, there's no way I'm finding my marketing magic here. Especially when the gorgeous view of the water isn't the only pristine sight in front of me.

Brock's mile-wide shoulders roll with every breath, light and rhythmic.

The man is just *breathing*, and he still looks like a giant.

We work diligently—I *try*—for the next hour.

Then his phone dings and I glance at the time.

It's coming up on five o'clock and we need to get an early start tomorrow. So I pick up my laptop, ready to start heading back to my room.

"Sunshine?" he calls.

My hand lingers on the doorknob as I look back at him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"There's an email we need to talk about."

"Okay." I walk over next to him.

"I hired a medical research firm to look into your dad's condition—"

"You—what? Why? How?"

My whole world starts spinning.

He shrugs like he just told me he ordered us lunch.

"I had a team inquiring this morning. You'd be surprised how little red tape exists when the hospital director belongs to the same country club. Now, I just need your signature to get his records sent over."

Oh my God.

Am I still breathing?

"Brock. This is...really not necessary," I force out.

“Pippy—”

“You’re not calling me Pippy now!”

“I told you I was.” There’s a smile somewhere in his electric-blue eyes.

“Sunshine, his condition is serious, I don’t need to tell you. The muscular issues causing him so much grief are beyond the reach of your average doctors from a very average city hospital. That’s why we need backup.”

“I’m aware. He’s in the hospital now because his muscle control keeps getting worse...”

“Degenerative myelopathy is nothing to play around with. He could take a turn for the worse rapidly if he doesn’t get more than pills and physical therapy. He needs real treatment.”

I sit down on the edge of the table.

“I know. That’s what I’ve been worried about. But it’s a progressive disease. There’s no cure.”

“There’s a new treatment, or so I’ve heard. It hasn’t been approved by the FDA yet, so it’s not available in the US outside carefully controlled trials—”

“Whoa, whoa.” I hold up my hands and stare at him. “Look, I appreciate you for digging, but medical tourism isn’t an option. Plus, new usually means ungodly expensive and impossible to get on a waiting list.”

“Family care is an employee perk at Winthrope.”

I shake my head. “You know I can’t put my dad on my health insurance.” I shrug. “He gets VA healthcare anyway—”

“VA? Your father’s a veteran?”

I nod. “It pays for the usual junk that might keep him alive and sort of comfortable for a while. But there have been lots of treatments it wouldn’t pay for, and if it isn’t approved in the States—”

“He’s going to Mexico. I can have him on a plane the instant he’s cleared to travel if you say yes.”

My heart stalls.

“Piper—” he starts.

I stagger back against the glass wall. “No way. Brock, you can’t make that offer. He’d never agree to it, for one.”

“Disagree. What man turns down *free* treatment to improve his life?”

“Improve it how?” I challenge.

“I’m no doctor. However, I’ve heard gene therapy can actually reverse some muscular damage at the cellular level. It won’t be easy and nothing’s guaranteed. He’ll still need regular physical therapy to build back his strength, but without the treatment and proper therapy, he doesn’t have a chance at a true recovery.”

I hate him for being so generous. Almost as much as I hate him for being right.

But I know there isn’t a prayer this works.

Hiding a few bill payments from Dad is one thing. But this?

The man hates handouts.

I’m not sure he’d be keen about leaving the country for treatment. But if it could give him his life back, shouldn’t we try?

“I don’t know. This sounds intense and expensive. It’s above and beyond anything you should ever do for me.”

“If you don’t want to consider it a company perk—which it is—fine. I’ll never deny healthcare to anyone that’s well within my means, especially a fellow veteran.”

“He’s not in the best shape,” I say, grasping at excuses. “I don’t like the idea of him being in Mexico alone.”

“Send your sister. She’s off for the summer, isn’t she?”

I blink. “How long are we talking?”

He shrugs. “A few weeks, maybe a month or two tops. I’ll get more details from the medical team.”

“Maisy would lose her mind,” I say with a long sigh.

“She’ll have the time of her life. Most schools have programs for earning extra credit for kids her age,” he says, leaning toward me across the table. “Don’t tell me she hasn’t been begging to travel like her big sister.”

God, he’s making this *hard*.

“You’re in the middle of a PR crisis,” I say quietly. “I wouldn’t feel right, just taking your money for treatment when we’re...” I don’t finish that thought. “Look, I’m just not sure Dad will ever agree to this. He’s a stubborn donkey.”

Brock studies my face. “Is that where you get it from?”

I bite my lip and glare.

He laughs. “Piper, I want your dad well, and we can make that happen. Promise me you’ll think about it.”

I hesitate, our eyes locked in this flaming silence.

“I’ll *think* about it. But I’m not okay with letting my boss pay for anything this crazy, especially when we haven’t even talked about what happened in Chicago yet.”

“So talk,” he whispers.

I swallow.

*I’m so not ready.*

“Piper, if he doesn’t start treatment soon, you may never get a second chance. I assure you this is the best way. We’ll call it a performance bonus and write it off as a tax deduction.”

“I haven’t performed at all yet!” I point out.

Bad choice of words.

The defiant look he gives me might just leave me red-faced for the next century.

“Stop doubting yourself. Stop doubting *me*. I never would have brought this up if I wasn’t completely comfortable with it. I expect nothing more from you than to do your job,” he growls.

“Okay. Thank you,” I say, turning for the door again.

But he’s up in an instant, grabbing my arm. “Where are you going, Sunshine?”

“Bed. I need a nap.”

“I have a very large, lonely, and comfortable bed just down the hall.” He pries the laptop out of my hand and sets it down.

I don’t even try to resist as he leads me into the grandest bedroom ever.

Inside, he pulls me closer, draping a blanket over me.

When he doesn’t make any moves to tear off my clothes, I’m stunned.

He guides me down on the huge bed with a kiss on the back of my neck.

Once we’re lying down, he wraps his arms around me, holding me so tight I feel his heart drumming against my skin.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I whisper.

“I don’t know what the future may bring any more than you do, but I enjoy your company, Piper Renee. I like whatever this is right now.”

*That makes two of us.*

“So, um, what happened in that trip—”

He brings me closer, and his breath on my neck silences me.

“It was goddamned intense. And when it happens again, we’ll make sure it’s under better circumstances,” he rumbles.

*When*, he says.

Holy hell.

This is too much.

Yes, I’m cocooned in his arms right now, but what’s to stop that from changing tomorrow?

He straight up didn’t promise me a future.

He’s still my boss and nothing else.

Before this weekend, I wasn’t even sure Brock Winthrop had a heart.

I’m falling too hard, too fast, too recklessly.

What if he comes to his senses and drops me like a hot potato?

Nothing good can come from living out this fantasy.

I’m trying not to cry as he strokes my hair, slowly threading his fingers through it. “What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“Like hell. Tell me.”

“I’m just worried,” I admit.

His grip tightens around me again as he leans in, pressing his lips to my cheek. “Your dad will get the best care, sweetheart. You have my word.”

That’s when my heart drops out.

Stolen and shattered by the world’s most eligible billionaire bachelor who will forget me the instant he finds his next supermodel to obsess over.

In the meantime, though, I’m going to close my eyes.

I’m going to enjoy this.

And I’m going to pretend this bossy lie we’re living can last forever.



## THE PARADISE PACKAGE (BROCK)



A few days later, Piper storms in and drops a hefty box of files on my desk.

Her normal hellcat smile is gone and there's a crease in her forehead.

"How are you?"

"Fine."

If that's fine, then I'm Mr. Fucking Rogers.

I wait for her to say more. When she doesn't, I nod at the files.

"What's this?"

"Part of your master plan. We finally have something concrete. You want to drown out the negative reviews with positive PR? Then we'll do it with honest reviews from real people," she says, her eyes flaring.

I pause, turning it over in my head. "For that to be effective, we'll need real people with a built-in following."

"Yep," she agrees.

I stare at her, wondering if the stress is clouding her thinking.

"Piper, we already tried that once. Everyone and their damn brother turned us down. They act like Winthrop properties will give them genital warts the second they walk through the door." I can't keep the bitter edge out of my voice.

"Well, yeah. You were going for A-listers for hotels that look like they're a C plus at best. They get showered with offers and it makes them crazy selective about what they do and where they go."

"So, what's the plan? Punch down?"



For the first time in days, she smiles.

Goddamn, do I love that sight.

“We go after newbies—successful ones who have been posting consistently three to six months and have a steady uptick in followers. They have enough fans to feed the algorithms, but probably aren’t getting enough freebies to scoff at luxury offers yet. Their reviews will be more generous. You’ll win with strength in numbers.”

I stare at the Seattle cityscape, the sun piercing through a grey ceiling of clouds. Her plan is damn near flawless.

I turn and say, “You’re brilliant. I’ll have Marketing start contacting influencers later today.”

She smiles, but this time it doesn’t touch her eyes.

“You know you can be in Mexico with your dad, right?” I say.

We’ve danced around the subject over the last week. Between my work schedule and her visits to the hospital, we’re like passing ships in the night. Always finding safe harbor in each other’s arms and exchanging few words.

“No, you solved my problem. Big-time. It’s only fair I stay here and take care of yours.”

“And you’ve done that,” I say. “What happens next involves more people doing their jobs well than you and Miss Landers.”

She holds my gaze.

Her eyes are shining, innocent and intense. I still hate the stress lining her face.

“Come here,” I say.

“What?”

I push my chair in and start walking around the desk. “Come, I said.”

She steps closer once I’m in front of her, and I pull her into my arms.

“I can get you on a flight to Mexico City in a matter of minutes. That isn’t a problem. I don’t want you to be stuck here, worried half to death. You’re no good to me when work is an afterthought.”

“I’d worry myself sick there too,” she admits.

“Strange. The woman I met in Lanai was carefree,” I whisper, tracing her cheek with my thumb.

She giggles as my hand skims down her neck.

“There’s my favorite sound again. Let’s hear it more.”

“I’m carefree until I’m not, Brock. I just try not to dwell on things I can’t control, and I’m not doing a great job lately. With Dad and Maisy gone...it’s hard. It’s always been the three of us for so long.”

I’d tell her I understand, but as an only child whose parents were never more than distant, self-absorbed authorities, I don’t. I’m damn lucky I had my grandparents.

“You’re right to worry about your family, Sunshine. If something happened to my grandparents, I’d be devastated. If you change your mind about Mexico, just say the word. I’ll have you flown down there on my own jet.”

She looks up, her eyes glistening as she bites her lip.

“...they said it could take weeks. Maybe even longer for the full treatment and to analyze everything. I can’t be gone that long—so what’s the point of leaving now?”

“You can be gone as long as you need,” I bite off. “Your job will still be here when you get back, and now that we have our direction, your direct involvement is ideal but not essential.”

She shakes her head like it’s a boulder.

“You’re losing your edge, dude. You keep that up and you might need to fire a few interns to keep up your bad reputation.”

Swallowing a laugh, I flip her around before she can react and swat her lush little ass.

The way she squeals turns my dick to diamond.

“Ow! What the hell was that?”

“Your idea. If I’m losing my tyrant edge, perhaps I’d better try corporal punishment next.”

She glares at me, her cheeks burning red.

“Hmm. I can tell you enjoyed it, which may be a problem,” I say, pretending to think deeply.

Then she kicks me in the shin and I stagger back, laughing.

“You’re still a massive dick. That’s in your DNA.”

“I’m lucky my father left me one significant asset, Pippa. And so are you.”

She jerks her face away from me and mutters, “You really are terrible. You know that, right?”

“I know I can send you away with a company laptop and whatever else you need. I’m sure I can also sneak away to join you in Mexico, if you’d like. You could keep working and check on your dad between projects.”

I watch her consider it for a minute before she rolls her shoulders. “No. I’ll do the most good here.”

*Brave decision.*

Her determined expression reminds me of that breezy day in Lanai, when she started warming up to me.

What would it be like if travel was all about new experiences with a beautiful woman?

And what could it be like if I finally took a trip with a sensuous smile and an ass to die for?

One day, I’d like to find out, before this strange thing between us expires.

“I just hope Maisy is behaving in Mexico,” she says. “It’s too easy for a kid her age to start sneaking tequila shots.”

“That’s why I sent Fyo to keep an eye on her. Peace of mind,” I say.

“That was great. But you’re sure you don’t need him here?”

“I’m a grown man. I can handle not having a chauffeur for a couple of weeks.”

I’m also having Fyo do some digging on Apollo Finch with proxy servers in another country, where he’ll be harder to trace.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot you’re an adult since you have a self-propelled sausage *named* sausage.” She flicks her tongue out.

“Everybody likes andouille. What can I say?” I flash her a thin smile.

“I mean, at least it’s fitting.”

“Leave Andy alone or he’ll nip you tonight. The damn dog reads minds.” I wag my finger.

“Nip what? My toes?” She bursts out laughing.

I nod.

“Do you really think Fyo can keep up with Maisy? You’ve met her.”

I smile. “If she gets into a scrap or any real mischief, there’s no one better. He’ll call us immediately.”

*He might also use his former Spetsnaz skills to tear off a human head.* Of course, I don’t tell her that.

There's a reason I hired a driver who doubles as a special agent and bodyguard.

"So you help me corral my little sister now?" She steps forward, reaching for my collar and tugging.

"You already know I'll help as much or as little as you'll allow, brat," I say, brushing my lips over hers until she shudders.

Her mouth begs for a kiss I don't give.

Not yet.

She peers at me with that sea-green gaze again, and goddamn, I'm sorely tempted.

Technically, it's the middle of the workday.

I reach for her face, sweeping a loose lock of hair out of her eye.

"I'm glad you know where you're needed, Piper. Here with me."

"We'll see. But I know you're worried about that big industry shindig coming up."

"Yeah. The association conference is right around the corner in Portland. It's the best opportunity to catch Apollo Finch pulling out all stops to break our winning streak," I say, trying like hell not to let that smarmy little prick's face bleed through my mind.

"We'll turn your review scores around by then," she whispers, pressing her lips to my neck.

"It's not just the reviews. There's a major fashion show in our own backyard, right before the conference."

"Oh, yeah. The new Haughty But Nice thing? I *love* their stuff!" The way she bounces emphasizes just how much the clothing line excites her.

"We need to be on our guard. My gut says Finch may hit us there, or at least use it as a practice run. He's been working diligently with these negative reviews, but that's not enough. If he wants to knock us out, it'll have to be something bigger." I frown, anger burning up my throat.

"I hope not. Why don't we just focus on creating our own awesome buzz and cross our fingers?" she whispers, stroking my brow.

Her touch makes me feel like the unsettled beast I am, savoring her touch and fighting the urge to throw her down on my desk and tear her panties off.

"Finch is the sort of greedy little fucknugget who won't give up—especially if he sees us starting to counter his bullshit," I say.

“We’ll get through it, Brock. And if we can’t do it the nice way, well, you’ll just have to take him down,” she purrs.

“I like the sound of that.” I chuckle, lifting a fist. “Someone’s determined today.”

“I told you, I’m in this fight because you stepped up for mine.”

We share a magnetic look with so many unsaid words flying back and forth before my grip around her tightens.

“You know I’m not here for a quid pro quo, right?” I ask, searching her eyes.

“I know. But I’m here for a kiss.” Her soft hand moves down my neck.

Who the hell am I to argue with that logic?

I melt into her lips and kiss her long and sweet. The growl that thunders out of me reminds me how intoxicating she is.

This shit is dangerous, and I’m addicted.

I’m still twirling her hair in my fist when she pulls away with a gasp. “God, I... I should go now. Jenn needs an update.”

*Before I wind up on my knees in the middle of your office,* she means.

My cock throbs.

“Go, Sunshine. One condition,” I grind out, waving an annoyed hand.

“Yes?”

“Tonight, you’re all fucking mine.”

I’m expecting that sweet, awkward smile perched between two rosy cheeks. Instead, she lights up with confidence, her smile fading into a breathless O.

“I’d better be,” she whispers.

“As you know, I always keep my word,” I rumble, pulling hard on my belt. I don’t try to hide the thick outline of my cock bulging out. “Get moving. You have three seconds before I change my mind and everyone in the office knows you’re under the boss.”

With a startled laugh, she grabs her tablet off my desk and runs for the door.

My eyes stay glued to that ass I’m dying to shake until she disappears.

Then my gaze drifts to the old wooden clock in the corner, another remnant of Gramps’ time, ticking forward at a crawl.

Goddamn.

Tonight can’t come fast enough.



BACK AT MY PLACE, Piper collapses on the couch in the front sitting room as soon as we make it through the door.

“You okay, Sunshine?” I hold out a hand, grasping her fingers.

“Just overwhelmed.”

“With work or your dad?”

“Dad,” she says tightly. “The doctor called this evening and he sounds so hopeful.”

“Isn’t that good news?” I bring her hand to my lips.

“It scares me, getting my hopes up. All these years, we just braced for the worst, fighting a losing battle. But if this therapy really works, and he’s more like his old self... God. It’s weird to even think about. I do love the idea that Maisy might have the senior year I never did—”

“What do you mean?” I cut in.

She turns away from me, pushing a pillow under her head.

“I bought a secondhand prom dress with my babysitting money that year, but Dad got really sick and Maisy was only eleven. He’d just retired from fishing and they didn’t quite know what was wrong with him yet.” She pauses, breathing sharply. “I couldn’t just leave them home alone, so I missed out. And that was just the first big event that year I missed. We made it to my graduation, but he almost passed out so we left early. I didn’t go to the after-party. I wouldn’t have even if he felt okay when I knew anything could happen. Jenn was basically my only friend left by then.”

“Why?” I’m snarling, hating that doing the right thing cost her so much happiness.

She shrugs. “When you’re a kid and you start canceling plans, they get the wrong idea. My old friends just thought I was blowing them off. Jenn would come over and hang out at my house. Then I got kicked off the cheer squad for missing too many practices—”

“You were a cheerleader?” I hate my cock for what it might do with that information.

“Gooo greyhounds!” she belts out, sitting up. “I was pretty good at it, too.”

She bounces off the couch and does a high kick before I grab her again.

“Why am I not surprised?” I say gruffly.

“I promised myself Maisy would never miss out like I did. Until I took this job, I managed it.” Her smile deflates.

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault. It’s a good job with cool benefits and a halfway decent boss.” The look she beams over makes me want to eat her alive. “I can’t complain. And if this treatment works, she might even squeeze in a few more extracurriculars next year. That’s *huge*.”

“Yeah. Go change and clean up. We’re taking the yacht out tonight,” I say, refusing to peel my eyes off her.

“The yacht? Why?”

“Because I haven’t seen that smile nearly enough today,” I tell her.

She closes the space between us and rests her hands on my biceps. “Brock?”

“Yes?”

“When you’re not making that stabby face or yelling at people...you’re the best.” She leans in and kisses me.

Fuck.

I drink her in like a fine wine.

The flavor of her cherry lip gloss, the gentle pressure of her tongue on mine, the hot desire of her little body against mine.

Every bit of it hammers me apart and puts me back together, turning me into a man I don’t recognize—but dammit, I want to.

When she pulls away and blows me a parting kiss, I watch her go upstairs.

Is it just the moment?

Am I really the best?

Somehow, I fucking doubt it.

She deserves—*no, she needs*—to be lavished with love and attention after what she’s been through. A man married to his company with enemies is never going to provide that.

The really fucked up part is, I know it, but I’m too selfish to walk away.



SUMMER EVENINGS in the Puget Sound are like pieces of heaven.

We park the yacht in a spot where the captain says a couple rare orcas were spotted earlier this week.

It looks like we're in luck.

The huge black whales breach the waters from a safe distance. Close enough to enjoy their graceful movements, but far enough away to conform to environmental protection laws.

"So cool!" Piper says. "I've seen them plenty of times but not like this. It's so private here."

She gives me a smitten look.

The fact that I'm not taking her over the railing right now tells me how fucked in the head I truly am.

I knew Piper Renee would become an obsession.

What I never expected was to enjoy spending so much time with her.

I pull her in for a lingering kiss. "I figured you'd appreciate whale watching."

"How did you know?"

"The day you came home. When you saw the seal outside, you looked like a kid waiting for the ice cream truck," I say, pressing my mouth to hers again.

When I pull away, she goes quiet, staring peacefully at the whales blowing puffs of water.

The tension in her muscles is gone.

That alone feels like cause for celebration.

"Aside from a few ferry trips, I haven't been on a boat since Dad gave up fishing," she says softly.

"Damn shame. We put up with half a year of grey skies and a premium on real estate for this ocean."

I'm such an idiot.

The words are out of my mouth before I realize why she hasn't had a chance.

"It was harder on Dad, honestly. He fell in love with the ocean after growing up in Montana. I wasn't sure he'd survive when he had to hang up his sea legs for good. Fishing was his life...and the whole reason we kept the house when Mom skipped out."



Goddamn, she makes my heart bleed. This poor, vulnerable creature has lost so much.

Years of her life to her mother's abandonment and her father's chronic illness.

For the next chapter, she needs a man fully devoted to her needs.

*And I know that's not me.*

Not when I've had to stare death in the face once and came away realizing I'm only fit to be a cog in a very large machine.

I'll never be the man she needs and I fucking hate it.

If I wasn't a total asshole, I'd break it off right here and spare her future grief.

My phone pings then, tearing me from my melancholy.

Speaking of years lost—or lives—I sigh when I see the name on the screen.

Vanessa.

I swipe the notification away and put the phone on silent before dropping it back in my pocket.

"Anything important?" she asks, staring up at me.

"Nah. I'll call back later. I'm with my girl right now."

She backs in closer to me, moving the peach roundness of her ass against my hard shaft.

Fuck.

Lust floods my brain, this animal need blotting out all emotion, turning my blood molten.

"No quip about calling you mine this time?" I growl in her hair, sweeping blond locks back from her neck and exposing her skin for a kiss.

"I'm starting to get used to it. But I'll keep sassing just for fun if you promise to use it more."

Okay.

She *has* to know what the fuck she's doing to me, and she delights in it.

My grip around her turns possessive.

Too many dark, impossible thoughts flick through my head.

I turn her to face me, framing her glowing face with my hand as we kiss. Her leg glides up mine and her hands roam my body intently.

My fingers thread her hair, obsession vibrating in my bones.

Piper tries to pull away with a rasping moan, but I grab her head, keeping it pinned to mine.

“Stay. Enjoy the sunset with me,” I whisper, loving the heat of her forehead on mine.

For the next minute, we’re all torrid kisses, willing prisoners to the hot need erupting out of us.

I’m not expecting it when she says, “Will you take me home?”

“Home?” I pull back, searching her eyes.

What the fuck? Did I freak her out?

She shakes her head. “Y-your place, I mean. Sorry.”

She called my place *home*?

Shit.

I want her right here. Right now. Right on this boat.

If we didn’t have a small crew, I’d already have her stripped on the deck of this ship, taking her beneath the evening light and emerging stars.

If she wants to go home, though, that’s one of the few things I can give her.

She steps closer again, laying a firm hand on my chest.

I grip her wrist, guiding her down, loving how every touch ignites my skin, even through these clothes.

“We’ll head for home once you feel what you’re missing here,” I whisper, leading her to a quiet place at the back of the ship.

And I let her worship me in the cool, dying embers of sunlight.

Her hair glows like treasure, but it’s her eyes that rip me open, more hypnotic than I’ve ever seen when they catch the light.

“Goddammit, Pippa,” I say, my eyes still burning into hers as her hands glide lower, fumbling with my belt.

She’s wearing too much, even if that mischievous smile feels completely naked.

Her hand trails down my stomach, my waist, dipping below my beltline.

My head rolls back a second before it happens, the tension pulling my body like a bow.

She cups the bulge in my shorts, staring up at me with those round gleaming eyes and full lips made for sin.

“I think you want to go home too,” she whispers.

“Bullshit.” I grab her hand, pressing it harder against my cock. “I want you to suck me off right the fuck here before we’re docked.”

Her eyes ignite with delight. The redness on her face renders her speechless.

Not motionless, thank fuck.

Not too shy to listen and obey as her knees thud softly against the polished deck.

I feel like I’m leaving my body and looking down on the scene as her little hands work at my fly, my belt, pulling my pants open and lifting my cock toward her—

“Sunshine!” It comes out like a curse when my swollen head disappears in her mouth.

I should hate that she struggles to even get a third of the way down my length, but I’m a sick, sick man.

No, I *enjoy* her struggle, watching this mouth that’s tortured me a thousand times suddenly so fucking full of me she can barely breathe.

I have to hold back so I don’t hurt her.

My hips grind as she sucks me, teasing her tongue under my head, pumping the base of my shaft while her free hand slips into mine.

I squeeze her fingers so hard I’m afraid she’ll break.

“Damn, little girl. Piper, *goddamn*. You keep that up, and I’ll—”

My voice chokes off as her tongue finds my sweet spot.

The way those flaming green eyes stare up at me turns me to stone.

There are no words here.

The world shrinks into an angel doing her damndest to rob my balls dry.

Just her searing lips.

Just her soft skin.

Just her muffled, tiny moans as she bobs, gagging on me.

Fucking shit!

I can’t.

I can’t last another red minute, and when my hips jerk in warning and a vicious growl explodes up my throat, my spine detonates.

“Pippa!”

My cock swells and shoots its first rope.

Her eyes roll back as hard as mine when I start coming down her throat. I'm surprised she lasts for more than a second before she has to let go, her little fist still pumping my length.

I grab my dick and finish all over her, grinding my teeth, hellbent on marking her face with my come.

I'm so fucking undone, delirious, coming for what feels like forever.

Her head tilts back like she's receiving an offering, lips pursed and eyes closed, her face fucking painted by the end.

"Hold on," I whisper when I'm done, slamming a hand on the wall next to me for support. "Hold on and I'll clean you up."

I need a solid minute before I can move, enjoying my work and the absolute adoration on her face as she wears me.

I'm glad as hell there's a clean towel nearby in a trunk, and I bring it back as I stuff my cock back in my pants, then set to work cleaning her.

She's still licking her lips like the minx she is when we sit on the bench again. I throw an arm around her as I hit the intercom to tell the captain to take us home.

"Sunshine, don't tell me you've gone crazy?" I whisper, laying her head on my shoulder.

She stares up at me with a seductive smile on those lips that just unraveled me.

"Maybe I have. And it's all your fault, Brock Winthrope."



WHEN YOU'RE REALLY MOTIVATED, you set new records.

The bonus I promise the captain gets my boat home faster than ever. I think we even beat the bat-out-of-hell pace the engines set that stormy night I brought Lancaster out to save his girl.

I'm starting to understand his sanity.

I also have to take Pippa below deck until we return. I can't keep my hands off her.

Piper gets my tongue on the desk in my private quarters, her legs thrown over my shoulders, panties torn. I slip them into my pocket before I go to work on her.

She's so fucking close before my mouth even lands on her clit.

I could eat this woman all night, but I'll have to settle for a few minutes. That's all she lasts before she's a trembling mess, fingers digging at my hair, her pussy throbbing with a madness I'm proud to deliver.

"Brock!" She whimpers my name.

My grip tightens on her thighs and I seal her to my face, where she rides out the hottest climax yet.

She tastes like a sugar lick when she comes for me.

I don't stop until she's pulling my hair, looking down and flushed, begging for a kiss.

And that kiss lasts—making her taste herself—until I hear the intercom switch on, announcing our arrival.

With her dress patted down, we disembark and walk up to the house.

Once we're inside the house, I waste no time lifting her up.

I haul her upstairs draped over my shoulder.

Laughing, she slides a hand under my polo shirt, rubbing my shoulder and peppering my throat with kisses.

It's a miracle when I kick the door shut between us.

*Finally.*

Her energy matches mine as she grabs the hem of my shirt and starts pulling.

I place a hand over hers and move it away.

"Why?" Her eyes go wide and her cheeks are so red she's intoxicated.

"We've already done fast and hard, Sunshine. I want to take my sweet time now."

She kisses me again and I walk us to the bed, leaning over so I can position her right in the center.

Then I climb over her and take her lips in mine.

I massage her lips and tongue with mine, kissing down her neck, down to where her neckline fades into her cleavage.

Honest to God, I could live here forever.

But her hips beg me not to, bucking insistently under me.

It's pure hell ignoring the invitation.

I barely manage to slide down the bed to her feet, removing her shoes and kissing each ankle reverently.

She goes to pieces.

I smile, kissing a line up her right leg, straight to her inner thigh.

“Brock,” she whispers, raking her nails through my hair.

The slower I climb up her belly, the more impatient she becomes.

By the time my lips wind up her throat and land on her mouth again, she’s clinging to me with a smolder in her eyes. Her kisses crash against me frantically.

Goddamn.

Even this man has his limits.

I guide her up, helping slide her dress off over her head, and smile when I see a silver lace bra.

“Showy. I like it,” I say, placing my finger over her nipple and tracing a tiny circle that follows the curve of her breast.

“Hurry!” Her teeth dig at her bottom lip.

“Patience, woman,” I growl back.

Her skin answers me, so hot it’s insane.

I’m not sure how I keep it together.

“This is—” I find her bra clasp with my other hand and unhook it. “Better than Christmas morning.”

Then she’s naked and glorious and entirely mine.

Snarling, I take one round breast in my mouth, working my tongue around the pink halo circling her nipple.

Piper traces my forehead to my chin and back up with a featherlight touch, moaning.

“Ooh.”

I think I’ll always be amazed at how such a small sound can make me so ravenous.

I release her tit, taking the other one, pulling her nipple with my teeth.

Her hips tilt and her legs close around me.

“Brock!”

“Always say my name like that,” I whisper.

This time when her hands grab my shirt, I let her pull it off. I might lose a couple buttons in the process.

When her hand strokes down my bare back, I’m ruined.

My body hovers over hers, tracing the seam of her opening with my fingers, feeling how hot and wet her pussy gets, how much she aches for every inch of me.

“Tell me you’re ready for me,” I whisper.

She moans a muffled reply, biting her wrist.

“Piper,” I say again, teasing her clit with my thumb.

My fingers find her center again.

It takes every atom of my willpower not to throw her legs apart and force my way inside her.

Luckily, she’s just as desperate.

Her hands are on my shorts, dragging them away. She grabs my boxer briefs and tries to pull them down, but they’re so strained they don’t move easily.

Enough struggling.

I pause to lose my boxers, shoving them down.

The little noise she makes when my cock springs out, throbbing like mad, almost makes me come on the spot.

“Brock, please,” she whispers, her voice so tight. “Take me now. No condom. I’m on the pill...”

Is she trying to make me blow right here?

I sink down, stroking her hair, my eyes fused to hers as the realization sets in that I’m about to have her skin on skin.

“Since you asked so nicely, Sunshine...”

This time, her pussy has no trouble taking me.

I slide into her warmth with a guttural sound, welcoming that honey-slick sweetness.

“Take my tongue while I fuck you.” I pull her lips open, swiping my tongue on hers.

Fuck, I need to be tangled up in this woman right *now*.

She must sense it, locking her arms and legs around me so tight, pushing her tongue back against mine as it chases hers around that sweet mouth.

I force my arms under her small frame, gathering her closer.

Fully melded, I don’t move until my balls demand it, relishing her heat, the soft way she moves on my dick as her hips beg for my strokes.

I swallow another moan.

Her pussy clenches.

She whimpers.

Her pussy clenches *again*.

We're so fucking close I see stars, total sorcery burning through my skin.

I drive into her, shaking her, finding my pleasure and pulling another orgasm out of her.

Her pussy sucks in every inch of me, so desperately I shudder.

Our eyes connect when she finally looks at me again.

We're one.

But the way she rocks against me, her last release only lighting her fire.

Her small screams.

Her body, this trembling vessel I need to fill, to ravish, to *own*.

I can't fucking hold on for long.

"Piper," I rasp, twirling my tongue with hers.

Then I go so hard my thrusts lift her off the bed and pummel her ass back into the mattress again, bruising strokes that send us over the edge.

One more push and I'm in to the hilt, my balls all fire and brimstone.

Everything tenses before I erupt a second later, grinding against her, a chorus of animalistic sounds spraying out of me as I fill her.

She tightens around my cock again, giving a breathless moan, convulsing under me in the same sweet perfection.

When the storm lets up, I break that soul-deep kiss and catch my breath before my lips return to hers.

"Sunshine?"

Her arms slide down my back. "Yes?"

"You're fucking amazing."

"No argument." She beams, running her fingers through my hair.

We lie there together, holding each other for the longest time.

I take a strand of her hair and twine it around my finger. "What happens if I fall asleep on you?"

She bites my ear playfully.

"You'll like the way I wake you up."

I kiss her forehead again, savoring the salty-sweet taste of her skin.

If I thought she took me straight to heaven on the yacht, I was wrong.

This is the whole paradise package.

Maniacal sex that leaves us both turned inside out and my lips free to wander, to savor her, to pull me deeper into a danger zone I'm afraid to even contemplate.



Even in this beautiful moment where I'm as lost in her eyes as she is in mine, there's an abyss opening in my gut.

What the hell happens when it's finally time to say goodbye to Piper Renee?

And why am I so shit scared that the last time might come too soon?



## STAYCATION BLUES (PIPER)



I am airborne.

Everything about the way his tongue moves in my mouth, the way he moves inside of me, the way my head rests perfectly on his shoulder, and the way he holds me tighter when it does is euphoria.

He finishes inside me for the third time tonight with a frenzied growl and crashes down next to me.

“Pi-per,” he whispers breathlessly.

I stroke his face.

He kisses me so tenderly.

“I—you’re—” He lets out another long sigh. “Goddammit. Just lie with me.”

“Someone’s a little flustered.” I giggle.

“Woman, I’m in my glory.” He pulls me closer and in just a few minutes, he’s out cold, snoring like the giant bear of a man he is.

I snicker at how fast he drifts off, kissing his cheek and running my fingers through his lush dark hair.

The way my heart drums scares me as I whisper, “Brock Winthrope, what am I going to do with you? You’re too freaking much.”

And he is.

Too much heart.

Too much muscle.

Too much hope.

Whatever this sweet insanity we’ve started is, it can’t possibly last.

I stare at his perfect silhouette in the darkness, wondering what he wants with me.

Those gorgeous looks are just icing on the Hercules man-cake.

I still can't believe he sent my father off for an experimental treatment at his own expense. He even sent his freaking driver on a paid vacation just to babysit my little sister.

He cares about people, no matter how much he stomps around and snarls.

I'm so overwhelmed when I steal another kiss from this fallen angel in his sleep.

*If this dream has to end, let me sleep.*

*Just a little while longer.*



*BUZZ. Buzz. Buzz.*

Bee? Phone?

*Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.*

Damn phone.

I roll over with a groan, cracking one very tired eye open.

It's probably mine and it could be important, even if my entire psyche rebels against getting out of this cozy nest of blankets and the warm beast at my side.

I reluctantly swing my legs over the bed and start shuffling through the pile of clothes on the floor, looking for my phone.

No dice.

Where is it if it's not with my stuff—

Oh. Right.

Brock stole my phone earlier when we were storming the house in a flurry of kisses, teasing me about demanding all my attention.

His shorts move against the floor as my phone buzzes, which makes me laugh.

I reach into the large pocket that's glowing and rescue my phone.

VANESSA appears on the screen.

Huh?

Oops. This isn't my phone.

But before I can put it down, her message scrolls across the screen.

***Brock, thank you so SO much. For everything. You're the best thing that ever happened to me. Wish you were here in NY.***

Leave it to a goddamn bazillionaire not to lock his screen, and who the hell is this Vanessa?

Before I can put it down and check my nosiness, another message pops up.

***I hope you're doing okay. Miss you. I promise to send more pics soon. Pics?***

Heart, meet hammer.

I'm seeing so much red I start to choke.

I'm tempted to respond, *Hi, Vanessa. Piper here, the woman who just slept with him last night and holy hell it was good. Mind telling me what you want?*

Yeah, no.

I know. I shouldn't have read his messages.

I shouldn't have created a self-fulfilling prophecy last night by dwelling on when this would end.

Of course it's now.

And of course it's with a massive screaming heartfuck.

I angrily scoop my clothes off the floor, stuff myself into them, and walk out of the mansion.

Because I'm pretty far up a private road, a half mile away is the closest my Uber can get.

At least the brisk walk burns off the fury knifing through me, texting Maisy as I go.

***Checking in. I'm about to stop by the house. Any reason I haven't heard from you in almost twenty-four hours?***

That's another worry.

She hasn't replied by the time I'm climbing in the car, but it's so early and barely much later in her time zone.

There's no answer by the time my ride drops me off. Our little house doesn't feel like home now that I'm alone.

Falling down alone in my childhood twin bed doesn't make it any easier to sleep after curling up to Mr. Player Backstabberston for a week.

Does Vanessa curl up with him too?  
What does she even look like? A supermodel?  
How long have they been—

*No.*

I don't want to know, and I still smell like Brock.

Maybe that's why I push my face into my pillow and scream until my lungs hurt.

Sometime after the most restless sleep of my life, I wake up late, find clean clothes, run a hot shower, and try to wash all the billionaire stink off.

I can't work like this, so I try to pop a couple melatonin and go back to sleep.

I tell myself I'll feel better by noon.

Yeah, even I don't believe it.

After an hour of struggling to sleep, I move to the living room and start watching *Law and Order* reruns until my eyes hurt.

At least thinking about murder cases makes me feel slightly better about having my heart hacked up by a serial bastard.



THE NEXT MORNING, I'm slightly more functional, but that doesn't mean *better*.

I turn my phone back on and ignore what looks like at least seven messages from the man I left behind. No time to read them now.

I walk into Sweeter Grind five minutes after they open. It's empty except for one lonely guy in the back corner.

I wonder what his story is.

Is Vanessa texting his boyfriend too?

Did some woman who lit up his entire sky smash the stars like cheap ornaments?

No one sits alone in a coffee shop this early on a windy grey Saturday morning without a story.

I order a dark roast with heavy cream and find a seat against the back wall. Maisy's ringtone blares from my phone so loud it scares me.

"Hello?"

“Hi, sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. Fyodor took me to the beach yesterday and we went to this cool Aztec museum. Easy extra credit for international studies!” she says proudly.

“Well, I’m glad you’re having fun. But if you’re out sightseeing, who’s with Dad?” I ask.

“Oh. Um, he started physical therapy yesterday. We stayed until he started, but you know how touchy he gets about that. He wouldn’t let me watch him struggle.”

“Is he eating normally?”

“Yep, pretty good appetite. Whatever they gave him cleared up the stomach problems he was having after the fall,” she tells me. “You shouldn’t worry so much, Pippa. He’s making the most of his time. He even has a private balcony in his room and jokes about being on vacation.”

That makes me smile.

And I guess I can’t completely hate Brock since he’s the reason for Dad’s recovery.

But that kind of makes it *worse*.

“I’m glad you’re both okay. How are you feeling about his outlook?”

“Hopeful! I don’t know anything about medicine but the way they talk just sounds so good. I think when he goes home, things are gonna be different. I’m pumped.”

God, I wish I could cling to that hope.

“Me too, Maisy. But don’t go another twenty-four hours without calling me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you,” I say.

“Love you too!” She hangs up instantly.

She absolutely *should* when she’s enjoying herself that much.

I sip my dark coffee, wishing it was the Kona peaberry brew. But as much as I loved that coffee back in Lanai, it comes with other memories.

I definitely don’t need that crap.

When I look up again, I see Jenn coming through the door, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

She doesn’t even wave until she gets her coffee and slumps down across from me.

“Welcome to the land of the living,” I say.

“Can I just say I’m shocked we’re at Sweeter Grind? You’ve been on such a Wired Cup kick since Hawaii I wasn’t sure you’d ever change it up again.” She tips her cup to her mouth and drains half of it in one pull.

“Eh, it’s nice to mix it up, right?”

*Especially when you’re trying to get your mind off heart-stabby men, I don’t add.*

“I’m glad. They’re overpriced anyway. Okay, so, I can’t wait to hear about this thing with the boss.”

I scoff. “I can.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” I sigh. But the cutting look she gives me says that won’t fly for a second. “You really want to know? Nothing new. Brock Winthrop is just a card-carrying jackass. And I think I should start looking for a new job. Don’t know if I can keep working here.”

“What? But he’s paying through the nose and you were doing so well with the reviews!” She sets her cup down and leans closer, the coffee prying her eyes awake. “Pippa, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Not sure how Vanessa is, but I’m peachy.” I gulp down the dark roast until it burns my tongue.

“Vanessa?” Jenn blinks at me.

“I’m asking the same thing. But she sure is oh-so-thankful to have Brock in her life, and she’ll be sending him pics soon!”

I know I’m getting unhinged.

And technically, we never talked about a relationship between bouts of soul-soaring sex. It’s not like I ever asked if we’re exclusive or special or even more than mutual sneakylinks.

For all I know, Brock might think I’d be perfectly happy as one more rotating choice in an entire harem of women lined up for his pleasure.

Still. Just thinking about the one other woman I know about makes my blood turn green.

“Lady, what happened?” she asks, tapping her cup impatiently.

“I still don’t know, honestly. He was asleep. There was a phone buzzing on the floor. I thought it was mine, so I fished it out of the clothes—”

“Wait. The clothes were on the floor? Whose clothes?”

My face heats as I force out, “*Ours.*”

“Ooh, spicy! Continue.”



I finish telling her everything I know, which isn't much.

"...then I left. I have *some* dignity," I finish.

"Holy crap. What a dick-knuckle." She shakes her head. "I didn't want to say it, Pippa, but I was afraid he'd play you like this. I'm pretty sure these billionaires are all the same."

"Are they? What about that big coffee mogul who owns Wired Cup?" I sigh.

"Cole Lancaster? That wedding was dreamy!" She clasps her hands together. I can practically see stars in her eyes. "Oh, plus the way he saved her from that psycho. You know Winthrop helped, right?"

I cock my head. "He what?"

"It was his ship! The same yacht you were on brought Cole through this crazy storm to save his lady. Winthrop was in town after they made that big coffee deal and gave him a lift."

Of course.

Brock just *has* to be hero and heartbreaker in everything.

My heart nosedives.

"Yeah, well, I can't deny he's a big cinnamon roll underneath his thorns. He took care of Dad and Maisy. He even has an adorable weenie lab." I wait while she laughs in disbelief. "So, yeah, I can't hate him. Without Brock, who knows if Dad would've made it another year."

"Don't give him too much credit. His family made their fortune off people like us punching a timecard. Brock saved your dad because you're an amazing copywriter and apparently a better kisser. That doesn't make him Mr. White Knight."

"But he even sent his driver to babysit Maisy..."

"Hey, we're trying to talk about how much he sucks here, aren't we?" She rolls her eyes. "Oh, fine. *Partial credit*. But he's still an elephant dick, and you should talk to Vanessa. She probably doesn't know about you either with how these guys sneak around."

"I thought about that," I say slowly.

"Why didn't you?"

I shrug. "I wasn't trying to snoop, Jenn. But there was no lock screen and the texts kept popping up. And then I thought maybe telling her would be the right thing, but one minute before that text, I was so smitten. Call it

an illusion. Whatever. All I know is, it hurt like hell when it shattered. So what right do I have to go around breaking other people's fantasies?"

"You're too nice. Sometimes I wish I could be more like you." She sips her drink in silence before she looks at me again. "When I came here, I thought this was a crisis meeting."

"Crisis? What crisis?"

"I guess you haven't seen the bad news with everything going on. But now, you might welcome it." She looks down at her cup.

"Um, what? What bad news? I've had enough of that."

"It's bad for him, Pippa. Not you. And we aren't fixing it this time. Let Vanessa help him crawl his way out of this hole," she says with a dark laugh.

"Okay, what *are* you talking about?"

"A video went viral at Winthrop Scottsdale yesterday."

"That sounds like a good thing?"

"Not when it's an altercation between an employee and an influencer. Go check TikTok. Try searching 'Scottsdale scandal.'"

Holding my breath, I open the app and type it into the search bar.

A slew of videos pop up with angry captions.

I open the first one without any commentary attached.

A girl who looks roughly Maisy's age dances around the hotel lobby in a black skirt with matching boots and a halter top. Her curls are bunched into buns on her head.

"Looks like she's having fun..."

"Just wait," Jenn whispers.

A man in a Winthrop blazer walks up to her. "You need to take that outside, ma'am. This isn't a playground or nightclub. The workin' girls hang out on fifth street behind the back exit. But you'll have to walk around the building to get there."

"Working girls? I'm here for a vacay, dude," Dancer Girl flings back.

"Very funny. Now move along. We can't have your sort on our property soliciting business. Kindly leave or I'll call the police," manager man snaps.

"What do you mean 'my sort'? What 'business' are you talking about? I told you, I'm staying here. I'm just waiting on my parents because I locked my keycard in the room."

Oh, God.

My stomach knots, but I keep watching.

“If your story were true, you’d just go to the front desk and ask for another card,” he says coldly.

She shrugs.

“Whatever. I didn’t know. You’re not helpful, dick.” She walks away from the guy, flipping her camera around so we can see her. “Yeah, so, I would *not* recommend this place. Nothing beats getting called a hooker just for hanging around in comfy clothes—”

The guy comes back into the shot, cutting her off. “What are you doing? I told you to *leave*.”

“Getting another card like you said!” she says angrily.

“You need to get out now.”

“Dude, fuck you! My parents paid good money to put up with your shitty attitude.” She rolls her eyes. “O-M-G. How do you even have a job?”

“Dylan, get security,” the man yells to someone off-screen. “Let them know one of the whores from the street won’t leave.”

The girl looks into the camera again with her mouth hanging open. “Wow. *Woowooow*. Did you guys hear that? Like someone forgot to give this crusty Boomer d-bag the memo that you don’t talk to women like that. And you damn sure don’t call security over nothing!”

A guard steps into the frame. “Miss, come on. Let’s go.”

“Wait? What? You’re serious?” the girl asks, her voice shrinking.

He grabs her.

I gasp.

The video fades to a jerky black with her belting out a loud scream.

“That was—yikes.” I look up at Jenn. “I don’t even know what to say. That could have been Maisy. Hell, it could have been *me*. I forgot my keycard in Chicago and Brock had the staff grab my stuff.”

Jenn nods. “Yeah. There’s no fixing that, bad reviews aside. Maybe Vanessa works miracles.”

I try not to throw my coffee over her head.

“Brock Winthrop is a sneaky, overgrown man-child. I hate him, but I still take my job seriously. Hopefully, we didn’t implement this plan too late to undo this tidal wave. I don’t even know how we get small-time influencers now if this is all over the internet.”

Jenn frowns. “We didn’t sign up for this. It’s just too much and it’s a *real* scandal. It’s one thing to polish over snotty rich people not getting their luxury towels. Those are apples and this is a sour orange.”

“...are you sure it’s true, though?” I venture. “I mean, think about all the things we found out in Chicago. There’s pretty good evidence someone’s trying to bring Winthrop down. What if this is another engineered hit job?”

My mind flashes back to Apollo Finch and his creepy grabby hands. The acid in his voice when he went after Brock.

“Eh, if it’s fake, we’d better see those actors in Hollywood. And think about what *did* go wrong in Lanai,” she reminds me.

Fair point.

My phone rings and I glance at the screen. “Speak of the actual devil. It’s him.”

“Answer it! I want to hear this.”

“I’m not taking that call.” My face heats.

“What if it’s about work?”

Sigh.

I swipe the green icon and press the phone to my burning ear. “Yes?”

“Pippa, where are you? Are you okay—” Brock starts. “I talked to Fyo. He said your dad’s fine and there’s been no change in his condition. So, where the hell have you been?” he asks.

“At the coffee shop with Jenn,” I say numbly.

He goes silent for a moment.

“He hasn’t figured it out yet, has he?” Jenn whispers.

“Are you going to explain why you left without even saying goodbye? I tried calling you all damn day. What happened?” His low growl vibrates through my head.

I’m suddenly afraid to mention Vanessa point-blank, but I don’t have another reason for leaving. “I told you I had to stop by the house, so I left early. And I had work to do,” I lie.

“What work? You could have used my office,” he says, suspicion in his tone. “Piper, what’s really going on?”

“I needed space, okay?” I shriek. “Space to think.”

“Space,” he echoes. I imagine him shaking his head and scowling. “Goddammit, Piper, tell me what’s wrong. What did I do?”

I don’t want to tell him the truth.

“Did you really think you’d get away with it forever? Are you flipping serious? How stupid do you think I am?”

“Get away with *what*? What are you talking about? Are you on some crazy pills I don’t know about?” he snarls.

I snort into the phone. “That’s rich and very male. If a chick calls you out, she must be nuts. Goodbye.”

“Goddamn you, wait!” he barks, and I pause. “Why am I an asshole again?”

I slump down in my seat, straining for words.

“Brock, just stop. It’s game over and I know about her. But if it makes you feel better, she’s probably still in the dark. You’re golden there.”

“She?” The word sounds like thunder.

“Vanessa. She said she’s really happy you’re in her life, so... I won’t keep you guys. Ciao!”

“What the fuck? You were—peeping around in my phone after I fell asleep? That’s fucking *low*.”

For a second, I whip my head away from Jenn, tears stinging my eyes.

It hurts hearing him so angry. Even if he’s the whole reason we’re so damaged.

“I didn’t snoop. For some unholy reason, a billionaire CEO is too stupid to use a lock screen! I picked it up thinking it was mine. The messages were just right there. But if you didn’t have a—a *Vanessa*, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Vanessa is none of your goddamned business,” he grinds out.

“Cool.” I cut the call there before I burst into ugly tears.

“That sounded brutal. Are you okay?” Jenn asks softly, reaching across the table for my hand.

I shake my head. “He’s not even sorry.”

“He’s sorry he got caught, you mean. Typical rich prick.” Her face screws up with disgust.

“I don’t know, Jenn. I feel like someone just carved out my insides and left them on the side of the road.”

“You don’t need him. It probably feels like you do right now, but you don’t. You were happy before you met him.”

“Then why do I feel like death?”

“It’s just the shock. Pippa, you’ll be fine.”

I pick up the phone again so I don’t have to see her pitiful looks.

“What are you doing?” Jenn hisses.

I smile. “I’m going to be brave and deliver the bad news. Someone should do it, and he already hates me.”

She watches in horror while I try to call back.

The jackass doesn’t pick up.

“No answer. I’ll try texting,” I say.

***Piper: Just thought you should know the Winthrop Scottsdale went viral. Don’t worry. I’m on it. I’m not sure Vanessa can help with these things, but you still have me for that. For now.***

***Brock: Vanessa doesn’t stick her nose where it doesn’t belong.***

***Piper: Sounds like a “her” problem. You’re welcome, asshat.***

I shove my phone down and look at Jenn. “Any chance I can bum a ride home? I need to crawl into bed and die.”

“Sure, but Winthrop isn’t worth dying over. You’ve got ten thousand other guys in this city who’ll treat you better.”

Right. Because billionaire beast-men who come rushing to my family’s rescue grow on trees.

“I hope you’re right. At least if Dad comes back a whole new person, the money pressure won’t be there anymore,” I say.

“You’ll travel the world and kick so many asses on the way,” she says, lifting her cup in a mock salute. “I’ll bring you home and stay for lunch. My treat.”

She’s trying so hard to help it hurts.

I feel ungrateful, but I know she can never fill the Brock-shaped hole in my heart.



## LET BYGONES BE (BROCK)



**F**uck, fuck, *fuck*.

Why didn't I just reply to Vanessa on the damn boat?

Then again, why do I need a woman who goes through my phone?

I don't have time for that drama shit.

Still, I open the texts as soon as I fight Andy off from licking my face.

The dog has a sixth sense for trying to cheer me up the only way he knows.

Honestly, I was so freaked out by Piper ghosting that I didn't even notice Vanessa's messages until now.

I read through them and hit call.

"Brock, hi! What's shaking?"

"Returning your call," I say tightly.

"Oh, well, I just wanted to thank you again. AJ never ever would've gotten into NYU without your letter, and the scholarship...you are a lifesaver, Mr. Winthrope. I never could've swung the expense without you."

Even with the thunder cloud over my head, I smile.

"It's the least I can do. If the situation was reversed—"

"Brock, no way. I never would have let Darren marry your widow, knowing what he was like. And after all that, the way you're still *here* for us." Her voice trembles. "You're such a good man."

"Keep it to yourself, lovely lady. It was a long damn time ago and it's all in the past now," I say.

The burning line of scarred tissue across my chest reminds me it's not as distant as I like to think.



“Well, I appreciate everything you do. We all do, but it’s not necessary. And how’s Mr. Fyo?”

“He’s great, enjoying some downtime in Mexico right now,” I say. “Does AJ need anything else? Lunch money, software, books?”

“Oh, no. I’ve got that covered,” she says with a laugh. “You still do a pretty good job of hiding how nice you can be, you know.”

“I’m not nice, Vanessa,” I say flatly. “If that’s all—”

“See?” She laughs again. “A man of few words, but a kind one. It wasn’t easy signing those divorce papers.”

My jaw tightens.

Am I kind?

Fuck no.

I’m just your run of the mill rich dick with the weight of the world on his shoulders. Sometimes my only relief is solving everybody else’s problems when I can’t fix my own.

“Everything okay? You’ve gone quiet on me. I’m not accusing you of being some softy. I don’t think anyone ever would, but you’re not the raging tyrant some people think.”

*Tyrant.*

What is it with that word?

Everyone pins it on me, particularly one insufferable woman I can’t pry out of my head.

“Am I really that terrifying?” I ask.

“I—you already know what I think.” Her voice is tense now. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s not my place.”

“It’s okay. I had a—” I pause because I don’t even know what to call it. Fight? Spat? Feud? “A serious disagreement with someone recently. It left a bad taste in my mouth and I just wondered if I really come across like Satan with a bad case of hemorrhoids.”

She’s quiet for a minute like she’s mulling it over. “You’re an intimidating man with skin thicker than a pumpkin. Sometimes you come across a little cocky, and yeah, the whole billionaire thing doesn’t help with that. But everyone who knows you gets that it’s just an act. For someone who doesn’t—well, you can seem a tad abrasive.”

I snort at how diplomatic she’s being.

“Be honest, Vanessa. I’m fucking sandpaper, number ten grit.”

That gets a laugh out of her.

I wish I could join in.

After Vanessa, Piper might be the only woman I've ever *allowed* to know me. Or I thought she did.

"Can I ask who you're fighting with?"

"No one. It isn't important," I say.

"Well, I hope you smooth things over, Brock. You do so much for me and my son. Can I give you some friendly advice? If you don't like it, you don't have to take it."

"Sure," I say, knowing full well I probably won't take it.

"This person you're fighting with, you have to decide how badly you want her in your life. And if you do, it never hurts to swallow your pride. Apologize, even if you don't think you're wrong. If it's someone you work with, ignore me and do whatever you think is best. That usually works out pretty well for you."

"Thanks, Vanessa."

"Anytime. And you should drop by for dinner. AJ would love to see you again before school starts."

"Send over a few dates when you're free and I'll see what I can do," I promise.

I hang up.

My mind instantly snaps back to the woman who's invaded my house, my space, and my thoughts.

Vanessa said if I want to keep her in my life, I'd better shut my yap and apologize unconditionally.

Fuck, that's a bitter pill to swallow.

I can't believe I'm even considering it.

After I sink down in my chair with Andy snoring next to me for the better part of an hour, I make up my mind.

It's just an excuse to take my car out and get some fresh air. Even at the risk of Piper Renee clawing apart what's left of my pride.



I BANG ON HER DOOR, holding a colorful bouquet bigger than my head in my other hand.

No answer.

I wait ten seconds and knock again. When no one appears, I try the knob desperately, and I'm surprised when it opens.

"Piper?" I call through the darkness.

I walk into the small, dark house and find her on the couch with a glass of wine and shadows around her eyes. "Hey."

"Why didn't you answer the door?"

She shrugs. "I didn't know who it was, and I kept hoping they'd go away. Or burst in and put me out of my misery."

"You left the door unlocked?" I flare.

"Jenn was here earlier. I guess I just forgot to lock up when she left."

"Can I come in?" I growl.

She gives me the side-eye. "You're already in."

"I brought flowers," I say, holding them out.

"Take them to the cemetery. Dead people need them more than me."

"You're still upset." I square my shoulders.

"How observant."

Fucking hell. I knew this wouldn't be easy.

I shut the door behind me and cross the room, stopping to lay the bouquet on the coffee table in front of her.

"We need to talk," I say bluntly.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Sunshine, I came to apologize. You're not making that easy. I shouldn't have gone nuclear, even if you had no right to go digging through my shit." I still sound mad, even after rehearsing these lines in my head.

She looks at me slowly like she's sizing me up. Then her gaze softens.

"Brock, listen... I will always appreciate what you did for my family. I also don't need your apology. We don't need some big ugly breakup when we were never really together."

Shit, that stings.

Never mind the fact that it's technically true.

She's staring at some stupid show with the volume turned down so low I don't even think she can hear it.

I stomp over, pick up the remote, and switch the TV off. “Look at me. I promise you that those messages you saw are not what you think.”

“Okay.” She still doesn’t look at me.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“You’re an only child, so I know she’s not your sister,” Piper says miserably.

Goddammit, why won’t she look me in the eye?

I stomp in front of her, fold my arms, and glare until she finally looks up. I might as well spit it the fuck out or go home.

“You want to know who she is? She’s Darren’s fucking wife—and for a couple months, she was mine.”

That gets her attention. Her eyes bug out and she makes a strained sound, scrambling up on the sofa.

“She’s *what*? You...you were married?”

“She was widowed. Then she married me. We were never in love. It was a legal formality,” I say, reaching for her hands.

She’s so stunned she doesn’t fight me.

“I don’t understand, Brock. What does that mean?” Her eyes are glistening and red.

“Where do I even start?” I mutter, looking down.

My eyes land on my chest and I pause, bringing my hands to the seam of my shirt.

“Fuck it,” I say, grabbing both sides.

In one fierce jerk I lose half the buttons, exposing my bare chest.

Piper stares at me like I’m possessed.

“What *are* you doing? Um, you can’t striptease your way out this...”

“Miss Sunshine, if you’ll shut it and listen, I’d like to direct your attention to this.” I stab a thumb at the jagged line cutting across my chest.

Her jaw tightens and her eyes follow, tracing that hideous scar.

“You remember the day you asked me about it?”

“Yeah. You didn’t want to talk about it. Combat, you said, right?”

I nod grimly. “It’s from the day I almost died. I can’t go into specifics, but I’ll tell you what’s relevant.”

She glances away. “If it’s from a war and you don’t want to talk about... I get it. I wasn’t going to mention it again. My dad still has nightmares from

Iraq—that highway of death—so if something terrible happened, don't go there again for my sake.”

“I said I'll tell you what happened. I want to,” I admit.

She bites her lip and nods slowly.

I sit beside her, clasping my hands.

“Darren was my copilot. We were flying a surveillance mission along the Syrian border. Maybe it was a malfunction or we took a hit from one of those Russian missiles the brass swore they didn't have—I'll never know—but either way, we barely bailed out before we went down.”

“Oh my God.” Her face tightens.

“We ejected over hostile territory. I was hurt in the tumble down over northern Iraq. Darren, he had it worse. The internal bleeding made him a dead man before I even crawled over...”

“That's terrible,” she whispers, fingering her lip. “Let me guess, he was a good friend? You promised to take care of his family after...you know.”

“Fuck no,” I growl, shaking my head. “Darren was a human piece of shit.”

She looks at me in stunned silence, waiting for more.

Goddammit, I hate this.

“He was a drunk and a bully. He was heading for court martial before I got stuck with him on that mission because my usual guy was out sick. Everybody knew he was infamous for cheating on his wife, Vanessa. There were even whispers he'd hurt her. Men heard him threatening her more than once over the phone.”

“Holy shit.” Her lip trembles.

“I watched the miserable fuck groan his last breath before I blacked out in the desert. Woke up on a German airbase being sewn back together. That's where I got this,” I say, tracing the scar on my chest again. “Of course, they still treated Darren like a big hero. I'm sure Vanessa was relieved his abusive ass died, even if she was too nice to say it.”

“Brock...” She lays her small hand over mine.

I grab it and continue.

“I had to take care of his family. Especially when I knew Darren wasn't just a rotten apple, but he fell off a whole tree of them. He was into bad shit back home and he owed the wrong people a lot of money. They came calling on Vanessa to collect, threatening her and his son.”

Piper covers her mouth. “So that’s why you—”

“Yeah,” I say with a nod. “I married her until they were done. A little heavy-handed, but it was enough to send them a clear message to fuck off.”

“These people, you put them in prison?” she asks.

I smile darkly.

“Not quite. That’s where I met Fyodor. He wasn’t my driver then, but a man I hired with a rare skill set. He helped me find out where they met. I authorized him to stage a fire.” I watch her eyes light up with more shock. “Believe me, Vanessa wasn’t the only one suffering. They had a former police chief getting kickbacks and they never would’ve gone to court. What we did was easier and faster. I have no regrets. Once they were gone—major credit to Fyo—Vanessa divorced me amicably. I’ve stayed in touch with small gifts for the kid, AJ. He’s about to head off to college and sees me as an uncle of sorts.”

“God.”

She falls back into the sofa, boneless, covering her face. She’s motionless too long.

“Say something, Pippa.”

“...I’m so sorry, Brock. I can’t imagine. And I’m sorry I was such a psycho bitch without giving you a chance to explain.”

She cracks an eye and stares at me in silence.

“You just did. Are we okay now?” I bite off.

“Are we? Because I had the wrong idea. I thought—”

“I know what it looked like,” I interject. “And as soon as I figured it out, I should have told you you’re crazy. I still don’t like that you went through my phone—”

“I didn’t! I was fishing around for my phone on the floor and grabbed yours by accident. The messages just came up.”

“I believe you,” I say, holding up a hand. “But the next time you read my texts, will you ask me about them before you run off in the middle of the night and assume I’d ever waste time sticking my dick in another woman when I could be in you?”

Her cheeks bloom rose red.

“Yes. I’m so sorry.”

“Enough apologies. I get it. If I thought for a second you had another man in your life, I’d dismember him.”

Her eyes are so wide and glassy she knows I'm serious. Especially after my story.

"I should have known. You were just taking care of people as usual, and I went off and accused you of—"

"Sunshine, it's not important." I pull her into my arms.

She can't scare me like that again.

Now that I know what losing her is like, holding her feels so intense it's blinding.

"Just let me do this," I say, kissing her neck.

"If you still want to," she says weakly, hot tears falling from her eyes.

"Do you hear yourself, Pippa? My girl has been gone for two fucking days. If you weren't crying, I'd already have you against the wall, showing you how much more intense it gets."

I'm not sure it's even possible for us to be more intense, but I'm willing to find out.

She turns, blushing, and laughs softly. "Stop. I'm being serious."

I bring my lips to her ear. "You think I'm not?"

"You took care of my family and I attacked you."

"I'm not upset. Consider the air cleared."

"But I feel like a horrible person."

"A little jealousy now and then is healthy. I told my cleaning lady she could skip out early and I'd take Andy back, though, so can we continue this talk at my place?"

"Sausage puppy! I'd like that."

"Yeah. Plus, I'll feel better since I can't trust you to lock the door here."

She glares at me. "It's a safe neighborhood."

"Atrocious shit still happens in gated communities. I don't like you being alone here with any prick free to walk in. I'm sure your old man would agree."

"You're not my dad." The look she throws me confirms I'm right.

"We both want you in one piece. I'm sure we'll probably get along fine."

And I guess the hint that I want to meet her father saves me. Because she laughs brightly and throws her arms around my neck.

"God, I've missed you, you big idiot."



I'M glad as hell Piper Renee doesn't hold a grudge.

We're strolling along the rocky beach behind my house. I have one arm draped around her and Andy's leash dangling from my other hand.

Is this real life?

Could this be everyday life?

"Were you sad without me?" I ask, reaching down to pull a piece of driftwood out of Andy's mouth.

"Eh, I kept telling myself at least I wasn't a carved-up corpse on *Law and Order*. Did you die without me?"

"Ten times," I say firmly. "I'm just happy as hell you're back."

I wind Andy's leash around my arm and step closer, tightening my hold on her hand before I lower my lips to hers.

The kiss is purely possessive. I feast on her bottom lip with my teeth, pushing my tongue into her mouth and stealing her breath.

This is for the days we missed.

This is the ferocity of a madman who now understands what he has to lose.

"You have no idea how incredible you are," she whispers as soon as I pull away.

"It's adorable you think so," I rumble, kissing the back of her hand.

Andy yips his agreement and starts bouncing up and down like a sun-bleached log on his stubby legs.

We finish Andy's little adventure, stealing kisses along the way.

I've never been happier that I manned the fuck up and took Vanessa's advice.

On the way back to the house, Piper says, "It's funny watching him in the sand. It's like he sinks and has to fight his way up every time, but he doesn't seem to mind. He's a little trooper."

"You hear that, boy? She's smitten." I reach into my pocket and toss him a dog biscuit I loaded up before the walk.

Later, back at my place, Piper heads for the guest room where Fyo dropped her stuff the very first night she came to live with me.

"We're sleeping alone tonight?" My jaw tenses.



She holds my eyes. “No. But I’d like to get ready somewhere a little more private.”

I kiss her deeply, grabbing her chin.

“Fine. Come join me when you’re ready.”

I have no idea how long she’ll be, or what she’s up to.

Did the fight leave a permanent wedge between us?

I hit the shower after Andy passes out in his bed in my closet corner, exhausted from the walk.

When I walk out naked, I find Piper sprawled across my bed in a sheer white nightgown.

She’s the picture of innocence—and that makes me want to defile her. Especially when that sheer thing looks completely see-through.

“That’s why you needed to get ready?” I growl with a knowing wink.

“You look ready yourself. Come lie down.”

Who am I to argue with the pretty lady?

I climb in bed beside her and we fall into a kissing contest that leaves her moaning.

“Oh. Oh, Brock!”

Her little sighs turn my dick into an armed weapon.

I kiss down her jawline, her throat, her cleavage.

Her tit finds its way into my mouth, and I suck like mad, ripping a hole in her gown with my teeth.

The flimsy fucking silk is no match for my lust.

Piper whimpers beautifully.

She struggles to pull it off before I demolish the rest, but I grab her arms and pin her down.

“No, ma’am. Let me finish my work.” I bring my fist to her neckline, balling up the fabric.

“But why?”

“It’s my job to ruin you. And to buy you a nicer replacement when we’re done.”

“Brock, you’re—”

She never finishes that thought.

I rip the gown right down the front in one rough pull so it’s hanging open, splaying her naked body in front of me like a banquet.

Her eyes flick to the torn silk, her chest rising and falling in heated waves.

“Whatever you want,” I tell her. “Don’t worry about it.”

She smiles. “What I want most is you inside me.”

Growling, I gladly oblige, pushing my tongue back in her mouth as I shift between her legs and grab my throbbing cock.

We both groan when I sink into the heaven between her legs.

Goddamn, she’s too hot.

Too wet.

Too everything, and in the madness storming my veins, I want it all now.

She throws her head back, breaking the kiss as I start working inside her.

This is nothing like the last time.

It’s fast and angry and so needy my nerves burn like a flaming rope.

I’m too lost for words, fucking her through her first orgasm and driving on as her pussy squeezes me.

Snarling, I bring my hand down and find her clit.

I cradle her closer, possessively, holding my cock inside her while I torment her nub.

Just feeling every pulse.

*Everything she gives.*

Her hands tear at the sheets, and soon, she’s begging, her mouth pulled open in a pink ring.

“Brock. God. More.”

I wish I were a stronger man.

But when the woman you thought you’d lost asks you to hammer her into the next century, you don’t argue back.

I kiss her again, growling into her mouth, no brakes on my rhythm now.

Her limbs tangle around me desperately as I move inside of her, my speed and size lifting her up and slamming her deeper into the mattress.

Every stroke becomes a desperate race to the finish, and I—

Fuck!

There’s almost no warning when I blow inside her. She sets me off that much, making my balls hurl fire.

I was put on this Earth to fill this woman. To mark her. To anchor her to my soul.

And the way she clenches and rakes her nails down my back and tries to scream says I've done my job.

We come together in a scalding red silence that ruins me right along with her.

I'll never be the same.

I'll never fuck like this with anyone else. No one except this angel who wrings my balls dry.

*I'll never fucking let her leave me again.*

That psycho realization still torches my brain when I finally pull out and crash down next to her, leveling one sticky-sweet kiss after another on her lips until we both pass out.



IN THE MORNING, we sit together with hot coffee and these dangerously tasty blueberry scones she whipped up.

Even Andy is a fan, taking every opportunity to whine for crumbs.

*Yeah, yeah, I know the feeling.*

She smiles at me over her mug. “So, have you seen the Scottsdale video?”

“Who in America hasn’t?” I sigh.

“I’m working on it, but I’m having a hard time.”

“You and everybody else in Marketing,” I say, biting into another scone.

“Do you think it’s legit?”

“Hell no, but I have people for investigations. If I can prove it, Finch is fucking dead—legally,” I add. I almost hate that I have to remind her I don’t go around slaughtering people with former Soviet hit men out of habit.

The assholes after Vanessa were a special case.

“That girl is the same age as my little sister. If it’s true, I almost feel bad trying to bury it... I know we should, but you have to ditch that manager.”

“I’m still waiting on a name from HR. If it’s true, he’s gone in a heartbeat,” I growl. “I don’t need anyone working for me who talks to people like worms—especially a minor.”

It's such a bright, beautiful morning, we finish our coffee outside. Andy flies out for a bathroom break, racing across the freshly cut lawn.

"I hate seeing you stressed. I was thinking we should take a trip. Clear our heads and get out of town," she whispers, reaching for my hand.

"Paris? Tokyo? Or would you prefer somewhere domestic?"

She scrunches up her face and laughs so sweetly it hurts. "Jeez, dude, I meant a *road trip*. I found this cool little cabin in an ocean town in Oregon. It's not that far, just a few hours."

Andy comes leaping to my side with a loud *woof!*

I guess that decides it then.

"What about the PR hell?" I ask.

She rests a hand on my arm, gazing into my eyes. "We can keep working, but you need to relax a little. It's just two days."

The way she kisses me makes it damn near impossible to argue.

"Sunshine, if I'm with you for a whole weekend, the last thing I'll do is relax. Even if that doesn't mean work."

"Last night was fun," she admits. "I could always use more."

Now she's speaking my language.



## COMPANY INK (PIPER)



**I** try to stop my heart from leaping right out of my chest.

It's no big deal.

It's just a warm, sunny weekend at the beach.

It's just a break from reality with a gorgeous, complicated man and his adorable sausage dog.

It's just a man I'm hopelessly falling for.

When we finally park the SUV he's rented by the little cabin and I step out to stretch my legs, I'm instantly back in Lanai. The warm sand and rolling waves rival Hawaii, and so does the tingly glow he breathes into me with every glance.

"Enjoying the view?" he whispers against my neck, grabbing my shoulders.

I melt into his grasp and tilt my head, staring up into his sparkling blue eyes.

God, this man.

He has no idea how exquisite the view really is.

And just before we kiss, Andy unleashes a flurry of barks from his carrier.

"I think you'd better take someone for a walk," I tease, turning in his arms and brushing my lips against his.

The sausage barks his agreement.

"See?" I giggle.

Biting back a smile, Brock marches over and opens the kennel once he's got the little beast leashed. After he's had his potty break and sniffed every flower under the soaring cedar trees in front of the cabin, we start collecting our luggage.

Brock barrels through the front door with his hands full and drops the bags just inside the door.

You can practically see the whole thing from the front door.

It's a cozy place with a rustic dresser and bed, cushioned wooden chairs, a modern kitchenette, a jacuzzi tub just out back on the deck, and a spacious bathroom on the other side of the small house.

I look at him, blushing. "Um, sorry, I know this isn't the usual kind of place you stay—"

"It's perfect," he says, catching my eyes.

He walks forward and lays a claiming kiss on my lips while Andy scampers around, exploring the room.

"For real?" I whisper.

"I've got you and I've got my dog. This place would have to be crawling with bedbugs or sand fleas to suck," he says sincerely.

I smile so hard I almost break.

"You can pretend to be someone else here, you know." I'm thinking of Lanai as I reach down to stroke the pup pawing at my leg for attention.

"Better plan. We pretend we're someone else together. How does that sound, Mrs. Farmer?"

I stand again and close the space between us. "Pretty wild. Especially if you're saying we're married."

The almost shy way his grin lights up his face makes me laugh. He reaches into his bag and pulls out a bag of dog treats, throwing Andy a cookie.

"We're Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, and Hoover's our dog."

"Hoover?" I repeat.

"He sucks up every crumb," Brock points out.

No argument there.

I lay my hand on his massive arm, loving how hard he is.

"Watch out. That's a role Andy and I could get into." My hand drifts to his wrist.

"Me, too, woman," he growls back, twining his hand through mine.

After a few more kisses, we unpack and then get 'Hoover' leashed for a longer walk on the beach.

“There he goes in the sand again. Poor little guy,” I say with a laugh, watching the dachshund-lab struggle through the high dunes. “We should have packed some dog boots.”

He lets go of my hand, opting to drop his arm around my waist instead. “Hoover’s no wimp. You remember the last big snowstorm the city had last winter? I thought he’d dig tunnels all the way to Vancouver.”

I laugh as we walk to the edge of the water.

Massive waves sparkle like silver hills as they churn, crashing against the towering rocky islands just off the shore.

A few bone-white seabirds soar overhead, squawking, and the brave little pupper goes wild, barking and rearing up.

“Easy, boy,” Brock says, kneeling to scratch his ear. “Last time you picked a fight with a goose twice your size, you didn’t come out on top.”

“He did not!”

“He did. This guy thinks he’s a Doberman in a bratwurst’s skin.”

The breeze picks up then, tumbling my hair. Even though it’s warm, the wind has a slight chill to it, and I press myself closer to the safe wall of his chest.

“Hold this.” Brock hands me the leash.

I watch him as he takes off his jacket, drapes it around my shoulders, and stares at me like he’s awestruck.

“What?” I whisper.

“You, Pippa. You steal all my words. Here we are in this gorgeous place, the sun shining down, and I can barely look away long enough to give a damn. You were meant to be my art, woman—and I’m not an artsy guy. I just love the way you look when you’re content and wrapped around me. Love how the wind tries to pull you away and I get to hold on tighter. Love how your eyes shame the sky every time you look at me. Fuck, just like—” He stops, craning his face to my neck, inhaling me.

“Lanai,” I finish, my voice trembling.

*What is happening?*

I think I know.

I’m afraid to admit it as he leans down, caressing the side of my face, bringing his mouth to mine.



The kiss is gentle and sweet and slowly turns possessive.

I lean in closer, which only deepens it, my heart fit to bursting.

I'm almost glad Andy pulls on his leash, growling at a little crab popping out of a hole in the sand.

I need the distraction.

God, I'm going to need *a lot* of them if I want any prayer of not having Brock Winthrop bring me to my knees.

Too many unsaid words whisper against my tongue as our mouths play.

I lavish his taste, his feel, his *intensity*.

Then Andy barks, darting for the crab before the leash jerks him backward.

"He's as bad as a five-year-old." Chuckling, Brock backs away from me slowly with a lingering gaze.

"He's wonderful. He has a pretty awesome owner, even if said owner probably wishes we were in a fancy resort." I smile, wondering if I need to tether myself to the ground.

A single glance makes me float.

"Bullshit, Mrs. Farmer. There's nowhere I'd rather be."

"Yeah? Nowhere besides standing in the cold without a coat and a crazy dog?" I challenge.

He kisses my nose. "What cold? All I feel is *fire*."

And I'm grinning until my face hurts as we saunter around with Andy for another half hour or so, letting him bounce after crabs and birds as fast as his toothpick legs can carry him.

Back in the cabin, Andy flops down for a nap while I unpack a massive bag of groceries I threw together at the last minute. And that's how I find out Brock doesn't eat all his meals off art deco plates prepared by world-class chefs.

He goes to work making homemade pasta without even looking at a recipe while I whip up my grandma's classic Bolognese sauce. If I didn't have fifteen years of practice making it for my dad and Maisy, I'd be intimidated.

But the way he smiles at me over wine later, when we're in the jacuzzi tub out back, tells me it's a winner.

So is the way he lifts me up and carries me to bed, all greedy looks and roaming lips that tighten his spell on my soul.

In the morning, I wake up to Andy pawing at the door.

Brock is already hunched over his laptop at the table when I throw my robe on and pad out, stopping next to him.

I reach for his computer and gently close it.

“No working, Crankyface. This is our weekend, remember?”

“Very demanding, Miss Renee. And you call me a tyrant.” With a wicked smile, he swings up and swats my butt.

Even though I’m laughing, I know where this goes.

I don’t even last a second after Andy flies out the door before Brock has me against the wall, his hot breath on my throat, yanking my robe open.

“Hey!” I yell through my laughter. “What do you think you’re—”

A firm hand cups my bare breast. He gives me a feral look.

“What does it look like? Mrs. Farmer, if you won’t let me work, you’ll have to keep me entertained other ways.”

“Hoover’s going to be pissed if you delay his breakfast...” I tease, working to keep my breathing even and pretending my nipple hasn’t pebbled under his touch.

“Hoover doesn’t eat for another hour.” He replaces his hand with his mouth.

Holy hell.

My eyes flutter shut and I slide down the wall with a butterfly sigh.

We never make it to the bed.

He tears down his boxers, shoves his way between my legs, and takes me hard and fast against the wall. It’s a miracle we don’t damage the wood paneling.

Brock drives against my body like the ocean waves slapping the shore, matching their rhythm and the intensity.

I grind out my pleasure through clenched teeth when he empties himself inside me.

God.

When I’m breathless and ragged and still tangled in his arms, it hits me just how insanely lucky I am.

For the rest of the weekend, we live out our fantasies.

We might as well be the Farmers when all the worries of Pippa and Brock are a few hundred miles away.

I’m so high on him I never want to come down.

If I had my way, I'd stay here forever with a thousand stolen kisses, masterful sex, an excitable puppy who never fails to make me laugh, and a man who helps me cook and does it so freaking well.

But if I had my way, we never would've had to suffer what came next.



THE WEEK after we return from the beach is a blur.

It's like the afterglow when you wake up from a lovely dream where everything feels fuzzy and unreal.

Everything is going too right for once.

Maisy calls to tell me Dad is up and moving. The marketing campaign Jenn and I put together runs flawlessly, and there haven't been any new hiccups as Winthrop Seattle preps for the big fashion show.

So, why am I just waiting for the other shoe to drop?

Why do I have that knot of panic in my belly?

Is it just the utter insanity happening today?

*I hope.*

Brock pulls me closer in the back seat of the SUV. "You're tense as hell," he observes.

Without looking at him, I nod.

"Talk to me," he demands. "You're a lot of things, woman, and quiet isn't one of them."

I smile. "I'm just nervous."

"About?" He side-eyes me.

*Is he kidding?*

"Well, not everyone is used to waltzing around with billionaires and gossipmongers."

He laughs. "It's a closed event. If the press shows up, Gramps will toss them out personally. I wouldn't feed you to the wolves, Sunshine."

"...but what if your grandparents don't like me? Do you think it's too soon?"

His piercing blue gaze sharpens.

"Do you think it's too soon?" He grabs my hand and squeezes. "Because I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

“I’m sure about you.” I close my eyes. “About *us*. It’s just, if your grandparents don’t like me, or if they think I’m—” I stop, trying to find a diplomatic way to say ‘trashy.’

“They’ll adore you. I promise,” he growls, so much certainty ringing in his tone I can’t even argue.

His arms sweep me into his lap. “And if a one in a trillion disaster strikes and they don’t, it doesn’t change anything.”

*I so don’t deserve this man.*

My lip trembles.

He has me on the edge of tears.

Instead of crying, I lean in, tilt my chin, and meet his mouth with mine.

He kisses me so sweetly, lending me the courage I need.

Soon, we pull up in front of LA’s most exclusive country club, and he leads me through a throng of well-dressed people with a higher combined net worth than entire countries.

My stomach lurches as we go up the medieval-looking stairs to this castle of a clubhouse.

I so don’t belong here.

As soon as we make it up to the main floor, an older couple rushes Brock.

The man’s lime-green suit with a purple vest and tie gives him away immediately.

Ross Winthrop’s eccentric fashion tastes are almost as legendary as his fortune.

For an older man, he’s still insanely tall, and he looks down and surveys me. Then his eyes flick to Brock, and he chuckles.

“A sweet young thing you’ve got on your arm.” He nudges his grandson with his elbow. “Don’t be shy, boy.”

“This is Miss Piper Renee,” Brock says proudly.

The elder Mr. Winthrop takes my hand and kisses it. “Pleasure. How’s my grandson behaving?”

“Like a total sweetheart—today,” I add, trying to lighten the mood.

“That doesn’t sound like him,” Ross says.

“Some people like me, Gramps. Hard to believe, I know,” Brock says.

“Only because you pay them so well.”

I stiffen at his words.

Uh-oh.

Do they know I work for him? And what would they think if they do, and they also know we're—

I never finish that thought.

Brock senses my nerves, pulls me closer, and gives me a look that says, *are you okay?*

I nod.

Then it's Mrs. Emily Winthrop's turn. She swats her husband's arm. "Oh, quit harassing our Broccoli in front of his date."

"Broccoli?" I grin and meet Brock's eyes.

He sighs like a tortured man.

She grabs my hand and closes it between both of hers.

"How long have you known Brock? Tell me everything." But before I can answer, she drops my hand and pats Brock's cheek. "Oh, it's so nice to finally see you out with a woman."

"Uh, thanks, Grandma," he mutters.

"Are you serious about her?" She smiles and waves a hand. "You must be. She shares one of my dearest passions."

Mrs. Winthrop nods at me, and at first I don't follow. But I notice her eyes sweeping to my neck, and I reach up and pull out the tiny silver sparrow necklace I've worn since I was sixteen.

"It's a cheap, sentimental thing, ma'am. But I love jewelry too."

The old lady smiles and laughs, the lines deepening under her eyes as she looks at Brock. "Do you want to tell her or should I?"

Brock exhales sharply. "Grandma's a bird freak just like you, Piper."

"Oh!" I'm floored. "Seen any good ones lately?"

"Kindly don't get her started," Ross groans, giving Brock a miserable look.

But Mrs. Winthrop ignores him and launches into this awesome story about the raptor center she funded in the southwest to help rehabilitate the California Condor. By the end of it, I'm grinning from ear to ear.

I think the two men muttering to themselves are wishing the condors went extinct by the time we're through and finally look at them again.

"Don't muck this up, dear," she whispers in Brock's ear. "If you're smart, soon I won't be the only crazy bird lady in the family. When are you proposing?"

“Grandma—”

“Don’t be coy with me. You never would have brought her to meet us if you weren’t—”

“She has ears, you know,” he bites off harshly.

I don’t know how I hold it together.

I’m dying, trying not to laugh.

Fortunately, Ross takes his wife’s arm and gestures. “Is that the Hargroves over there, love? We really should go say hello and hear about that new rhino sanctuary they’ve started.”

“Hear about how many bragging rights their donations buy, you mean? Bah.” Mrs. Winthrop flashes her teeth in an awkward smile. “Please excuse us. If you find me later, I’ll tell you all about the time Ross and I were stranded with a mob of emus in Queensland.”

With her husband pulling on her arm, they disappear to the other side of the room. Halfway to the other couple, Ross Winthrop turns back and winks at Brock.

I giggle behind my hand and say, “Wow. That was close. You got lucky.”

“Sorry about that,” Brock says. “Give her half a chance, and she’ll talk until she’s sprouting a beak.”

“Why? It went better than expected, *Broccoli*.”

His eyes snap to me, twin blue flames.

“Sunshine, if you ever call me that shit again, I *will* take you over my knee,” he says.

Oh, he’s mad.

And why does that sound so enticing?

A glamorous-looking couple approaches us then and slaps Brock on the shoulder. “Small world, Winthrop. Did your grandparents drag you out here?”

“Anything for conservation.” He waves a hand in front of me. “This is Piper Renee. Piper, this is Lincoln and Dakota Burns from Haughty But Nice.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say, gushing a few words about how much I adore their clothes.

I step back and listen to Brock making small talk with them. Haughty But Nice can’t wait to show off its latest wares, and he assures them the

Winthrop Seattle is the perfect venue.

My phone vibrates in my bag.

I frown.

Hopefully it's not anything with Dad.

Even though he's on the mend, the old worries linger.

My phone buzzes impatiently again.

I glance over at Brock, hoping to catch his eye and signal my need to slip away. But he's still gabbing and they're talking about—Edgar Allan Poe?

I wonder what I missed, but there's no time to worry about it now.

“Well, I see your grandparents are here from across the pond. I won't keep you.” Lincoln wraps a protective hand around his wife's waist. “We need to mingle anyway. One of the rare times I can get my little poet out of the house.”

Dakota throws back her head and laughs, her blond curls rippling. “Would you stop? We went out with Wyatt and Meadow for those stupid cinnamon rolls last week.”

They walk away, totally caught up in a conversation only they understand.

“Guess who we saw coming off the dance floor?” Ross Winthrop asks, reappearing next to us with his wife.

“Who?” Brock asks.

“Basil Von Grant from Harriet Hotels. He thinks he's taking first place at the awards this year,” Ross chuckles. “Can't fault a man for being the eternal optimist, I suppose.”

“Not happening.” Brock shakes his head. “That award is ours.”

Ross nods. “It's certainly nothing to stress over. Our reputation—”

“Is better than ever,” Brock finishes too quickly. “This will be our fifteenth year in a row. I'm not letting you guys down.”

Emily nods. “We're proud of you either way, but winning is *always* better.”

Wow. I wonder if Brock's competitive edge actually comes from his grandmother.

Then my phone thrums again, stealing my attention.

Jesus, I need to get out of here.

I reach over and gently touch Brock's shoulder. "Someone keeps texting me. I need to make sure it's not Maisy." I nod politely to the elder Winthropes and make my escape.

The large balcony is closer than the exit, so I make my way over and push through the doors. Cool air hits me in the face as I fish out my phone.

Four missed texts from Jenn.

***Holy crap, Pippa. Are you okay?***

Of course, they show up in reverse order, so I'm going to have to keep reading to find out why I wouldn't be.

***Again, I'm so sorry.***

My heart stops. Why is she sorry?

***Please don't be mad at me. I just thought it would be best if you heard it from me first, if you haven't already.***

Huh? What is she talking about?

***Hey, I know you're busy, but there's something you should see. The local tabloids and gossip blogs are going crazy and since it's about you...***

I tap on the link attached and my entire world shatters in slow motion.

## **EXCLUSIVE: WINTHROPE HEIR DIPS HIS PEN IN THE COMPANY INK; JUNIOR COPYWRITER GETS AHEAD!**

RIGHT UNDER THE cursed text is a picture of Brock and me, our lips locked with Andy's leash tangled around us. We're right outside his house in the back. I think it's from last week.

I don't need to read further to know what this story is about.

He just told his grandparents the company's reputation is on the way back up.

Now that's a lie.

All because I'll be the reason Winthrope loses the award, helpless fodder for Seattle's brutal tabloid gossip mill.

What do you even do when your life detonates with a problem you never imagined?

My first instinct is lie down and die.



But as I stand in the cool night air, trying not to panic, struggling to figure out what the hell my next move should be, I wait for a miracle that never arrives.

Instead, I look up and see Brock rapidly approaching. He's still smiling, meaning it's my job to obliterate his happiness.

"You ran off so fast I lost you in the crowd! Everything okay?" he asks.

I nod because I don't know how to find the words.

*There are no right words for this.*

He comes closer, though, concern flashing in his eyes.

I instinctively throw a hand up to stop him.

I don't know why.

It's not his fault, but I don't want to confirm all the ugly rumors here in front of everyone.

"Piper, you're pale. What the hell's going on? Is your father okay?" He reaches for me again.

I stagger backward, bumping the railing behind me and hating myself with a passion.

"Sunshine, be careful. We're on a second-floor balcony." He's quiet for a minute. "Have I upset you?"

"No, we just... Can we please go back to the hotel? *Now?*"

He eyes me slowly, as if he's trying so hard to read my mind and failing. "We can, but you need to tell me what's got you rattled."

With a deflated sigh, I hand him my phone.

The blog post is still on the screen in all its hellish glory.

He stares at it for ten seconds before his face flushes red with anger.

Then he grabs my hand, pulling me along, even before he says, "Let's get the fuck out of here. When I find out how he did this, he's *dead*."

I almost believe him.

But even if he means that literally, I can't bring myself to tell him it doesn't matter.

We're already two dead, miserable creatures walking, and I can't fathom how we'll ever find our way back to life.



## SQUARE ONE (BROCK)



Piper sits on the king-sized bed in our hotel room with her legs dangling over the edge.

Her face is almost as red as her dress.

Unmistakable proof she was crying in the bathroom and trying like hell to hide it.

Yeah.

I'm going to slaughter Apollo Finch three times over.

Once for going out of his way to savage my grandparents' legacy.

Again for digging into my fucking personal life.

And finally for hurting the woman I love.

Although Fyodor could drop him like a hammer the instant I say the word, I already know I'll have to settle for nailing his ass legally.

I fucking hate it.

A slander and libel case is so much less than this vicious fuckwit deserves.

"Brock," she starts, but the look on her face says too much.

"That twisted, gutless, cutthroat chickenshit bastard clown had no right! *No right.*" I shake my fist in the air. "He's hellbent on bringing me down."

"I'm so sorry." Her words are barely audible.

Why should she apologize for his shit?

"I'll bury him alive. Nail his dick to the inside of a cell with criminal charges," I vow.

Piper balls up her hands, moving them roughly on her thighs.

Something about the motion stops me in my tracks.

She's gone from humiliated to scared thanks to yours truly.

Goddamn.

Why am I letting him rattle me like this?

I suck in an acid breath and exhale. "I'm sorry, Sunshine. I don't mean to explode."

She shakes her head.

"It's fine. I just hate this. Everything was going so well, and now—*this*. Just go public with our relationship, and I'll resign," she whispers.

*What the hell?*

"I have no problem going public with our relationship, but you're not resigning over this. You're the reason we even have a counterattack. If you quit now, we're back to square one, and my marketing department is left swinging in the breeze."

"If I quit and we're still together, the scandal dies. It's not news-worthy to date a woman who doesn't work for you anymore—"

"You can't quit. I need you, Pippa."

"Maybe I could stay on as a consultant, but I doubt you need it. The issue isn't us, Brock. It's the optics, office morale, the judges at that conference..."

I inhale sharply, annoyed that she's always too smart for her own good.

"You are *not* quitting your job and downgrading to a goddamned basement consultant who can't even step into the office. That's not right."

"I'd like to come clean and do things right, even if it hadn't come to this. I don't want Maisy thinking it's cool to sneak around with your boss."

"We will, Sunshine. We'll just do it on my terms."

I won't watch Apollo fucking Finch back Piper into a corner. He's a complete lunatic if he thinks I'm going to be backed against a wall where she's concerned.

Her lips slowly curve into a tense smile I haven't seen since before she handed me her phone. "What are your terms?"

"You don't quit your job. HR can fuck off and deal with it. I'll take the blame."

"That...that isn't going to work. How do you just gloss over this while you're trying to clean up your brand image? Never mind the award." She tilts her face up.

“I’ll win, dammit. Don’t worry about it.”

I’m not thinking straight—if I’m even thinking at all.

Right now, I’m halfway tempted to sweep her up and haul her into the lobby so the entire world can see me kiss her.

She stands. “You’re upset.”

“Obviously. That fucking jackal doesn’t fight fair. If it’s so important to beat me for his ego, his pride, he should clean up that piece of shit hotel and stand his ground without these cheap parlor tricks. But hell, I don’t even care about that. He can *have* the shitting trophy if it’s fair. Not this way. Not by hounding me out of the running with these nosy goddamned reporters.”

I pinch my eyes shut and see red, trying to breathe.

I’m back in a burning spy plane, all adrenaline, everything spinning and choking and horrible, helplessly plummeting to Earth.

Ripping this man’s throat out might be the only thing that stops my free fall.

At least Piper doesn’t look scared out of her wits anymore.

She walks up to me and rests her hand on my chest. “Brock, I’m not going to undo all of our work. I won’t ruin Winthrope.” She swallows. “I won’t ruin you.”

Insane.

I stare at her.

Doesn’t she know she’s already ruined me?

After Lanai, after finding her here, I knew I’d never look at another woman the same way again.

Swallowing a growl, I close my hand over hers.

“Piper, listen. The only way to ruin me is to let him win. If you quit, that’s exactly what you’re doing. He’s kicking me in the balls right where I live.”

“Then what can I do? How can I help?” Her frown deepens.

“You’re here. That’s enough.” I pull her closer, hugging her to my chest.

“Since when did the bosshole become so sensitive?”

“Don’t know. Maybe the day a mouthy thing with looks like an angel barged in, watching me shower—”

“You broke into my room,” she says, smiling.

Even with my gut turning into a volcano, I laugh.

That’s her magic, all right.

She makes me happy even with the entire sky falling down.

“Piper?” I whisper.

“Yeah?” She tilts her head back so she can see my eyes.

I almost say it.

I almost cut myself open and bleed on her.

I almost give her the words vibrating in my soul—but I shouldn’t tell her now.

Not like this.

Not while we’re stuck in this dumbass crisis.

The first time I say ‘I love you,’ it needs to be perfect.

“Brock?”

“Never mind,” I say.

Her eyes search mine. “What were you about to say?”

“I forget. Nothing important.”

I didn’t forget shit.

I’m just too gutless to say it.

Still, I run my hand down her back. “I’ve vented and moaned, but you haven’t said much. How are you really holding up? You’re in the middle of this too, and I wish like hell you weren’t.”

“I—I don’t know. I don’t like being called a junior copywriter who got ahead by sleeping with you. I hope nobody who works with us thinks that.”

“If anyone’s that stupid, they don’t know the facts. Piper, we kissed before you ever worked for me. Hell, I kissed you. This shit show is entirely on me—”

She meets my lips with hers, silencing me.

“Hush. If you hadn’t kissed me, I would have done it first,” she admits.

“Yeah?”

She nods, a slow smile appearing. “Once I had the nerve, I would have walked right into your office and kissed you.”

“I wouldn’t have called security.” I grab the zipper on the back of her dress and pull it down.

“What would you have done?”

I kiss her lips. “What does it look like?”

She brings her leg up behind mine.

Her hands move to the row of buttons on my shirt. “I might even have done this.”

She works several buttons out of their holes and flicks her tongue against my chest.

“Fuck,” I rasp, lust bolting through me. “If you did that, I’d have no choice but to do this.”

I place my hands on the shoulders of that skintight dress and peel it down.

She continues working my shirt open. “Then I’d call this fair game.”

She unbuttons my pants next and watches them fall.

I feast my eyes on the beautiful woman in front of me. “You’re not wearing any panties.”

She smiles and bites her lip.

“The dress was too tight. And I wanted to surprise you later, before everything went crazy.”

I’m definitely going crazy now.

Especially as she works her hands under the elastic of my boxers, pulls them down, and slides a soft hand down my length.

“Miss Renee?” I bite off, my head rolling back as she strokes me to heaven.

She rises on her toes to kiss my lips.

“So formal. We should fix that,” she whispers.

Goddamn, if I ever needed to blow off some steam...

I devour the inside of her mouth before I can answer. Then I pick her up and place her on top of the desk in our room.

“Brock, we have a bed—”

“Too far and less fun,” I growl.

I thrust into her then, anger and madness and adoration filling my hips.

Every stroke renders us breathless.

Every groan brings us closer.

Every pulse writes whole volumes, books about all the shit I want to say with words, but I can only communicate with flesh right now.

“Brock!” she whimpers, her pleasure cresting, and she digs her little teeth into my shoulder.

As I drive on, deeper and harder and faster, I realize I have something no power-hungry billionaire rival can ever take, no gossip can derail, and no amount of money can buy.

As I slam her against the desk and bottom out, emptying my balls with a groan, I know this woman is irrevocably mine.

I just hope I'm smart enough to keep her.



THE NEXT DAY I'm in my office, lighting up every resource I have so this never happens again.

"Up security on everyone's company devices. I want my house watched twenty-four seven, the whole perimeter."

I'll be damned if this jagoff gets another picture from inside my yard.

It's a threat to Piper and a breach of my privacy.

I don't want her home alone either. Her family isn't back from Mexico yet. Finch could bug her entire house if he wanted.

"Anything else?" Keenan asks. "For the record, I'm sorry you have to deal with this."

"That's it. Don't apologize, just get it done." I cut the call and pound my phone against my desk.

A thick envelope catches my attention.

What the hell is that?

I tear it open and pull out a large blue card with a yellow thought bubble that reads, *There is no good card for this...*

I flick it open and see the words, *But I'm so sorry for your loss.*

And then in handwriting underneath, *Hell of a winning streak you had, Winnie. It almost pains me to see it coming to an end.*

*P.S. At least you won't be lonely. That sweet little kitten should help lick your wounds.*

Fuck him entirely.

*I am done.*

Before any sanity sets in, I grab my phone and call Apollo Finch.

"Winnie, what a surprise. Did you get my card?"

"You fucking coward," I spit.

"Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

"Stay the fuck away from her and stay away from my house! If she shows up in one more tweet, I'll send you to the butcher shop. Then I'll



send a package to your mother.”

I know how unhinged I sound, threatening dismemberment.

I don't care. This maniac has crossed every red line.

“Oh, Winnie, your threats are so tedious. You should work on that anger. I had to take a few classes myself after Samantha—*yeah*.” He catches himself.

It takes a second to remember that was his ex-wife's name.

The woman who walked out on him after losing the award sent his life into a spiral. I'm sure the decent chunk of his fortune she got wasn't nearly enough for putting up with his bullshit.

“Don't play dumb with me, Finch. No one else sends me a condolence card unless they're causing my bad luck. All for an award I haven't lost yet.”

“*Yet*,” he bites off.

“The award isn't the point. I'm warning you, stay the fuck away from my—” I stop. Shit. Why give him more ammunition? “Stay away from Piper Renee.”

Silence.

Then he says, “Was it worth it?”

“What?” I clip.

“Dipping your pen in the company ink. Was it worth ending your winning streak and embarrassing yourself?” He pauses, waiting for an answer I won't give. “You were always so buttoned-down. No scandals, no women, no substances to spice things up. Mr. Boring Workaholic, too married to his work to ever wind up in trouble. Or so we thought.”

Goddamn, this is pointless. He's been warned and I'm not sitting here taking his shit.

“Are you done?” I snarl.

“Don't hang up yet,” he hisses.

I wait.

“You're so protective of Miss Renee. It's almost endearing,” he says, an edge in his voice that hints he thinks this could backfire. “I wonder what you would think about this?”

“What?”

“You have to rein in your temper first, Winnie. You are threatening me with a meat grinder, after all. But I wonder how much you'd flip if you

heard my little recording?”

“Recording? What fucking recording, Finch?”

“Oh, fine. Best not to leave you wondering, huh?”

I wait while there’s a clicking sound and another voice with a digital echo.

A voice I recognize.

“He’s going to get blown up and it’s all thanks to me,” Piper says miserably. “Jenn, what if they start digging into my father? All the medical stuff he’s paid for? An office fling would be pretty embarrassing, but if everyone finds out he’s spent tens of thousands on my family... I can’t do this. I can’t let his kindness end in a slaughter. I’ll never live it down. I love him so—”

*Click.*

The recording cuts off.

I’m too fucking stunned to speak, my heart banging in my chest.

Finch’s nasty laugh echoes in my ear. “Rather sad, isn’t it? You’re so protective of her. You can just tell the guilt must be eating her alive. What will she do if this leaks and the whole Winthrop crew finds out about Harold Renee’s special treatment?”

Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

Before I know what’s happening, my fist crashes down on my desk so hard pain lashes up my arm.

“Leave her alone or you *die.*”

He makes a loud exaggerated yawning sound.

“That’s very sweet of you, still trying to go all Neanderthal for her. Such a shame that we understand your little romance, but everyone else—well, your HR department—might consider your moves potentially litigious. Winthrop Resorts might even need a new CEO.”

“Stop following her, or Oasis Springs will definitely need a new chief. I’ll make sure they never find the body,” I growl.

I don’t even disconnect the call.

I just chuck the phone across the room.

It thuds against the wall, bouncing to a stop on the floor.

*Pure bullshit.*

And here I am, playing right into his game.

Fuck whatever happens to me.

I care that he could make Piper's life far more miserable.

That can't happen.

I can't take more from her than she's already lost just by trying to do the right thing with her ailing father.

My phone goes off and I walk across the room, surprised it isn't broken as I snatch it off the floor. "Goddamnit, Finch, you need to back the fuck off and—"

"Young man, that's no way to talk to your grandmother!"

Oh, shit.

"Sorry. I thought you were—"

"Apollo Finch? I gathered that much. Are you two fighting? Oh, Brock, multinational CEOs don't have time for schoolyard spats. Just be the bigger man and walk away."

I wish like hell I could.

"What do you want?" I ask, tamping down the fury in my voice.

"I just called to make sure you and that sweet girl got home okay. You left in such a rush."

Right.

My elderly grandparents had an international flight, and she's worried about me. Typical Grandma.

"We're good. Just a PR issue I had to go chasing down," I say, holding my breath and hoping she hasn't seen the news.

"That junk in the papers? It's as bad as the old Roland Osprey rag."

Well, fuck. So much for keeping a lid on it.

I wait in grim silence until she says, "I don't think you did anything wrong, you know."

"You don't care that I'm dating an employee?" I ask.

I certainly can't make myself regret it.

"Oh, pish-posh. Back in my day, that was called an office romance, and it was spicy."

I cringe. "Grandma, don't make me hear that again."

"Prude. I wouldn't have you harassing some poor girl who worked for us, but that's not what happened. She hangs on your every word. You watch her with your heart in your throat. You two were *adorable*. She's exactly the kind of woman I always hoped would find you."

"Yeah," I say tightly, stunned that this insanity has their approval.

Maybe my tight-ass grandparents aren't as concerned with optics as I thought.

Grandma laughs. "If I'm being honest, I was rooting for a British girl so you'd move to London. But I really just want to see you as happy as I saw you this weekend. If that girl is special, treat her like gold. Cling tight. I could go on forever, but you know what you need to do and I need a nap, dear. I just wanted to let you know we're behind you before you did something stupid in the fuss—or you let her make a dreadful mistake."

"Thanks, Grandma," I say dryly.

"You're welcome and I love you."

"Love you too. Go take your nap."

I wasn't expecting that.

I have to protect her, dammit, now more than ever, before Finch drops another atomic bomb on her life.

I owe her that much if I want to keep her. I just wish it was as simple as threatening Apollo Finch with an early grave.

As I sit down and think, my jaw tight enough to break, I know what I have to do.

The question is, am I strong enough to do it?

I have to try.

Even if it makes bailing out over hostile territory in a flaming wreck and dispatching a bunch of mobster fucks feel like a spring picnic.



## ROCKY ROAD (PIPER)



I lay on Brock's couch, talking to Dad over Zoom. He looks better than he has in a long time, and they've got him walking all over the hospital campus.

"Are you sure you're not getting too much exercise, Dad?"

"I moved my whole life until I couldn't. Feels damn good to be back in the game."

"I know. I'm just worried about you," I say.

"Yeah, that's my number one concern, too, honey."

"What?"

"Making sure you get it through your head that it's not your job to fuss over me. You need to finally learn how to be young." The way he smiles over the screen almost breaks me.

I'm about to sass back when Brock comes in.

I look up. His jaw is clenched and his eyes look hollowed out.

*Oh, no. More bad news?*

He sits down on the couch beside me but doesn't look at me.

"Hey, can I call you back later?" I ask.

"What's wrong?" Dad moves his phone closer like he thinks it'll help see me better, blowing his face up huge.

"Nothing!" I throw back.

"Bull. Your voice just changed."

"Oh, Brock just came home and I need to talk to him. Business stuff."

Brock puts up a hand. "Don't end the call on my account."

“Are you staying at that man’s house?” Dad growls, a protective glint in his eyes.

I try not to laugh.

“Dad. I’m twenty-four, remember?”

I don’t give a real answer, though.

I never told him I’ve been with Brock this whole time, and apparently Maisy omitted that fact, too. Thank God. She’s earning her sisterly bribe this time.

“We’re gonna chat about this when I get home. If all goes well, I’ll be back in about a week,” Dad tells me.

“Sounds great, Dad. Take care of yourself.” I cut the call and glance at Brock. The way he’s bowed and tense gives everything away before I even squeak out, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing new.” He stands and moves away from me, still not meeting my eyes. “Piper, I was thinking, maybe it’s time you go visit your dad. I know the doctors are sending a rosy assessment, but wouldn’t you like to see him yourself?”

I sit up, clasping my hands.

“I mean, that’s what Maisy’s there for, and all she says is that he’s doing crazy well. He hasn’t walked half a mile for years. He’s eating and his energy is through the roof. They’ll be home in about a week, supposedly. He’s doing great, and it’s all thanks to you.”

Brock gives me a curt nod.

I frown.

*What’s going on?*

I stand and move toward him. His body language matches a wounded dog guarding its injury, and I don’t want to set him off. So I reach out slowly, running a hand up his arm.

“London,” he says, staring past me.

He gazes out the window at a few lazy sailboats on the water.

“Come again?”

“You should go to London. You haven’t had a chance to travel internationally much and my grandparents love you. You’ll have a mountain of content when you start up your videos again. Hell, you can stay with them—”

“What the hell? No!”

He throws me a worried look before his face sets like stone again.

“Okay, I get it. You don’t have to stay with them; I’m sure they’d put you up in a complimentary room at the Winthrop London. They’re odd birds, even if I love ’em to death—” He stops and shakes his head. “Especially Gramps. But they own thirty other gorgeous properties in the UK. You can have your pick.”

I stare at him until he meets my eyes, and it scares me.

He’s so cold. Distant. Frightened.

“Brock...are you *trying* to get rid of me? If you don’t want me around, just say so. I’ll go home. You don’t have to send me across the freaking ocean if it’s space you’re after.”

“Not space, Pippa,” he growls, pulling me into his arms. “It’s for your own good—until this shit with Finch gets sorted. Can’t risk him sending his little minions to hound you with cameras or God knows what else.”

“Finch? Did something else happen?”

His jaw tightens, but he won’t answer me.

My mouth twists.

“Yeah, I’m going home.” I spin around, reluctantly leaving his embrace, and head for the bedroom to pack up anything I’ve been stupid enough to bring here.

But before I get two steps away, he grabs my arm. “Pippa, no! I need you to *listen*.”

My heart stalls as I throw a look over my shoulder.

“Excuse you?”

“That came out wrong.” He pinches the bridge of his nose before he looks at me again. “Look, anywhere you go is more secure than here. Not less. Trust me, I’m not pushing you away. If I wanted ‘space,’ you’d already be gone. I just need you safe, and that means I need you out of Seattle for a couple of months—”

“A couple months? Brock, this is bonkers.”

“I think once the fashion show and the hotel conference are over, the immediate threat from Finch vanishes. I won’t be the reason he hurts you.” His eyes stab through me.

“And I’m not leaving you high and dry in the middle of this crap. If he’s after me, then I’m already too involved. Dad taught me you don’t run from bullies.”



“This isn’t a damn playground fight,” he bites off. “Pippa—”

“Brock. I have a job here. A life. Dad and Maisy are coming home, and I also have you. I should stay.”

He paces the room like a lion.

I want to reach out for him, but he’s trapped in this bubble of pain and worry. I swallow thickly, trying to find the right words to make him listen to reason.

“I know you’re just looking out for me, but I’ve made up my mind. I can’t leave.”

He jerks to a stop and looks at me with anger flaring in his eyes. “That’s exactly what you’ll do.”

I stiffen.

“No, I’m not.”

Snarling, he squares his shoulders and crosses his arms. “It’s not a request. Effective immediately, you’re on administrative leave for the next sixty days. You’ll decide where you’d like to go and tell Keenan so we can make the proper security arrangements. Anywhere but Seattle, I don’t care.”

Oh my God.

He can’t be serious?

But he is. The rough, ragged lines in his face leave no question.

“Who the hell do you think you are? You can’t just wave your hand and banish me.” My voice shakes. I’m flipping bristling.

“Who does it look like? Your *boss*.”

“Boss or not, you can’t just order me around. Do you tell anyone else where to go every time some crisis erupts?”

“There’s never been a crisis like this, so no. If I had to protect them, I would in a fucking heartbeat. I’d also offer them the same two months of paid vacation to make sure they’re safe,” he says, still glaring.

Holy hell.

I need to choose my next words very carefully.

“You do a lot for me, Brock Winthrop, and I’m grateful. But you don’t have the right to move me around like a pawn.”

“Then leave if you won’t listen!” he snaps, stomping across the room.

He throws an arm against the windowsill and bangs it loudly, staring out at the ocean, his body heaving with huge, angry breaths.

I’m too stunned to move.

Did he really just say that?

I don't realize my mouth is hanging open until it starts trembling and every breath hurts.

"What was...what did you say?" I ask quietly.

"Fucking leave, Piper. Get the hell away from me and go somewhere safe," he growls over his shoulder, never turning to look at me.

He's obviously upset.

I wait for over a minute for him to correct himself, to come to his senses, to drag his mountain of a body across the room and *apologize* and assure me we'll get through this like we should—*together*.

Only, it never happens.

"You're still here?" he rasps, his eyes watching my reflection in the window.

Oh, not for long.

I should have done this a long time ago before I had any childish hopes that this not-relationship could possibly last.

I don't worry about packing. I just turn sharply and head for the door.

"Piper, where are you going?" he calls after me.

I ignore him. I have to get the hell out of here before he sees me break.

Because when the tears come, they will be ugly and blinding.

"Piper, wait." I don't even hear his heavy footsteps until he's behind me in the hall. "I didn't mean to hurt you. But if this is the only way you'll make the right decision—"

"You want to talk about decisions?" I spin around to face him so he can see the agony he's carved in my face. "My mind is made up. I'm leaving, and not because you're forcing me out."

"I'm not fucking forcing you," he grinds out. "You're not going home, are you?"

"That's not your business." I storm away with stinging tears already cutting tracks down my cheeks.

"You'll be alone there like a sitting duck. You saw how that fucker snuck his camera guy onto *my* property. Be mad at me, whatever, but don't be fucking stupid."

"Too late," I say, sniffing harshly. "I was stupid enough to be with you!"

"Piper, goddamn. Don't make me send some poor security guard to your doorstep."

“Do it, and I’ll call the police.”

I want to go off on him for going all stalker, too, but I don’t have the energy.

I’m the kind of tired a good, long sleep won’t fix.

I’m heartbroken and barely holding it together.

He yells at me as I walk away, something about having a car waiting. I have half a mind to get an Uber, but my eyes hurt so much that staring at my phone will feel like an ice pick to my brain.

Somehow, I keep moving my legs.

I almost stumble over Andy’s long body by the front door. The dog looks up with sad black eyes and whimpers.

Way to break my heart a little more.

Why are animals always too good at reading human feels?

“Sorry, boy,” I whisper, crouching down quickly to stroke his head as he sniffs my arm.

Then I’m flying out the wide front door, down the long driveway and hill, and slipping through the gate.

Brock’s temp driver is parked right outside as promised. He rolls down the window when I come up to it.

“Are you going to take me where I want to go or only where he says?” I ask roughly.

“You’re the boss’ woman. This isn’t a prison bus, ma’am. If you’re unhappy, he’ll have my head, so just say where.”

I shake my head.

The tears fall in hotter, angrier beads as I crawl in the car, slam the door, and sob into my hands. At least the driver has the tact to leave the privacy screen up for a few minutes while I pull myself together.

“Where to, Miss Renee? And if you don’t mind me asking...what did that sorry S-O-B do?” the driver asks.

If I weren’t so devastated, I’d laugh.

“Nothing worth repeating,” I say numbly. “Can you just take me to this address?” I rattle off Jenn’s place.

As we start moving, I look back at the house, this huge looming silhouette in the evening sun tucked behind the shadowy trees.

Somewhere up there, I know Brock is staring out at me, anger and grief bleeding out of him.

“It didn’t have to be this way,” I mutter.

If this stupid, fearful, overly protective man could have just opened his heart, I’d have stayed through the apocalypse.

But he wouldn’t give me a chance, and now stress and bitter memories are all he can deliver.



***WILL I see you at work tomorrow?***

I stare at Brock’s text without blinking.

*No, jackass. You will not.*

“I’m so sorry.” Jenn gives me the biggest sympathy eyes ever. “I feel like this is partly my fault...”

I laugh around the lump in my throat. “Your fault? How?”

“I shouldn’t have egged you on. I thought it was cute and you seemed so happy.”

“Y-you warned me,” I stammer, wiping my eyes. “Brock Winthrope, king of office tyrants. Remember?”

“Well, yeah. But when I saw you two were actually *into* each other... I joked around. I may have helped kindle some false hope, and I should’ve known better.”

“No, Jenn. The only voice of reason I needed was in my head. When I basically walked into him in the office that day, I should’ve walked right out and found another job.”

I sigh until my lungs rattle.

“Pippa, you needed money. Nobody faults you for that. How’s your dad doing, anyway?”

“Really well. No bad interactions with the gene therapy yet, and he’s more or less healed from the fall. They’ll be home next week. I would have told you sooner, but I was kinda busy with Brock ruining my life.”

“Oh, honey...” She leans toward me, pushing the box of tissues closer. “Can I ask you a question, though?”

I nod, blotting my eyes.

“Can you just walk out and give notice? You don’t think he’d make you pay for your dad’s stuff, do you?” she asks.

“No, but he should. And I still have the same money problems. I don’t know how many long-term studies there are to really know what life could be like for Dad in a few years. We’re about to find out if this is a long-term cure or a gimmick.” I shake my head. “He seems okay for now, at least. That buys me time to figure something else out. I can’t keep working at Winthrope.”

“I don’t blame you. It sucks that you came up with the whole review strategy and somebody else will take the credit when it’s done.” She shakes her fist comically.

“You had a huge hand in that, Jenn. You can have my performance bonus. I never wanted to be stuck in a nine-to-five anyway. Who knows how long I would’ve lasted without that big stupid bear of a man.”

My throat tightens again, but I hold in dry, rasping sobs until I’m out of tears.

I don’t even know when I pass out on the sofa or when Jenn throws a fluffy blue blanket over me.

When I wake up, everything hurts. Jenn lounges on the other end of the couch, stuffing ice cream into her mouth.

“Oh, you’re awake. You hungry?”

My stomach gurgles. *Definitely not.*

“I’m fine...”

“Rocky Road?” She passes the pint over with the spoon jabbed in the middle. “When you can’t eat solid food, a big pile of ice cream is the next best thing.”

“Deal.”

I sit up with a groan and take the pint. I don’t realize how starved I am until I’m shoveling in one heaping bite after the next, washing my worries away with chocolate and marshmallow fluff.

“Oh, whoops.” I don’t look up until it’s halfway gone. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to take your ice cream...”

“We’ve got three more pints in the freezer. Had a feeling I’d better stock up,” she says with a grin.

What are best friends for?

“I’m just too lazy to get up and grab another one, and you seem—distraught.” Her tone drops an octave on that last word. “You were too upset

to talk much earlier, and I don't mean to pry. But can I ask what actually happened?"

I tell her everything between more spoonfuls of Rocky Road. Brain freeze is a great way to dull the heart pain.

"I still don't understand," she says when I finish. "He thinks this Finch dude will send goons to follow you home or something?"

"Who knows. He wouldn't say. But I can't deny he has good reasons to be worried... you know the pictures of us that got publicized? Finch wanted to engineer a scandal for Winthrope Resorts. All so he could win this stupid award, and I guess Brock thinks Finch might have something else up his sleeve—"

"For you? But why? Does this freak have no limits?"

I scrape out the last bite of ice cream and swallow.

"Between Brock's paranoia and the way Finch creeps around, you tell me."

"Yikes. Could it be more personal?" she wonders. "Unless he thinks screwing with you would upset Winthrope. And if he thinks that, the boss hole all but admitted it by sending you away."

I stare at the empty ice cream container, fiddling with the spoon.

"...I still don't know how much he cares about me. It never made sense, Jenn. A freaking billionaire model with a hotel empire at his beck and call. This was never meant to last."

"Don't say that!" she hisses. "Um, sorry. I just think that the fact he was actually nice to you means something. Before you, I didn't think Winthrope had a kind bone in his pinky."

"The whole thing is weird, what with the way the story broke while we were at that conservation thing in LA" I admit. "Seems fitting. I was in an awesome dress I never would've bought in a million years on my own. He knew everyone in the room. Finch nailed him right where it hurts—and he used me to do it. But I wonder if Brock is more upset about that or the fact that this idiot got the jump on him..."

Jenn looks at me slowly. "Before you decide, maybe you should talk to him."

"What?"

"You could call him," she says again. "Ask for more deets about what he's so worried about?"

“Since I left, he’s sent one text, Jenn. And that was just asking if I’d be working tomorrow. I’m not calling him unless he gets down on one knee. He knows where to find me.”

She sighs, sinking down in her seat.

“You’re right, but this *sucks*. I’ve never seen you so down before. But maybe you should cut him out and just focus on your dad.”

With a shrug, I set the ice cream pint on the coffee table in front of me and pull my knees up to my chest, hugging my legs.

“What else is wrong? Besides, um, everything,” Jenn asks with a sad look.

“I’m glad Dad’s feeling better, but I hate that Brock paid for it. I don’t want a permanent connection to that jackass.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” she says.

“What’s the other?” I ask.

“Most heartbreaks just end with nothing to show for them. But yours may have bought you more time with your dad.” She’s quiet for a minute. “Hard to believe he sent your dad off for a rare treatment that he paid for and had his driver tag along if he doesn’t care about you.”

I shake my head fiercely, not wanting to give in.

“But you’re thinking like us. You know, poor people. Money is nothing for Brock. He doesn’t care.”

“Then why would he step up and do it?”

I shrug.

Because he was caught up in the same impossible fantasy—and now we’re both spinning back to Earth.

With tiredness overwhelming me again, we veg out in front of Netflix until I pass out on the sofa again.

The next time I open my eyes, there’s a dull grey light streaming in and faint traffic noise.

Jenn is up, plodding around and getting ready for work.

She steps out of her bedroom in a black pencil skirt with a white blouse and blazer. “Morning. Are you going to be okay alone? Should I call in sick? I’m always down for a mental health day.”

“I’ll live, but thanks. Save your PTO.”

A couple hours later, my phone vibrates, pulling me from another rough sleep.

*Please be Brock. Please be Brock.*

It takes a few seconds to check my own desperation.

How pathetic.

Good thing, too, because when I glance at the screen, it's not the king of all jerkwads.

***Jenn: I don't know if this makes you feel better, but he looks like total shit today.***

It helps.

*A little.*

Just not enough to peel my potato body off this couch so I can eat or shower. It's more like a shot in the gums. It numbs the pain that's still coming.

A second text comes through.

***Jenn: I hear him yelling at everyone, and he keeps walking by your desk like he's just waiting for you to show.***

But the third message is the best by far about an hour later.

***Jenn: Aaand he just asked me if you're out sick. I told him you moved to Fiji with your rich travel boyfriend from TikTok. He stormed off to his office, swearing under his breath.***

***You're awesome,*** I send back with a laughing emoji.

Brock Winthrope stole my heart and pulverized it.

I won't let him steal my happiness. I learned a trick after Mom left to help cope with losing her and later, Dad's health issues.

I take out my phone and open a blank notepad so I can start making a list.

*I'm thankful for: 1. My awesome family 2. Dad getting better. 3. Jenn and her ice cream therapy. 4. I'm still alive. 5. ...*

Ugh.

After staring at the screen for five minutes, I give up.

It's not working its usual magic when every last possibility begins and ends with Brock damn Winthrope.





## GHOST OF YESTERDAY (BROCK)



“Captain Winthrop, hello? Are you home?” Keenan opens his mouth and bangs on his head, waving a hand at my face.

I look up from staring out at the lifeless cityscape below, wondering where the fuck summer went behind this blanket of grey clouds.

“I’m here, and you’re losing your next bonus if you don’t knock it off,” I snap.

“So you’d like to approve it then?” His eyebrows dart up.

“Approve what?” I glance at my phone again to see if there’s any word from Piper.

Of course not.

*Not after the shit you pulled, genius.*

Keenan rolls his eyes. “Bossman, were you even listening? The final menu for the fashion conference?”

Right.

“Isn’t that the hotel manager’s job?” I slide fitfully into my chair.

“You wanted the personal touch, remember? With the whole Finch thing and the award coming up, you told me you wanted to pick through everything one last time. Keep up.” For once, he’s not his usual smarmy self. Keenan looks genuinely worried every time he looks at me.

Where the hell is my mind? But I already know.

“Yes,” I lie. “It’s approved.”

“...you haven’t seen it yet.”

Goddamn.

I chew on my own stupidity, trying to find the right words that'll convince him my head isn't three feet up my ass.

"Whenever it comes in, you tell me if it looks good. Use your best discretion, Mr. Dutton."

He goes quiet, punching notes into his tablet or pretending to. Then he looks up.

"You know, you're never a fuzzy ray of sunshine who's actually pleasant to be around, but your grouchy ass usually makes snap decisions pretty well. The workaholic android thing helps make you bearable. If that's gone...no offense, but you can't be a major league prick *and* lazy."

I snort, well aware of what he's doing.

He wants to shake me out of my rut, even if that means pissing me off.

I wish it worked.

"Whatever," I mutter.

"Oh, for the love of—Mr. Winthrop, will you just get this over with? Buy her a dozen roses, knock on her door, swallow your big fat greasy ego, and—you know what?" He throws up his hands. "Screw it. Go have steamy enemies-to-lovers straight people makeup sex, and then come back and act like a fucking grumpy CEO jackass instead of a scolded space cadet."

I glare at him and sigh.

"You done?"

His lips purse.

Yeah, that's what I thought.

Keenan stands, clearing his throat and pulling on his tie.

"Call me when you've got your head back in the game. I'll look things over and let you know if I need to escalate. In the meantime, *get help*." He darts out the door without glancing back.

When I get home later, nothing improves.

Andy paces back and forth listlessly, pawing at the door when he doesn't really need to go out. He hates the rain that's picked up, adding to the city's dreariness by the bucket.

When I'm lost in my phone for too long, he starts howling.

Grumbling, I unglue myself from my seat just long enough to scoop him up. "You know you're too short to be a bloodhound, right? What's wrong, Andouille?"

He licks my face and leaps out of my arms, running to my room barking. He comes back to me less than a minute later and starts for my room again.

I follow him with a rock in my gut.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I still smell her too. She’s probably not coming back,” I say. “It fucking sucks, buddy.”

It’s like he’s magically started comprehending human speech.

My worst fears just rile him up more, sending him pacing and barking until he slumps at my feet in a coughing fit.

I scoop the dog up and stroke him softly until that asthma cough settles down.

*Poor guy.*

Once he’s calmer, he follows me over to my bar where I pour myself a brandy, spilling liquid on the back of my hand. I lick it off, muttering to myself.

Keenan wasn’t joking.

This clumsy, moonstruck mess of a human being isn’t me.

And with my whole life in flames, it’s a hell of a time to have my brain turning into a calcified grapefruit.

I throw back the drink and start my gas fireplace. Staring at the flames helps calm down Andy, at least, and soon he’s settled by my feet in a snoring lump of sausage-lab.

My worries hit like hornets burrowing through my chest, stinging me with anger and regret from the inside out.

I think I’ll sleep in my office tonight because there’s a ghost in my room.

And I miss her so much I refuse to believe she’ll ever stop haunting me.



“HOUSTON, we have a problem with the fashion menu,” Keenan says the next morning, standing in front of my desk.

“I thought I told you to take care of it?” I look up from my accounting report, annoyed as all hell.

“And I did. I approved the menu. But when the order was placed, the kitchen complained a few items couldn’t be filled.”

That grabs my attention.

Winthrop normally buys from the best local places everywhere we set up shop in.

The Seattle property is one of our oldest.

We’ve worked with the same suppliers for years, and we know about shortages well ahead of time.

Short of some force of nature calamity, orders are always filled or easily adjusted at the last minute.

“What happened?” I ask.

“From what I’ve gathered, this big guy from Qatar just rolled into town with three yachts. You know, the one who’s always on Instagram with cheetahs and caracals on his jets? He bought up basically every supply of high-end oysters in the entire city for his party.”

*How the fuck does Seattle run out of oysters?*

“Figure it out. Or do I have to wade through the ocean collecting them myself?” I throw myself back in my seat.

“If you want them badly enough...eh. In case you didn’t hear me, the only way to ‘figure it out’ is to completely change the menu. There are no oyster varieties the chef requested left in the city.”

“Fucking how? We’re sitting on a harbor.”

“I guess Mr. Prince-stagram has a legendary appetite. Heard he’s having caviar flown in from Alaska by the pound next.” Keenan shrugs.

“Jesus Christ.” I swipe a hand over my very warm face. “That must be one hell of a party.”

“Should we opt for more fish? The salmon crisps we served at the software conference last year were a big hit.”

“Dammit, Keenan, this crowd has California tastes—the pickiest. Show me you’re still relentless and find my oysters somewhere—have them flown in if you need to.”

He glances at his tablet and then looks up with his lips pursed.

“I’ll follow up. Is it just the oysters you’re so irate about or something else? Or should I say *someone*?”

“Get the hell out of my office.” I wave him off like a pesky fly.

“You’re never any fun.” He snaps a crisp salute. “I’ll dig for your stupid oysters. But Winthrope?”

“Yes?”

“You need to get laid. Bad. You actually smiled a few times when she was putting out, you know.”

I ignore him as he leaves my office, humming some insufferable song.

Hell, getting laid isn’t even the half of it.

I’d settle for waking up next to her in the morning with my nose in her hair or walking Andy together on another glittery beach.

I should have told him I’d handle the damn oysters myself.

Maybe working the phones would give me something to focus on besides my living nightmare.

I haven’t cared about work since she left.

I’ve never *not* cared about this job.

Sighing, I glance over at my sideboard, needing a drink. I see the same brandy I had in my sunny office in Lanai, when I managed to convince her I wasn’t Lucifer incarnate.

Looks like that was only temporary.

I stab the button on my desk and call Keenan back in.

“Already? I need *time* with those oysters.”

“Get this out of here,” I growl, pushing the bottle to the edge of my desk. “Relocate it to your office.”

“Why?” He picks it up and glances at the label.

“I don’t need it around while I’m working,” I clip. I know there’s a risk he’ll think I’m spiraling into a drinking problem.

That shit would almost be easier than the truth.

“Uh, right. Why do I sense there’s more to this story?”

I don’t answer, turning back to my screen and tapping loudly at the keys.

“Fine, I don’t even want to know.”

“There’s nothing *to* know,” I snarl.

At least he removes that cursed bottle and comes back ten minutes later with a pack of mineral water.

“You expect me to get a buzz off this?” I tear a bottle out of the pack, turning it over in my hand.

“I expect you to stay hydrated. You’re so damn crusty and ornery these days you could use it,” he says bluntly.

I wait until he’s gone before I rip the cap off and glug down half the bottle, spilling a mouthful on my shirt.

What the fuck am I doing?

I can’t carry on like this.

The whole company’s morale is in the gutter, and I’m not helping.

*God help me, I have to see her.*



A WEEK LATER, I’m on her porch, knocking at her door with my heart lodged in my throat.

When no one answers, I notice a small gap in the Valencia blinds that I swear wasn’t there a second ago.

Piper jumps back from the window like there’s a twenty-foot werewolf on the other side.

*You deserve that*, I think bitterly.

I give her another minute to make up her mind before I rap at her door again.

“I know you’re home!” I yell through the door.

No answer.

Goddammit.

I’m about to look for another way in at the risk of breaking and entering charges when the door creaks open.

A young face appears, twisted in disgust.

“Take the hint, dude,” Maisy says. “She doesn’t want to see you anytime this century.”

“I’m still her boss. I just want to talk,” I bite off.

“You are? She basically quit.” But the kid sighs and pulls the door open a little more. “So, I’m sure this is hard for a rich dude, but sometimes you don’t always get what you want. She doesn’t want to talk to you. Ever. Now eff off.”

*Little punk.*

I can't believe I'm doing this, but I'm desperate. I shove my hand in the gap before she can close the door, hoping she doesn't break my fingers.

"Maisy, wait. Do I have a chance? Does she hate me?"

She looks at me and shrugs one shoulder.

"Dunno. You suck a lot. She says she wants to hate you, but can't."

I'm almost airborne.

If she can't hate me, I *might* have a chance.

"Why?" I venture.

"You mean why can't she hate you?"

I nod.

"If you ask me, Piper just isn't capable of truly hating anyone. But I heard her talking to Jenn. She said she could never hate you specifically. Not after what you did for Dad..."

Damn.

Not great odds.

I'd rather she not hate me because of what we had rather than some weird sense of obligation.

It's also not lost on me that her father just came home. Now I'm standing on his doorstep, and I haven't even asked about him.

"How is your old man?"

"He's doing well! Um, I heard you helped with his treatment, so thanks for that. For what you did. Just don't make me slam the door in your face." She looks at her feet. "Oh, and that Jeep tour your guy recommended was fire. So were the tacos. Pretty GOAT." She looks up and grins.

"You're welcome," I mutter, unsure what that even means in Zoomer-speak.

"It was pretty cool of you. Most rich dudes are selfish pricks."

I don't exactly disagree. I'm just amused as I ask, "How many rich guys do you know?"

"Well, just you. And according to my sister, you're still a jerkasaurus. Just less scary than the time you broke into her hotel room and decided to shower instead of murdering her."

"She's *still* on that?" I try not to groan into my hand.

"Not my monkey, not my circus."

"Maisy, you've got to help me out," I say tightly.

"Why?"



I hang my head. This is my life now.

Ten digits in my investment portfolio, and I'm reduced to begging a teenager for help.

"I need to talk to your sister. What can I do to make that happen? You're her sister, you must know something."

She chews a finger in the corner of her mouth, thinking.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. Pippa doesn't date much. And you kinda waited too long to come after her. This isn't 1990 or whatever with relationships. You could've called or texted anytime."

"Hey, I'm not *that* old," I throw back.

"Well...I do think you're gonna have to do more than just show up and mumble a few apologies. You need some serious groveling. Like rom-com level," she says."

"Rom-com? What the hell are you—"

"Dude, I've thrown you a bone. You're crazy rich and a thousand people work for you. Figure it out." The kid rolls her eyes.

The Renee sisters clearly have the same backbone.

"If you were me, what would you do?"

"...I wouldn't be you, for one."

"But if you were—"

"Look, I'm not even sure what happened. She didn't mention it until I got back from Mexico, but I've listened in when she talks to Jenn. If Pippa thinks you suck rotten eggs, I believe her."

The way I wince isn't helping my rotten egg impression, I guess.

"You must have friends for this, right? Go talk to your bros," she says. "I wish I could help smooth things over, but I'm not stepping on her privacy. You haven't even done the basics yet."

"The basics?"

"Insect level stuff. You haven't tried talking to her in more than a week after a huge shit-fight. Now, you show up unannounced and empty-handed. Like, where are the flowers? The new iPhone? The badass new car? You're *rich*, dude." She slumps against the wall, laughing at her own humor.

I'm not amused.

"I'm not my big sister, but I have to say you didn't put much thought in. Piper had three promposals back in the day—"

"Promposal?"

“Google it. She was a cheerleader! The point is, she’s not gonna make up with some guy who can’t get creative when he owns pretty much everything.”

“Understood,” I say numbly.

“Good luck!” She disappears behind the door as it closes.

In the back seat of the SUV, I Google promposal.

Apparently, it’s a newer practice where boys do all-out proposals to get prom dates.

Jesus, I’m lucky I wasn’t born in this new century.

I hit the button to lower the privacy window.

“How much did you fuck up?” Fyodor asks instantly.

“Enough. She wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Give her time. The heart speaks slower than the head and women always listen.”

“Some Russian proverb?” I raise a brow.

“Mine,” he answers smugly. “She will come around, sir.”

I hate that he talks like it’s a done deal.

“Her sister told me I’m not trying hard enough. I don’t even know what that means.”

“What *have* you tried?” Fyo chuckles once.

I scratch my head and look out the window, coming up with nothing.

“I still don’t understand how this happened, boss.”

I sigh. I filled him in—mostly—but it’s not his damn wheelhouse. Intel and dirty jobs are what he does best, and he’s got plenty of that on his plate.

“Finch happened,” I snarl, toying with asking him to put out a hit on that sack of shit right now.

“And she blames you for that? She doesn’t think you were protecting her?”

I shake my head slowly.

“She doesn’t blame me at all, Fyo. Hell, she offered to quit her job to stop the gossip and help me.”

“Let her. Where is problem?”

*Right here.*

*I’m the damn problem.*

“We know Finch won’t stop, and I won’t risk Piper getting dragged into more bullshit aimed at me. I told her to leave Seattle until after the fashion

show and the awards. When she refused, I asked her to leave me. I didn't fucking mean it, but she did."

"Careful what you wish for."

Tell me about it.

"What will you do?" He stares back at me in the mirror, his bearish eyes bright and assessing.

"Working on it."

"If you need suggestions, I know a—"

"No." I cut him off before he even starts. "Just find out what you can about Finch's itinerary before the Portland conference. If he's making any new moves, report back ASAP. We can't get caught with our pants down again."

It's criminal that flushing out a viper like Apollo Finch feels easier than winning Piper back.

Only, with Finch, I have an army of people behind me and I know what to do.

With her, I'm clueless and alone.



I SHOW up the next day again with a bouquet of fragrant verbena.

I only knock a couple times before Maisy opens the door. "Oh, welcome back. FYI, she still won't talk to you."

"Will you just give her these?" I hold up the bouquet.

She nods. "Hmm, it's a start. Nice."

I pass her the flowers.

"Do you want to wait here?"

I nod.

*Good. If she's asking me to wait, maybe Piper will come out of her hole.*

I'm still watching the sunny street, grateful for the break in the midsummer gloom, when the flowers come flying out of an upstairs window.

They roll to a stop next to my feet.

"Sorry!" Maisy says, leaning out the door.

I don't bother asking.

It's not like it's her fault Piper won't speak to me. I climb into the car, feeling drained.

Fyo already has the privacy screen down.

"Before you ask, the answer is *fucking awful*," I say.

"Flowers are overrated. Maybe try something more intimate?"

"These *were* personal," I grumble. "They're the same flowers she loved in Lanai—and today she didn't give a damn."

"Perfume? Jewelry? Tickets to her favorite show?" Fyo suggests.

"Piper doesn't wear much jewelry."

Because she doesn't like it or because she doesn't have it? I wonder.

That's something I should know.

Shit, maybe our problems started before I blew up on her.

"What does she like?" Fyo asks.

"Travel. Her family. Birds." I stop before I accidentally say, *me*.

"I need to think," I whisper, wishing I could rub my pounding headache away.

"Take your time, Romeo."

I open her TikTok and stare at her videos until I feel like I need toothpicks to hold my eyes open. An ad cuts in between the hundredth TikTok for high-end luggage.

Huh.

It's worth a shot.

I order the suitcases in pale pink with stylized flamingos on them.

Delivery takes a couple days, so I bury myself in work, annoyed that there's nothing new on the Finch front.

I wish he'd get off his ass and take a swing so we can get this over with.

The next time I go to the Renee house, I'm rolling an oversized Italian leather carry-on with one hand and a pile of matching suitcases in smaller sizes with the other.

I knock on the door.

No answer.

I'm banging until my fist hurts when Maisy finally appears.

"You again? I talk to you more than I talk to my friends."

"I promise you won't have to deal with me as soon as your sister talks to me."

She narrows her eyes. “Y’know, I should start charging you a consulting fee.”

I snort. “And what’s your advice today? Will she talk to me or not?”

Maisy bites her lip.

*Goddammit.*

“Really? I’m still that radioactive? Has she said *anything*?” I form a fist at my side.

“She said she’s getting sick of you pestering us, dude. You’re lucky Dad met up with his fishing buddies. I told him we’ve been getting a lot of annoying salesmen lately, but he said if he hears anyone at the door again, they’re getting a piece of his mind.”

“I’m not quitting until I see her. If she wants me gone, she’ll have to tell me herself.”

“Won’t be today. Maybe in a month.”

I glare at her.

She better be joking.

“Will you at least give her this?”

“Yeah—for ten dollars,” Maisy adds, staring at the luggage.

“What?”

“I didn’t sign up to haul your gifts around for free. And these look way heavier than flowers.”

“Are you serious?”

She folds her arms in front of her chest.

“I’ll send you an invoice.” She pulls out her phone and fidgets with it for a second.

“Forget the damn invoice,” I growl, fishing in my wallet.

I don’t have exact change so I push a crisp twenty in her hands.

“After college, you need to talk to me,” I tell her. “I’ll find you a job in sales.”

“Cool! Pleasure doin’ business.” She disappears behind the door with the luggage.

I hang out on the porch again, steeped in my misery for a few more pointless minutes in the fading hope that maybe—just maybe—Piper might give me the slightest opening.

Nope.

I knock on the door again. Maisy opens it. “Mr. W? What now?”

“Did she like it?” I demand.

“The bags? She hasn’t even seen them yet.”

“Where would she like to go more than anywhere else?” I ask.

“Hmm. She’s mostly just been around the US. Anything overseas would knock her socks off.”

“Where?” I urge, waiting for her to rattle something loose in her brain.

“She’s obsessed with Hungary. One time when she was ten she went on a big Eastern Euro kick, wouldn’t shut up about Budapest, wine country, old castles, whatevs. It’s all she talked about for months.”

*Finally.*

“That’s something. Thanks, Maisy.”

I turn and start toward the car.

“Yo, Brock?”

I look back at her over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Keep it up. If there’s anyone you might wear down with kindness, it’s my sister.”

*Thanks, kid. I’m going to need it.*

“She still won’t talk?” Fyo asks the second I’m in the vehicle.

“No.” That would be too easy. “I’m running out of ideas. I’ve tried flowers and designer luggage. I’ve got a vacation package up next. If that doesn’t work, I’m at my wits’ end.”

“Have you tried an apology? A *big* one.”

I snort loudly.

Fyo shakes his head and pulls onto the road.

“Boss, I’m beginning to understand why you’re still single. You never tell a woman she’s wrong, especially when she’s this pissed at you.”

Could it really be that simple?

I hate that I already know the answer.



## PENGUIN SUIT (PIPER)



**S**tupid man.  
Stupid job.  
Stupid life.

I'm staring at my bank account and crunching numbers, wondering if I have enough to jet off to somewhere warm and free from hot billionaires. If Dad keeps improving, then maybe in a few months.

How nice would it be to leave the heartbreak at home for winter?

*Knock. Knock.*

I look up from my phone and yell, "Come in!"

Maisy strolls into my room with a puckered smile she tries to hide and totally can't.

"What now?" I huff out, folding my arms.

"Your hotel prince came bearing large gifts. Gotta give him props for trying!"

Oh, boy.

Here we go again.

Brock may be an enormous douchenozzle, but he's a persistent one.

Seriously.

An old jewelry box in the corner catches my eye. I frown.

Maybe there's a reason why I'm extra resistant to his material charms. While Maisy waits for me to launch into a tirade, I walk across the room and pick it up before I pass it to her.

"Remember this thing? Why don't you take it, Mais?"



“Huh? Pippy, you haven’t touched that thing in years.”

“That’s the point. You can get more use out of it than me,” I say glumly. That’s not the truth.

I never wanted this jewelry box. *I wanted my mom.*

The fact that it’s still around is just a hollow reminder of my loss. That’s the only thing this ‘gift’ can ever be, and it’s the same for Captain Heartslaughter.

Maisy thumbs it open, staring at the silver ballerina inside the box.

“Eh, I don’t know. I don’t have much jewelry.”

“Then trash it. I don’t care what you do, honestly.” I turn away, hating that I have to ask. “Well, what did he send this time?”

“Oh, you’ll like this!” she gushes. “New suitcases, and they’re straight dripping.”

I assume that means good.

*Naturally.*

This man doesn’t know the meaning of bargain shopping, and he’s oblivious to the fact that I don’t want ginormous expensive suitcases.

“Want me to bring them in?” Maisy asks, biting her lip.

“Leave them at the door. I’ll deal with it later.”

“Aw, no fun. Maybe you should just give him a chance—”

“I *gave* him a chance, Mais. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

She sticks her tongue out. “I’m old enough, and you’re being ridiculous. He’s your typical dumb dude but he’s not so bad—”

“Neither is a mosquito bite, but you don’t go tromping through swamps for fun,” I counter.

Her eyes soften.

“You know, I don’t agree with everything, but...I’m proud of you, Pippy.”

I stare at her.

Proud of what? I just had an ill-advised fling with my boss that exploded my heart. Real gold medal material.

“Are you going to tell me why?”

She giggles and shrugs. “He’s hot and loud and determined. But you’re holding your own, sis. If some moody billionaire guy who’s just missing the *Twilight* sparkle came to my house day after day with gifts, I’m not sure I’d have your strength. I couldn’t just ghost him.”

“If he ripped your heart out, you’d be surprised.”  
Her face falls. “Right. Sorry. I’ll lay off it for a while.”  
I watch glumly as she slips away, leaving me with my misery.



“PRINCE APOLOGY AGAIN.” A day later, she’s back, standing in my door.

“Tell him I died in my sleep,” I say, looking up from scouting freelance writing gigs online.

“You know he won’t believe that, and on the off chance he did, he’d go on the warpath trying to find someone to blame.”

“Don’t care. Still not talking to him.”

“But at least check out what he brought today!” She’s practically squealing, her eyes huge with excitement. “Pippa, trust me. You have to look.”

Sigh.

I almost limp over to her, afraid to see what she’s hiding behind her back.

But I’m surprised when there’s nothing and she just holds out a piece of paper.

I take it and turn it around.

An envelope. Inside, there’s a round trip ticket to Budapest, redeemable anytime in the next year. There’s an egift card to a premier Hungarian hotel affiliated with Winthrop brands—and a damned note.

*SUNSHINE,*

*I know you won’t let me be there when you make your five-star dreams come true. However, I’ll be waiting for the videos with you smiling.*

*Your biggest fan,*

*Brock*

I FACEPALM, wishing I never had to look up again.

“You’re crazy if you throw that away!” Maisy says sharply.

“Just move aside, please.” I walk past her, grabbing a roll of tape and a pen from my desk.

“Pippa? What are you doing?”

“Dealing with yesterday’s gift and saving you some breath.”

I scratch out a few words on the back of the envelope and head for the front door, noticing the luggage Maisy left for the first time.

Ugh.

The suitcases are absolutely beautiful and he nailed my favorite color. My heart flips over when I see the flamingos.

*Stay strong.*

“See? I told you,” Maisy says, following me.

I don’t answer her as I tape today’s gift to the door and read over the words I scratched out one more time.

*THIS IS PROBABLY an unfamiliar concept for a man who never learned to take “no” for an answer, but I’m not for sale. You couldn’t send me away and you can’t buy me back.*

WITH A RELUCTANT SIGH, I drag the luggage to the porch, too. I’m going to leave it there, even at the risk of someone from the street swiping it.

Maisy watches me in stunned silence.

When I walk back inside, she says, “Unbelievable. You’re really giving up Budapest? Pippa, think of the pierogies!”

“That’s Poland,” I say.

Not that it makes it any better.

I wish she’d never told him about my travel dreams.

He clearly listened. He remembered.

*That stupid, stupid man.*



ANOTHER DAY.

Another overbearing, totally outrageous bribe.

This time, it's a ticket to Paris and a gift card to the Winthrop de Gaulle resort there.

"You should have just pointed him to the note I left and told him to scram," I tell Maisy, trying not to sound angry.

*"I did. He just didn't care. I know you don't want this...but here."*

She hands me another note, this time with no envelope.

PIPER RENEE,

*I'm not stupid enough by half to try to buy your love.*

*Freeze me out as long as you want. It doesn't mean I'll ever forget you or stop trying to win you back.*

*And you really shouldn't leave your luggage outside.*

*-Desperate*

MY HAND CRUMPLES THE NOTE.

For a second, a voice screams *shred it!* but I just don't have the strength.

I run into my room for a pen and come back, smoothing the paper against the wall and using it as a writing surface.

"Now what?" Maisy asks.

"What do you think? He needs to *learn.*"

Muttering to myself, I slash angry lines across the paper with the pen.

"So, um, I know you two are old hat, but if you want to fight there are faster ways," Maisy tells me.

"I don't need speed, Mais. I need him to get the point!"

I twist away and stare at what I've written.

DEAR DESPERATE AND PATHETIC,

*Keep sending outrageously expensive crap as long as you want. I don't care if you escalate to fancy cars and golden elephants next. They're not entering this house.*

*You're so far off the mark you can't even find the darts.  
Money can't fix everything.*

-ANNOYED



HELLO, morning.

I wake up with a yawn, plodding to the door for Dad's paper. I find three months' worth of rare peaberry coffee packed and shipped overnight from Wired Cup farms, the roasting label marked for the Winthrop Lanai.

Pure torture.

Aaaand there's another note.

"Jackass," I swear, peeling it open so I can read and throw the stupid thing away.

*MISS DISAGREEABLE,*

*Here's something to help you wake up.*

*And if you'll tell me what you want, it's yours.*

*Anything.*

*If money can't buy it, I'll find it. Just give me a goddamned chance.*

-Stubborn Jackass

"YOU SAD, strange donkey-man. At least you're right about one thing," I mutter to myself as I scratch out a reply and tape it back up.

MR. HEE HAW,  
If I have to tell you, it doesn't matter.  
Figure it out or better yet, don't.  
Leave. Me. Alone.

-PISSSED

BUT NO MATTER how frustrated and exhausted I am, the hits keep coming.

More tickets. This time an entire flipping booklet of them.

London, Montreal, Prague, Capetown, Bali, Auckland—*oh, God, I'd die to see New Zealand if it was with anyone else on Earth*—and my travel packages start coming tucked into large bouquets I can't stomach throwing in the yard to wilt.

That ginormous dick.

Four more days of this crap, and I'm over it until the morning when Maisy screams like she's stepped on a cobra. Maybe a whole nest of them.

"Pippa! Pippa! *Pippaaaa!*" She's turning her lungs out.

Holy crap.

I come flying out and find her standing at the front door with—not Brock.

There's an elderly Japanese man, and next to him, the biggest shock of my life.

A black-and-white penguin roughly waist high tilts his pointed beak up and looks at me with a soft squawk.

"May he come in for a minute? Special delivery," the man explains. "Mr. Winthrop flew us in from Kyoto to deliver a message for Miss Renee. I am Takishido's owner."

*Message? What message requires a flipping penguin?*

"Oh my God! No way." Maisy laughs, squeezing my arm like she'll tear it off if I say no.

But I doubt I'll ever see anything like this again, so...

I lean up on my toes, looking over the man's shoulder for any sign of Brock. I don't see him, but there's a familiar black SUV parked on the curb.

He's out there, no doubt watching everything.

"Fine. The penguin can come in," I say with a sigh.

I hope this isn't the world's cutest Trojan horse.

But I'd be the most frigid bitch in the world if I didn't break into a giddy smile, watching the funny creature waddle into our house. I don't notice there's something stuck to his flipper until the penguin holds it up.

Another envelope. What else?

I grit my teeth as I peel it off and say, "Thanks, Takishido."

The penguin follows Maisy around the living room while I tear it open, too stunned to even breathe.

*PIPER,*

*You'll never know how many strings I had to pull to bring you a rare bird you've never seen this close.*

*If you still won't talk to me, then I hope like hell you'll hang on to these tickets. I owe the city council bribes for their next four reelections so they'd look the other way with a penguin on a public street. Bring Maisy on the adventure of her life if you won't go with me.*

*-FROZEN Without You*

BEHIND THE NOTE, two thick tickets fall out for a luxury cruise to Antarctica, complete with guided penguin sightings. By the time I collapse in Dad's worn recliner, I'm crying.

The penguin waddles in front of me and tilts his head up again, belting out a sympathetic squeak.

Yep, it's official.

I'm never, ever living this down.

Maisy rubs my shoulders while I laugh and cry and smile so brokenly at the unreal sight traipsing around our living room until the owner man lures him outside with a fish.

“Pippy? You’re going to talk to him, right?” Maisy whispers, grabbing my hand.

I’m reeling too hard to answer.

Right now, I’m not even sure I’ll ever be able to speak, much less make up with a man who’s getting way too good at groveling his heart out.



MAISY APPEARS at my door the next day with more flowers.

“Leave them in the kitchen,” I yell through the door before she even knocks.

“Can’t! Dad says there are so many hanging around he can’t taste his breakfast through the smell. He’s also mad he missed the penguin.” She laughs.

Ouch. The last thing I want is a perfumed reminder of Brock Winthrop’s assholery in my room.

Luckily, Maisy pitches in to help. It takes us half an hour to relocate the plants. Even with a few more packed up to drop off at the community garden, my bedroom turns into a green room and smells sweeter than a candy shop.

Maisy looks around and snickers. “Oh my God, he’s trying *so hard*.”

“And failing miserably,” I say.

“Pippa, I think he cares about you...”

My jaw clenches. “Enough to send gifts. But I don’t want any of this stuff, and honestly, sending me plane tickets just feels like being told where to go again.”

“Girl, what *do* you want? He gave you a note by *penguin*.”

I look at her slowly and sigh. “I just want him to love me and I want him to say it.”

“You don’t think he does?” Disbelief rings in her voice.

“Not enough to tell me.”

“Holy shit, is this how it is? High school is so much easier. If any boy started showering me with trips to these magical places and exotic birds, I’d assume he was madly in love with me and—”

“Yeah? What boy would that be?”



“Um. *Never mind.*” Maisy goes bright red and runs for my door. “I’ll tell him to buzz off if he shows his face again. Later!”

I laugh.

An hour later, after I’m cleaned up and hacking away at the job listings again, Dad leans into my room, watching me.

“You can come in and sit like a normal person,” I say, looking over my shoulder.

“Sorry, Piper. Just wondering how you’re doing besides the obvious.” He steps inside and surveys my room. “Damn. Haven’t seen this many flowers since the superbloom on Rainier in ’88. You’ve got yourself a Romeo.”

“Don’t worry, I’m still finding homes for these. They won’t keep stinking up the house.”

“That’s not my point, girl. And keep a few.”

“I don’t want them, and since you’ve outlawed flowers in the rest of the house…” I shrug.

“Tell me one thing,” Dad says, sinking down on my bed. “Just how long are you gonna make this boy suffer?”

I narrow my eyes.

“Dad, I’m just defending myself, okay? He doesn’t get it, and he’s not going to. He just needs to go find some new debutante and leave me the hell alone. Why are you taking his side?”

He chuckles just enough to annoy me.

“Piper, you’re my daughter. I’ll always be in your corner. But is it possible the man doesn’t know what he doesn’t get? We menfolk can be walking bricks sometimes.”

Yep, here we go. The fatherly advice I wish I could ignore.

“If he doesn’t understand the one thing I want, it’s a problem. A nonstarter, really. It shouldn’t be this hard.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

He stares at me, waiting.

I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with my dad.

Don’t get me wrong. I love him to death, and we’ve always been close, but we’ve never talked about guys.

“I just want him to show me he cares,” I manage.

It’s so much harder telling Dad than Maisy.

He nods slowly and glances around my room, smiling at the flowers. His weathered face always wrinkles up like a pug when he does and I can't help smiling back.

"I'm willing to bet he might," he tells me.

"Oh, Dad. Not you too. This is just bribery, sending me luxury vacations like I'm any other travel influencer he's trying to buy off."

He raises a hand. "Now, now, I understand. You're tough as nails and even harder to convince, Pippa. That's why we love you."

"I am?"

He nods, still smiling.

I look away as my heart jerks.

God.

We shouldn't be having such a human moment over Brock freaking Winthrope.

I clear my throat and say, "Full disclosure, he helped save your life. So it's fair to be biased in his favor."

"I know, baby girl, and I damn well appreciate it. If he thinks he's gonna hold it over your head, tell me right away. I'll take out a reverse mortgage on the house and pay him off."

"No. I don't think he'd ever do that."

I hate that a sick part of me wishes he would.

It would make keeping this wall up so much easier.

"Either way, he can't force you into anything. It has to be your decision, Piper. Any man worth his salt needs to get that through his noggin. I'm thinking he cares, though—and cares an awful lot—so I'll cross my fingers and hope this Winthrope guy's got enough common sense to grow a pair and say the truth."

"The truth?" I whisper.

We share a long look where Dad says nothing. The way my stomach twists says he doesn't need to.

"What-ever. I mean, you're right about one thing, he's not a bad guy."

No. He's a terrible one in all the best ways.

"If it wasn't so messed up, you might like him. He was in the Air Force," I say.

Dad points at me and says, "You love him."

I blink, turning away while every part of me goes red. I can't even try to deny that.

"That was...never the point, Dad. I've never said it, and neither has he." My face burns.

"So? What if he's just waiting for you to spit it out first?"

I laugh at his dad logic, shaking my head.

"No way. I'm not going first."

It's his turn to laugh. "What if he's thinking, 'shitfire, I've done everything I can think for this girl, even sent her a damn penguin and she still doesn't feel it!'"

"He doesn't think that," I toss back.

Dad just stares at me and smiles again. "And you know that how?"

"...I mean, it's obvious."

"Is it? I hope he mans up, Pippa, but I think you both have some talking to do. I'm not sure hiding from him is the answer."

"If he showed up just to talk like a normal human being without the bribes, that might be one thing—"

"He showed up empty-handed the first day, didn't he?" Dad points out. "You wouldn't see him then."

"I wasn't ready. But if he kept showing up empty-handed, maybe—" I stop.

Dad tilts his face down and stares at me.

I know how dumb this sounds.

"No telling what you would've done when it didn't happen."

"Dad! I thought you were on my side," I hiss.

"I am. Don't much like the idea of him trying to lure you in like a fish. But he can't ever tell you what you want to hear if you won't give him an ear. Maybe you should—"

A loud knock at the front door interrupts us.

I freeze and we share a look.

Oh, God, do I really *have* to talk to him? I'm so not ready for this.

Dad sighs, sensing my panic. "Hold tight. I'll go let him down this time. I think Maisy's tired of running interference."

I narrow my eyes. "Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"You're not going to say anything else, are you?" My heart twists.

Dad laughs. “Relax, honey, it’s not my place. I haven’t been mixed up in this sort of drama since before your ma took off, and I’m not hankering to jump back in and drive myself batty.”

Thank God.

I listen in as the front door squeaks as it opens, wondering how Mr. Congeniality will react to my father. He’s a thousand times harder than Maisy.

“Hi, Harold. Is Piper home?”

Oh, wait. Jenn?

I recognize the voice immediately and run to the front door.

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll take it from here,” I say.

The wild-eyed look on her face instantly scares me.

“Whoa, what’s wrong?” I ask.

“Have you heard? I’m sure he’s going to be a mess when he gets back to the office,” she rushes out.

What? Something happened to Brock?

I shake my head. “What happened?”

A horrible thought flashes through my mind. Oh, no, I hope it’s not his grandparents.

Dad moves out of the doorway so Jenn can come in.

“Massive food poisoning at the fashion conference!” Jenn belts out, flapping her hands.

I stop and stare at her.

“You’re serious? How is that even possible? Corporate was combing through every kitchen to make sure those crappy reviews were unfounded, and the Winthrop Seattle never had tons of food complaints...”

“Thought the same thing, but it’s all over the news, Pippa. It looks like a warzone. People throwing up in plants because the bathrooms were overflowing, others carrying out their friends. Everyone got hit. Famous YouTubers, fashion designers, even the press. *Total disaster.*”

I slink against the wall with my throat burning, still trying to understand.

“Holy hell. Come on, follow me.” I duck back in my room and grab my phone.

I have to see this for myself.

A quick search for Seattle fashion conventions proves Jenn right. It's all over Twitter and the local press sites.

More than a hundred people rushed to the hospital—ranging from influencers to paper pushers—all over a fast-acting food poisoning believed to be caused by bad oysters.

I scan the article. “Jesus. They’re already talking about a class-action lawsuit.”

“This is the kind of thing that leads to layoffs. I *hope* there aren’t layoffs. We’ll be dead meat for years and guess who’s on the chopping block when you can’t market your way out of this?” She falls on my bed, bouncing like a statue.

“God, I hope he’s okay.”

My stomach sinks as soon as I say it.

Guilt pummels me.

I want to help so bad, but how?

Things might be ugly personally, but he’s still the man who saved Dad’s life.

He can’t just suffer through this, alone and ruined and isolated.

“Pippa, are you okay? You look pale.”

“I have to help Brock,” I whisper.

“Like how? You’re not a lawyer. It already happened. It’s all over except for the tears and some major money changing hands.”

“I shouldn’t have quit before the conference,” I snap.

“Don’t go there. You had nothing to do with this. He didn’t give you much choice, remember?” she reminds me. “Besides, it’s not like you planned the menu or the catering.”

I look up sharply. “Who did?”

Her brow knits together. “Good question. Probably the hotel manager or the chef? I think there was a catering company too. Oof, everyone is going to be coming for their head.”

“Isn’t the award conference next week? This won’t just blow over. It’s not the kind of thing he’ll ever let go, especially once his grandparents find out. But there were other reports of food poisoning and they were unfounded,” I say, racking my brain.

“What? You think a hundred people are in on the lie?” she asks.

“No. But there were some well-known influencers who bought into the last lies—”

“Pippa... I don’t know. That’s pretty out there,” Jenn says, folding her hands in her lap.

*Out there, but not impossible.*

“Remember when we were in Chicago?”

She nods.

“We found proof the knives were out for Winthrope, and I’m pretty sure Brock was right about that Apollo guy. Total lunatic.” I wince, remembering how he grabbed me.

“You think something like that happened here?” She frowns, turning it over in her head. “I dunno. It’s a pretty big leap from mangled towels and fake duck eggs to mass poisoning people. It’s so horrible.”

“Oh, I’m not denying it. Still...” I pace the room a few times. “Still, it’s also the knockout punch some hypercompetitive moron needs who’s after that award like a greyhound chasing a rabbit.”

Jenn looks down. She clearly doesn’t want to believe it.

“You think it’s impossible?” I challenge.

“Not necessarily. I’m just trying to imagine how crazy you’d have to be to do something that illegal. Who makes a whole crowd barf over a freaking award?”

I have to stop and ask the same question.

Am I going too far?

Paying a few bad actors to leave craptacular reviews is one thing.

The other means millions in damages and probably some jail time.

*Is Finch really that criminally insane?*

A chill rolls up my spine as I ponder.

*And if he is, what else could he do to Brock?*

“You know, I’m not sure I buy it, but I’ll tell you one thing,” Jenn says, spinning her phone slowly as she thinks. “Brock and Keenan were talking about the menu. I heard them arguing over it a few times. I can’t see them making this kind of mistake with bad seafood when they were so invested.” She sighs. “I guess it’s always possible. But it’d be a supplier thing, probably, and it’d be like getting hit by lightning while a rabid bat bites you in the tit—”

I raise my eyebrows.

“Um, sorry,” she continues. “Anyway, Brock has been out of it since you gave him a piece of your mind. He’s skipped out on meetings with everyone except like Keenan—”

“That doesn’t sound like Brock at all. Why would he do that?”

“Why do you think?” She smiles and makes a finger gun, aiming it at me.

There’s that sharp stabbing sensation in my gut again.

Oh my God.

Oh. My. God.

If I threw him off somehow and accidentally caused this catastrophe...

I swallow thickly.

“Well, I don’t care how out of it he’s been,” I lie. “I can’t believe he’d ever allow a slipup this bad.”

And if he didn’t allow it, it shouldn’t have happened.

“Fair enough. It’s so weird. Just feels like the same BS we’ve dealt with before, but I have a hard time believing some dude would poison people to win an award. How psycho could he be?”

I wish like mad I had an answer. But I don’t know enough about Apollo Finch or his weird bad blood with Brock.

I also don’t want to agree when the best-case scenario is a lunatic competitor getting people sick.

“He’d have to be pretty whacked out,” I say weakly.

Then I remember how crazy protective Brock got when Finch approached us in Chicago.

He shoved me in the car and basically threatened Finch with an all-out brawl. He also freaked out and demanded I put my whole life on hold for the same reason, didn’t he?

*Did he have a deeper reason?*

“What are you thinking?” Jenn asks tensely.

“Nothing good. Because on the off chance we’re right—if he’s deranged enough to poison a hundred people—there’s no telling what else he’s capable of.”





## DAMAGE CONTROL (BROCK)



**H**ow the fuck did I wind up trapped in a flaming wreck for the second time?

This is worse than the spinning crash to Earth I survived once.

Because this wreck has no eject.

No parachute.

No end.

No mercy.

Everybody and their damn dog who went to that convention is ready to sue. Everyone except Lincoln Burns, I should say, who left a message telling me it wasn't my fault and I should fight it tooth and nail.

The sad part? He *still* sounded queasy as hell on voicemail after a whole evening heaving his guts out.

Goddamn.

Legal has blown up my phone so many times this morning there's a crater where it used to be. I had to shut the damn thing off.

There isn't much I can do to help.

Not by any conventional means.

I just know I'm going to annihilate Apollo Finch for taking this sick little game too far.

This isn't just about the reward anymore.

It's vengeance.

He blames Winthrope for collapsing his marriage, losing his kids, ruining his family.

So far, he's done a fine job of paying us back in spades.

I'm so done with sorting this out the nice way.

The *legal* way.

I'm also done pretending I have a path as the CEO. Someone needs to take the fall for this fuckery, and the sooner I land on my sword, the faster the press forgets this shit and buys precious time for my people to come up for air.

I just hate that I'll disappoint them.

Even if I know I'll only give my grandparents more grief by staying on and acting like anyone respects a single word I say.

A knock at the door drags my eyes up from my misery.

Keenan enters a second later and clears his throat.

"Report," I bite off.

"I spent the entire night digging. Here's what we know—I had the oysters brought in from a fishing boat in Bellingham, but you already knew that. They were kept on ice as standard procedure the whole time. They used the same local delivery outfit they've always used once the ship unloaded—"

I'm melting in my seat and he gives me a worried look.

"Go on," I grind out.

"The supplier is still working like hell to figure out what happened from there. It turns out, the delivery company subcontracted to a smaller outfit since it was a one-time delivery, and the smaller place—"

"Stop," I belt out.

He pauses, studying me. It must be the absolute fury etched on my face.

"Boss?" he asks.

"I don't care anymore," I growl.

"You don't? I don't follow. Is this some weird new test?"

I answer him by fishing out a second mug from under my desk and pouring a few fingers of scotch into it plus the mug that's already there. That's my new go-to drink since Piper ruined brandy for me forever.

I look at him and push the cup over.

"A little early, don't you think?"

"Not when the whys can get fucked. It's over, Mr. Dutton."

Soon enough, this will be someone else's problem.

Hopefully, someone with the competence to solve it.

Keenan's eyes flick to his glass and he takes a whiff, pulling back with his face screwed up. "Whew, that's heavy stuff. How much have you had today?"

"Since I'm still conscious and mostly coherent, not enough."

He watches me toss back the drink and pour another round.

"Who are you and what have you done with my boss?" he whispers.

"I'm a billionaire's loser grandson. You're a good employee and you deserve a stronger chief."

Keenan's mouth twists. "Big guy, are you okay?"

"Never better. Why?"

"Because. On a normal day when our revenue fell even a quarter point, you'd be tearing the office apart trying to figure out who was dragging. You don't sit around with unanswered questions," he says.

I chuckle bitterly.

"No mystery here. I know who's behind it. Now, I just need to make his greedy ass regret ever being born. And I will, especially once I have all the time in the world to make it happen."

He tilts his head, adjusting his glasses.

"I really hope you're not thinking what I think you are," he says quietly. I don't answer and he continues. "Well, do you at least know that the delivery subcontractor seems to belong to a shell company?"

Just like I thought.

I need more poison in my veins, so I reach for the bottle as I look at him. "Another round?"

"No." He sets the mug down on my desk.

I move to my sideboard and pour myself another shot, gathering my bombed-out thoughts. "I'm not the least bit surprised."

"Why not?"

"Because it's exactly the sort of devious, harebrained shit-scheme Apollo Finch lives for. I know that. I'm not stupid—" I pause. Given the state my life is in, I'm not sure how accurate that is. "Well, I'm not *that* stupid."

Keenan goes quiet. "Are you sure? Look, you convinced me he was dicking around when you finally found proof he had us review bombed, but this...*this* is a whole different ballgame."

I throw back another shot.

“It’s an immediate red flag.”

“But it could be a tax trick. You know how some of the smaller contractors like to run things around here,” he points out.

“The whole purpose of a shell is to shelter money without having to do any work. I guarantee you, Apollo Finch knows how to manage one, and he’s probably sloppy enough for someone to notice. He was having towels and other shit swapped out in Chicago. Unless you have another explanation, he’s suspect A, B, C, and goddamned Z.”

He heaves out a sigh.

I don’t care how crazy it sounds. *I’m right.*

“Either way, what are we going to do about this?” He sinks down in the chair, resting his arms on his knees.

“I have a few ideas,” I say cryptically. “However, I think the first thing we should do is reassure our media contacts there will be an investigation. And not the kind that drags on for months, turning up jack shit.”

“I’ve already got Jenn on the damage control team. It’s slow going.” He looks at his arm and taps his smart watch.

“Anything else?”

He looks up at me. “At the risk of pissing you off more, we know a certain someone who’s really talented at dealing with these messes. Should I try to get her back in?”

“Knock yourself out. She won’t talk to me, and I tried with a penguin,” I growl.

He gives me a bewildered look.

Probably trying to figure out whether or not I’m absolutely shitfaced drunk.

“Boss, you’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“Like what?”

“You’re never this calm on good days. I keep waiting for you to yell at me or throw something at the wall or—”

“I told you, I’m fine,” I insist.

“You keep saying that, but you don’t *seem* fine.”

I’m about to deny it for the thousandth time when I wonder what’s the point. Lacing my fingers, I exhale around the burning rock in my throat.

“Keenan, I’m sure I’ll regret this, but to hell with it. If a woman says you’ve given her everything but the one thing she wants, what does that

mean?”

“Oh, that’s pretty straightforward. You could *ask*.” He smiles cheerfully.

“I tried that, dammit. She said if she had to tell me, it doesn’t matter.”

Keenan laughs. “See, this is why I like guys. So much easier.”

Why do I bother asking him for advice?

“The good news is, she’s waiting on you to figure it out. Maybe you will once we’ve put out some fires.”

“She isn’t,” I counter. “She doesn’t care what I do. She won’t talk to me.”

“Then she’s not done with you, dude. How can a guy who pulls unicorn solutions out of his butt all the time be this dense?”

I snort, narrowing my eyes. “How would you even know?”

Keenan laughs again. “My bestie on mall runs is an awesome lady, and I never missed a slumber party in middle school. Look, if she was done with you when you asked what she wanted, she would have told you. And she definitely would’ve listed all the ways you fucked up. She didn’t, did she?” He waits while I shake my head. “Yeah. So she’s still waiting on you to figure it out. She doesn’t want to *have* to tell you because she doesn’t want it to be meaningless or easy. You’re being put to the test, my man.”

Fuck.

Is he right?

Do I still have a chance?

Even if I do, I might not after this Finch meltdown. That’s going to require bringing in Fyo and there’s never any guarantee there won’t be blowback with that.

Especially if it’s the kind that lands me in prison.

“Go work on damage control. I’ll figure this out.” The least I can do for my grandparents is have Keenan on the hunt.

He stands up and gives me a look like he’s holding back more comments.

Wise decision.

He’s been with me long enough to know what I should do if I still had a functioning brain that wasn’t occupied with begging Piper to talk to me and tearing Apollo Finch ten new assholes. He’ll be the biggest asset this company has when the board selects a new executive.

“Shut the door behind you,” I add.

I wait until he walks out with a deafening click of the door.

Once I'm alone, I turn to my computer.

Here we go.

I pry open my laptop and start typing. There's no good way to say any of this, but it has to be done.

GRAMPS,

*I've let you down. I'm not the leader you were and my mistakes are too painfully obvious to ignore.*

*That's why I'm writing to let you know I'm doing the only thing I still can—and the only decision I know you'd have the stones to make in my place.*

*I'm taking the fall.*

*You'd never fire me, and it isn't fair to put you in that position.*

*Therefore, I'll be resigning by end of day.*

-BROCK

SHORT, sweet, and straight to the point.

I read it twice and hit send. Then I click over to my pre-written resignation email to the board and email that, too.

*Done.*

Now, I just have the rest of my life to make Moon Bitch regret the day he ever met me, and win back my girl.

I go through the office and throw my things together, trying to finish before Keenan tries to talk me out of it.

Every memory here feels like an uppercut.

The photos of me when I was six, perched on Gramps' shoulders, both of us dressed in these ridiculous neon-orange shirts.

A scale model of the Winthrop Chicago, my grandparents' legacy, a gift from the Brandts.

That black mug with the owls I pushed into a corner two weeks ago, still smeared with Piper's lipstick. It was the last morning we were together in the office, having coffee, laughing and planning what felt like world domination.

Or at least dominating those damned reviews.

Goddamn, that hurts.

This isn't the way I ever planned to leave this place.

I was supposed to stay here until I got too old and grey and senile to run the place.

Just like Gramps.

Instead, I ran the company into the ground in record time.

As I slink out of my office and head home, I'm glad I don't have to go to that fucking joke of an awards ceremony.

I'd be the pariah everyone mutters about under their drunken breath.

At home, Andy flies up from his nap at my cleaning lady's feet and follows me into my room. He's pacing back and forth for an hour before he breaks into the same mournful howling he's been doing ever since Piper walked out.

Just my fucking luck.

She messed with my dog's head, too.

"Hold on, little air raid siren. We're getting your walk in early today," I tell him.

It'll also get me the hell out of this miserable house.

We head out into dusk. Andy wanders the path listlessly, barely sniffing at the flowers like he normally does. I ignore the nonstop vibration of my phone in my pants.

After our walk, I scoop Andy up on the couch and drink myself into a stupor.

I wake up with a brutal headache, my chest buried under dog.

I hear the thud as he jumps down and lets out another long baying howl at the moon rising through the window.

"Andy! Enough. Are you trying to split my head in two?"

I drag myself over to the table, shoving a few handfuls of cashews into my mouth from a tin. A few more for Andy gets him settled again.

I resist the urge to pick up my phone. I'll have to call Fyodor tomorrow and tell him we're using the nuclear option, but first I need to sleep off this

damn hangover.

Leave it to the sandman to be a colossal prick.

I toss and turn half the night, growling at the nauseous images flashing through my brain.

Darren laughing in the mess hall, talking shit to other airmen about the woman he was cheating on Vanessa with, goading me to walk over and knock his teeth out.

The heat in Piper's eyes, her lips, her soul the first time I slid into her.

Awful, glassy tears spilling out of her the day my dumbassery cost me everything. Fuck, how did I let her go without even telling her—

*Wait.*

I leap out of bed and wince as my hungover brain screams at me. There's also something buzzing on my nightstand like an angry bee.

*Is that what Piper needs? To know I love her?*

If I'd found my balls and told her, would I be waking up next to her right now instead of this dreary Piper-shaped dent on the other side of my bed I can't bring myself to smooth over?

"You magnificent idiot," I mutter.

My phone hums again and the noise drills through my head. I grab the bastard thing to shut it up and hold my breath, irrationally hoping it's her.

Nope.

Keenan again.

I knew he wouldn't let go easily. I sigh as my eyes flick over his text.

***Scratch everything I told you earlier. Apparently, the delivery company here in Seattle never subcontracts for a high-dollar order as big as you placed. This is totally out of the ordinary and the CEO can't tell me why it happened. He's stunned.***

I grind my teeth, wondering if the headache from hell will disappear when my blood turns to acid.

The phone buzzes again.

***Keenan: We're investigating now, but it stinks for sure. Don't make me tell you I think you were right twice. Because everyone has a pretty thorough account of where these oysters came from, how they were handled, and where they went. Once they got to Seattle, that's where it gets murky.***



***You know I'm not your boss anymore, right?*** I send back. ***Save your sleuthing for the new CEO. He'll need it.***

I'm mid-yawn and stroking Andy's head when my phone pings again.

***Keenan: You'll be back. And honestly, new boss or not, you're the only one who can ever fix this.***

I frown.

He isn't wrong. I need to shower and get on the horn with Fyo to see if he's managed to grab Apollo Finch's schedule yet.

***Keep me posted if you find anything else,*** I send.

Outside, it's a typically drab summer morning, purple-grey and lifeless before the sun explodes over the horizon.

Even so, I wonder if my luck is turning around.

I woke up with a better chance at settling the score with Finch.

And if dreams mean anything, I think mine just told me how to bring my Sunshine back.



## LOOSE ENDS (PIPER)



I can't take this anymore.

The whole food poisoning incident sticks in my mind like a thorn.

I couldn't sleep last night, tossing and turning and so restless to do something. What can I do, though?

I don't work for him anymore.

I'm not in his life.

I can't even do damage control for a man I sent into exile.

Ugh.

He may have ripped my heart out, but Brock doesn't deserve this.

I don't want him going through it alone.

Then I remember him telling me that his grandparents made a rule of using locally sourced vendors whenever possible. That's why he never believed the food was bad at the Winthrop Chicago.

*Is that a clue?*

I'm still wondering when I find Dad on the couch, sipping a coffee from those Lanai beans I think he's the only one drinking.

"It's not Trader Joe's but it isn't half bad," he says, holding up his mug in salute.

"I'm glad." I sit down beside him. "Have you heard about what happened at the Winthrop?"

"The big food poisoning meltdown? Yeah, those damn commercials are everywhere—'If you attended an event at Winthrop Seattle this weekend and experienced flu-like symptoms, call us.'"

Ouch.

“The ambulance chasers are out hard,” I agree. “It doesn’t make sense, though. Winthrop goes through a crazy detailed process to make sure they’re always serving the best. All local vendors, too.”

Dad nods, taking another pull off his cup.

“I hate to see it. That Winthrop boy seems like a good guy—”

I laugh. “Dad, he’s not a boy. He’s over thirty years old.”

He shrugs. “Well, I still sure as hell wouldn’t want to be in his shoes. A lawsuit this big is gonna be hell on his company. Good thing you walked away when you did or you might’ve gotten axed, honey.”

“Yeah, well, just out of morbid curiosity... Do you think you could find out who sold the oysters? You used to know everybody down by the docks.”

He pauses mid-slurp, looking at me over the top of his cup.

“I can ask around, Piper. But I know every veteran fisherman around these parts and no one would’ve sold him bad oysters intentionally. You sell bad stuff, you get people sick, and word gets out. Pretty soon, you’re selling your boat and moving to the Sonoran desert. Goodbye, livelihood.” Dad slaps the table. “Nah, nobody would’ve risked it. Plus, selling local, if anybody gets sick you gotta face their family. Whatever mucked things up happened somewhere else down the chain. I’m positive.”

I nod slowly, taking it in.

“Okay, but they might know something, right? I guarantee Brock doesn’t have time to vet drivers for this. Something stinks here. He agonized so much over that convention and even approved the final menu. No one at Winthrop Resorts or the Seattle branch would just let bad food slide.”

“You think he was sabotaged?” It’s like I can see the lightbulb switch on over his head.

“His other properties were being hit. He freaked out and asked me to leave, thinking this competitor would come after me. I thought it was far-fetched, but now—” I stop.

My heart knots as I come face-to-face again with the incredibly stupid reason why I lost the best man who ever happened to me.

“That what you’re fighting over?” Dad asks with a snort.

I nod.

“Ah, you young folks and your pride. Give me a couple hours and I’ll see what I can do,” he promises.

“Thanks, Dad!” I stand and start for my room.

“Hey, where are you going?” he calls.

“To call Brock.”

Dad jumps up so fast I look back.

“What are you doing?”

“Going down to the docks. It’s about time I see some old friends and if I’m gonna be your mole, it’s better face-to-face.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I ask quietly.

“Babe, I’m not a sick man anymore. Quit your worrying.”

“I know you aren’t sick, but that’s a lot of walking. I was kind of hoping you’d take it easy for a few more weeks. You haven’t even had your physical therapy follow-up yet...”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Could you take Maisy with?”

“Nope. She’s out with Trina at a movie and won’t be back for a little while. I don’t need no babysitter.”

“If you wait, I’ll come,” I offer. “I just need to call him quick.”

He chuckles. “I promise you it won’t be a quick call. Anyhow, I’ll drive down there if it makes you feel better. Won’t do the walking till I have to.”

Oof.

Honestly, it’s better than the long walk, but not ideal. If he has a surprise muscle spasm behind the wheel that might not end well. I start to say as much, but he stops me.

“Piper girl, listen. You’ve taken care of me for ages. Hell of a role reversal when I’m your old man, but you had to, and you went above and beyond. I’ll always appreciate that. But I’m okay now thanks to you.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t do much.”

Dad flashes a knowing grin.

“Sweetheart, your billionaire boy did it for you, not me. That was all you.”

“Brock did the heavy lifting,” I admit. “I can’t take much credit.”

“What you can take the credit for is being the kind of girl who makes a man willing to take on a whole family mess.”

Oh, that hurts.

*But I'm not that girl, am I?*

I'm the bitch who made him speak to me by penguin.

And isn't that what this is all about?

Yes, I'm the kind of girl he sleeps with and dresses up real pretty. But not the kind of woman he can ever respect enough to say "I love you" and let me make my own decisions.

I slip inside my room and shut the door.

I have to keep moving before I let these feelings weigh me down.

It takes a few minutes to work up the nerve to reach for the phone.

He usually answers his work number the fastest, but this time it goes straight to voicemail.

What the hell? Brock *never* turns off his work phone.

I call his personal cell next, but it's offline too.

Woof.

I can't believe I'm about to do this. I scroll through the phone and find a number only Fyo, his grandparents, and I have. I call Brock Winthrop's landline at home that's mostly used by his staff for housekeeping and deliveries.

Voicemail again.

I'm shocked that I don't feel relieved when I don't have to speak to him.

His recorded voice alone leaves goosebumps.

When I pull my phone back, my fingers tremble. I try one more time, wait for the voicemail beep, and then say, "Brock, it's Piper. I have a few ideas about how to help your situation. Contact me when you can. Thanks."

Then I collapse on my bed, trying not to bleed out my nerves.

I stare at my phone between naps, wondering if he'll call back. When he doesn't, I go to Maisy's room. She must be home, judging by the soft sound of her singing to herself.

"I did something stupid."

"What else is new?" She laughs.

"Mais, I'm being serious."

She drops her phone on the bed beside her. "What now?"

"I called Brock."

"Finally! Um, why is that stupid again?"

I glare at her. "Because we—you know we're not a thing anymore."

Maisy rolls over and laughs harder, wiping her face before she says, “Come on! You know he’d like to be ‘a thing’ again with so many special deliveries. I don’t get why you’re freaking out.”

“He hasn’t come by for a few days, right?”

“His ego can only take so much and he needed a break. Didn’t seem like you were budging and I don’t know how he’ll ever top that penguin.”

“I’m *not*. I just called because of the food poisoning. He saved Dad’s life and I’m obligated to help—if I can,” I rush out.

She laughs harder. “Wait. So, why are you upset that he hasn’t been around if you’re still ghosting him?”

“...he didn’t answer my call.”

“Aren’t billionaires pretty busy? When we stayed with him before Mexico, I got the impression he works a lot. Like it’s pretty much all he does, right?”

I nod. “But he doesn’t keep his work phone off.”

“Maybe he’s in a meeting,” she says flippantly.

“No. His personal phone is off, too.”

“If his phones are off, how would he know you even called?”

I bite my lip. “I called his home phone too.”

“What, like a landline? That’s so 1995.” She sweeps stray hair out of her face. “I dunno, Pippy. I don’t think he’s ignoring you.”

“I wouldn’t care. I just wanted to help.”

I sink down at the end of her bed, face in my hands, the entire world spinning.

God, I don’t know what to do.

How can I help with anything when he won’t even talk to me?

“Girls? Piper?” Dad calls sometime later. “I’ve got something for you.”

“What’s he talking about?” Maisy asks.

“Nothing.” I shake my head and open her door, stepping into the living room.

Maisy follows.

“What did you find out?” I ask almost breathlessly.

“The guys who brought in the oysters were from a ship I know. Captain Pike and I go way back. They were able to tell me quite a bit, actually,” he says proudly.

“How do you know it was the same batch?” I ask.

“It was the largest haul that day—the only one sold in a single batch. Special order from Bellingham. There were two other semi-large batches that day but they were sold off piecemeal. And this ship is known for damn good quality. They sell direct to market right off the pier whenever they don’t sell out up north. A lot of restaurants in town rush over to buy from Captain Pike daily. One of the guys remembered something weird about this batch.”

“Weird?”

Dad nods. “The whole batch was bought up by a big client with a caterer who booked a local shipping company to pick it up. But they sent some kids in a van to pick it up. And the van was sporting a bike shop logo.”

Oh my God.

I feel like the floor just dropped out, confirming my worst suspicions.

I swallow hard. “What shop? Any idea?”

“The van had a red logo that said Seattle’s Best Wheels. The oysters were packed on ice, but even then they can’t be out for more than a couple hours in the summer heat. They’ll go bad in no time, and with some bike shop punks handling them in a vehicle that isn’t even refrigerated right—”

“Holy crap!” I shake my head. “Yeah, no. *No*. Nobody from Winthrope or any company they’d hire ever would’ve sent random kids to pick up oysters for an event this big. I worked there long enough and visited enough properties to know. It just didn’t happen,” I say, my voice quivering with conviction.

“Well, only one thing to do now. Let’s scope out that bike shop,” Dad says firmly.

I nod.

“Let me get my shoes on!” Maisy squeals, always game for any drama.



IT’S a quick ride over to Seattle’s Best Wheels, thankfully.

By the time we’re pulling into the parking lot, I’m a nervous wreck, this seething mix of anger and fear and outright disgust curdling my belly.

Dad kills the engine and looks at me, waiting for my input.



“...I’m not sure what to say when I go in, honestly. It’s not like they’ll just admit to mishandling a bunch of oysters and making over a hundred people sick. This place doesn’t look like it could handle a single lawsuit.”

“Let me do it,” he growls.

“Dad, no. It’s my job. But you can come with for moral support,” I say, finding my courage.

He nods and we all go inside.

A short, grey-haired man works behind the counter. “Can I help you folks find anything?”

“Yeah, one of my buddies told me some kids with a red van work here and they do deliveries,” Dad says.

“Oh, yes. We mostly use the van for bike drops or repair pickups, but sometimes Zack makes extra deliveries for cash. He’s a good kid. He’s right out back if you need help with anything.”

Dad smiles.

“It’s a curio cabinet. Real big. I can’t lift it because of my busted back,” he says, wincing as he hunches over.

The man nods. “Well, you’re in the right place. He has a couple friends who help with big jobs like that, and their prices are pretty reasonable. Just walk around the building. You’ll see his van out back. If he’s not outside, knock on the window. Sometimes he’s playing with his phone or catching a quick catnap inside.” The man shrugs. “We were all eighteen once.”

Dad chuckles. “I understand.”

Once we’re out the door, I say, “Now what?”

“I’ve got this,” Maisy says.

I look at her incredulously. “What are you going to do?”

“He’s eighteen. I’m seventeen. I’ll look way more chill than some old people getting in his face.”

Her logic seems silly but I can’t find any fault.

So we all pile back in the car and I pull around to the van in the back. I’m not about to let my little sister go around that corner by herself, just in case this goes disastrously wrong.

Sure enough, there’s a tall, lanky kid with dark hair and a sleeve tattoo leaning against a red van with a cigarette stuffed in his mouth. The doors on the back are open like he’s been cleaning it.

Maisy gets out of the car casually. I roll the windows down so I can hear what they're saying.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey." The boy looks up and smiles, clearly enjoying what he sees.

"So, um, the guy in the shop said you help people move big stuff sometimes?"

"Aw, shit. My dad needs to quit telling people that. I was helping people move furniture for a while, but I'm off that backbreaking stuff. Mostly." He looks her up and down. "I mean, I can make an exception. I like the odd jobs these days—flowers, packages, food. They're more likely to pay better and be an easier job than humping a piano up three flights of stairs."

Maisy laughs. "Cool, yeah! So you've been working with food, huh? I bet that's pretty intense. Those orders must get huge."

"Yeah." He lifts the cigarette away and blows a puff of smoke. "So, were you looking for help moving or what? If you've got furniture, I can help you out just this once."

"Well, maybe." Maisy cocks her head and dips her shoulder. She leans in closer to the van. "Oh, woof! Smells like fish guts. Have you been hauling around manure or something?"

The kid tenses and glares at her.

"Just the usual stuff. Big seafood haul. I've been cleaning it out today to get the stink off." He tosses the cigarette on the concrete and then climbs in the van, grabbing a garden hose. "Tell you what. I'll let you come back later when it's all cleaned up. Then you can decide if you want to book the job."

Maisy steps on the cigarette, looking back at us like she's unsure.

*Enough games.*

I spring out of the car and sprint for the van. "Wait. Don't leave yet, please?"

The kid glares at me from inside and jumps down. Then he whirls past, heading for the driver's door.

I lunge forward, grabbing his shoulder.

"What the hell? Get off me, you psycho!"

"Sorry." I let go of the kid, squaring my shoulders. "Look, I'm not after you, Zack. I just need to know what happened with that seafood."

"Like I should tell your crazy ass anything?" He jerks his head sharply at Maisy. "She already lied about needing help moving when you just

wanted to grill me. Fuck off.”

“No one’s grilling you, guy. She just noticed your van smells fishy and asked if you made a seafood delivery.”

“But you want to interrogate me, right? I’m not stupid and I didn’t do anything wrong. Unless you want to come back with the cops and a warrant, I’m done.”

“I believe you,” I say, just as he’s walking away.

He stops and looks back over his shoulder. “Then why the hell do you want to talk to me so bad?”

“Because a lot of people got violently sick. Millions of dollars in damages, and I might know who caused it. I just need more information. You’re not in trouble, I promise. No one is after you.”

He gives me a long, wary glance. “You sure? Shit, I hate that people were puking their guts out. I did the best I could.”

I nod. “I’m sure. I work for the man who’ll have to pay for all the damage even though it wasn’t his fault. If anything, he’ll be thrilled you told the truth. If you want to stay anonymous, I understand. I just want to know what happened.”

He leans back against the van with a sigh and pulls out another cigarette.

“Okay, screw it. So I’ve been doing local deliveries for a while, but nothing that big or that special. When this freight company said they needed an extra truck for a big seafood order, I thought yeah, whatever. Turns out, the order was so big I had to call my friends to help load it by the docks and it still took almost a solid hour.”

Which means he would have only had roughly an hour to get it delivered properly.

“I would have been on time—*barely*—but then this dude from the catering place called and told me to go to some cheese shop across town. I warned them I’d be pushing it to make the delivery on time. They said if the oysters were on ice, it’d be fine. But the cheese shop was closed, so they sent me to three more stores. All because they needed this specialty crap and the only place that sells it is the shop that was closed. It was this—well, I can’t remember the name, but it’s this weird purple wine-cheese. They have some at the grocery store, but the caterer said that’s a knockoff and if his purple cheese wasn’t made from buffalo milk, it would fuck up his

recipe. But they added all of these special requests after I picked up the oysters. When I got to the hotel—”

“The hotel—you mean Winthrope?”

He nods. “Yeah. When I got to the loading dock, the ice was fucking melted. But that’s not my fault! They made me jump through so many extra hoops during rush hour and it was a hot-ass day. When I got there, the same guy who hired me was waiting with the chef. I showed him the ice. He told me not to worry and said he’d take care of it. They even paid me double for making the extra stops. I feel real shitty that people got sick and your boss has to pay. I was worried something like that might happen. That’s why I told him the ice was blown and I didn’t know if he could still use it. So, whatever. If you want the money back...” He reaches into his pocket.

I shake my head.

“Don’t. You did everything you were asked. It’s not your fault someone else spoiled the seafood. But there is one thing you can do. Would you be willing to go on the record? Even anonymously?”

“What record?” he bites off.

I open my purse and pull out a piece of paper and a pen. “I just want you to write down what you just told me and sign your name—”

The kid looks nervous. “That’s not anonymous at all.”

“I won’t show it to anyone but my boss without your approval. Hand to God. But did the person who hired you tell you not to tell anyone?”

He thinks for a second and slowly shakes his head.

“So, why are you worried about it?”

“Because. I don’t want to get thrown under the bus.”

“Not happening. The guy who caused this mess is going down.” I mean it, even if I have to knock him out myself.

The kid nods. He writes out a statement and signs it.

I read it over to make sure it’s everything he just told me.

“Would you be willing to leave your number in case I need to reach out for clarification?”

“Sure.” He jots his number below his signature.

“Thank you.”

“You won’t regret this,” Maisy says, grinning from ear to ear. “Thank you for doing the right thing.”

I grab her arm and gently tug her away.

We don't have time to stand around while she flirts.

"Mission accomplished, kids. I thought that went pretty well. What's wrong?" Dad asks once we're back in the car.

"Loverboy still hasn't called!" Maisy says.

Dad laughs.

I sigh. "It's not like that, brat, and you know it."

"What's it like then?" she counters.

"I just want to help him with the chaos that's going on, and now maybe I can."

"You want to make sure he's okay, you mean," Dad adds.

"Yeah," I say weakly.

And I realize that's all I've ever wanted to do.

Every single time Brock's handsome scowly face fills my mind.

Even if he's the grumpiest McJerkface to ever walk the Earth, I still freaking *care*.



## ALL THE ARROWS (BROCK)



**I**t's four a.m. and I'm wide the fuck awake.

I don't sleep much these days, even with a lump of sausage dog piled at my feet, blissfully snoring.

Tonight, I can't even dream of rest.

Not when Pippa left me that voicemail, offering help I don't deserve. I can't drag her deeper into this clusterfuck.

I'm lost in my own head when my phone lights up, blaring its ringtone. The name on the screen feels like an acid facial.

Let's get this over with.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"Where are you?" Gramps demands.

"It's four o'clock in the morning here. I'm at home."

"You should be asleep and resting up for the conference later today. You have an early flight to Portland," he says firmly.

It's so absurd I could split myself in two laughing.

"That's a joke, right?"

"No. Why would you think that?"

"I resigned, Gramps. Surely you saw the email by now?"

"Son, your resignation is not accepted under any circumstances."

I pull the phone back and stare in disbelief.

"What do you mean 'not accepted?' You can't force me to work for you!"

“No, but I can ask you to, and I’m your grandfather. You’d be an ingrate to turn me down.”

I roll my shoulders, feeling my bones creak.

Has he lost his ever-loving mind?

“Gramps, why? Why the hell would you want me to stay on after what happened? I’m damaged goods. I’m more use to you taking the fall so you can start fresh with a brand-new executive officer.”

“Pointless, considering I have a splendid CEO and replacing him this close to the convention is simply impractical,” he says. “You know how much I believe in second chances. When Ward Brandt concocted his little fake marriage scheme with his assistant to win our business—and found himself a real wife along the way—we stuck with him. Once he came clean, of course.”

I roll my eyes.

The shit Brandt went through isn’t even in the same universe as this train wreck.

“Whether I stay or not, there’s no point in attending the convention this year. I’ll give you the notes right now—we lost. A humiliating defeat.”

“That may be, but we’re not going to turn tail and run, now are we? We’re Winthropes. We have more dignity.”

“So, you want me to go and take the beating for your ego?” I grind out.

“Versus hiding away and pickling your liver? Yes, I do, broccoli boy. You and I both know you’ve survived worse.”

Dammit, he’s right.

If I survived a flaming wreck and being sewn back together, and then a showdown with mobsters where nobody but Fyo had my back, I should be able to handle this.

“Fine. If it’s that important to you to have a presence at the conference, I’ll go, but I’m still resigning when it’s over,” I say.

“Why? Give me one good reason.”

“I failed, Gramps. Pretty damned spectacularly. You don’t get the company smacked with fifty million dollars in damages and counting and just brush that off as a learning lesson,” I growl.

I’m expecting denial. A lecture. Another pep talk.

Instead, he just laughs.

*What the hell ever.*



If I'd watched someone else flame out as horribly as I have, I might laugh too, but Gramps breaking into a full-on belly fit catches me off guard.

"I did the best I could. I'm no good to you as a laughingstock," I say.

He laughs harder. "Oh, my dear boy. I didn't raise a loser, but you have me worried I might have a quitter on my hands."

My blood heats and my brows pull down.

"I'm no quitter."

"Then prove it. Don't resign. For the record, I talked to the board, and even with the wreckage, they're not keen on new leadership. We all need you."

Fuck. Way to corner me.

"You don't care that I'm running your legacy into the ground?"

"Mistakes happen—even disastrous ones. Imagine if Churchill quit after Dunkirk! Brock, this is your moment. The one where you take a good, long look in the mirror and decide if you're ready to be a man."

Shit.

Have I ever mentioned how hard it is having a grandfather who's never short on inspiration?

"Gramps, a mistake is when you order a gin and tonic and someone gives you a vodka. Our reviews died on my watch. I failed to stop corporate sabotage. Then a hundred people got seriously ill at the event of the year in our own backyard. What happened wasn't a mistake. It was negligence."

"Still waiting for a sound reason. You can't just throw in the towel because you've had an ugly run of it. What could you have done differently?"

That question knifes me in the gut.

"Hired Piper Renee sooner to save our asses," I say glumly.

"That's a start. So you know you need top talent. You also need more firepower in public relations, and a proper team to handle this other problem."

He has a point, but I needed that *months* ago.

Now, it's barely a tourniquet, even if I'll absolutely settle score with Apollo Finch my way.

"I should've known that before everything caught fire, Gramps. The fact that I didn't—"

“Means you’re a human being,” he finishes roughly. “And you’re a fine human being, too. This, however, is your darkest hour, waiting for you to shine—and I don’t just mean with the company. I’ll loan you the British team over next week. You Yanks are too damn passive.”

I should thank him and prepare to have my ego beat down. But before I can do anything, he speaks again.

“You know, when I took over what became Winthrope, it was a droll, second-rate chain. We existed in three countries, and the old buildings were twenty years outdated. Do you know how I turned it around?”

“No, but I guess you’ll enlighten me.”

“I went to some blasted hotel conference in the States where this man swore he could tell me how to turn my chain into multimillion profits. While I was there, I met this adorable American girl. She was going to be mine if it was the last thing I did. Back then, girls didn’t have a lot of options. They married well or they suffered. When your grandmother agreed to wear my ring, I swore I wouldn’t have her suffer. I had to give her the world, and I did. My hotels became the best in the world because my wife deserved nothing less. That’s not to say I didn’t muck things up along the way—I did—but I had a fire in my soul. I trust you’ll find yours soon. *Both* of them.”

“Both?”

“Has it ever occurred to you that your woes are inseparable?”

“What? You’re talking about...?” I stop, refusing to say her name.

I can’t fucking believe we’re having this conversation.

He sighs like a teacher answering the same question for the tenth time.

“Get your girl back, son. Your head’s not on straight without her.”

“If you know about Piper, then you also must know we’re not together. Not anymore,” I mutter.

“Yes, that’s rather easy when your grandma has spies everywhere cupid is concerned,” he tells me.

*Of course.*

“For the record, I didn’t make a mistake with Piper. I was trying to protect her.”

The old man chuckles. “Well, sometimes it’s best to be more subtle about protecting a woman than treating her like a windup toy. They’re not always appreciative.”

Tell me about it.

“You’ve made your case already,” I growl. “Fine. I’ll go to the conference and take the beating so no one else does. You’re right. Real leaders absorb the arrows—all of them—and tomorrow I’ll start undoing the damage. As for Piper, that’s different.”

He pauses and clears his throat.

“I don’t know if this helps, Brock, but your grandmother broke up with me three times before we were married. I always knew I was going to marry her, but I’d planned on a long engagement. When I nearly lost her, I cut it in half, because I figured once we were married, it would be harder for her to dump me.”

“Oh, please. He proposed *three times* before I accepted. He begged me to marry him,” Grandma cuts in.

“How long have you been on the line? I told you to stay off,” Gramps says.

For the first time in ages, I laugh.

They’ve been married for over fifty years, and they still bicker on an international call.

“I’m going to get ready for my beating while you two settle this,” I say.

“How are you winning her back?” Grandma asks. “You’d better not let me down. I need to meet my great-grandchildren before I shuffle off my mortal coil. Who knows how much longer I have left!”

“I’ll let you know once I’m done being sneered at and ridiculed as the proud CEO of the luxury chain that comes in last place,” I growl.

“And I’m the grandmother of a man who knows it’s harder to stand up after you’ve been knocked flat than to keep on running when you’ve never fallen. There should be an award for that,” she says matter-of-factly. “Since there isn’t, I’ll accept you coming out of this happily married and less inclined to work yourself into an early grave.”

“Enough with the death talk, Grandma. Have a good day,” I say, disconnecting the call.

Christ, that was brutal.

It was also the kick in the teeth I needed.

Nothing will ever numb this gaping loss, but talking to my grandparents helps. I get up to let Andy out, then clean up and stuff myself into a plain

black suit. I'm about to head out for a real coffee before I go deal with the sneering insults behind my back when my phone buzzes.

**Keenan:** *BIG news. It might even make you less of a crankyface.*

**Brock:** *What news?*

**Keenan:** *Miss Piper Renee plans to attend the conference with Jennifer Landers in Portland despite the fact that she's been gone for weeks. Should I reactivate her security credentials?*

My breath turns to cement in my lungs.

*Piper's coming?*

*Tonight?*

*To the same slaughterhouse?*

My jaw tightens.

She might just be hanging out with Miss Landers. I shouldn't expect much, but it's still a chance, even if it's the most miserable odds I could ever imagine.

Still.

I'll hunt her down and find out where we stand.

If she's really over me, I'll leave her alone, but I need to hear it face-to-face.

I grin like the desperate idiot I am and text back, **Yes. Let her in.**

Then I remember Piper loves vests and says I look good in silver.

I change suits and text Keenan on my way to the car. ***Do we know why she's coming? Does she want her job back?***

For a second, the urge to call her skins me alive. But if I have a chance to see her again in the flesh, I'll take it. Anything we have to talk about will be infinitely more powerful in person.

**Keenan:** *Sorry. I didn't speak to Piper. Jenn just asked if she could come. I told her I needed to clear it with you, but expected it would be okay.*

**Brock:** *Piper is cleared for anything she wants. Ever. What would you say to a woman who hasn't spoken to you in weeks?*

**Keenan:** *How the hell should I know?*

Fair enough.

As I climb into the SUV, my phone buzzes again.

**Keenan:** *You could try an apology. With chocolate?*

I snort loudly.

***Brock: Where the hell do I get chocolate this early in the morning?***

***Keenan: See if the hotel gift shop is open. If not, you'll just have to use your sterling personality.***

I groan before I text back.

***Brock: Why do I feel like that isn't enough?***

***Keenan: Because Brock Winthrop is an acquired taste, but if anyone's got a craving, it's her.***



MAYBE THAT FOURTH cup of coffee was a bad idea.

I can't stop moving now, so I walk up and down the aisle of chairs in the ballroom, ignoring the dirty looks and whispers I can hear behind my back.

"Holy shit. I can't believe he showed his face!" someone hisses.

I throw a nasty look over my shoulder. But why bother?

My name was fated to be mud the second I walked in.

Keenan sits in the same high-back chair in the ballroom, staring at me. "What does a man who already knows he's lost have to be so nervous about?"

"Have you seen her yet?" I snap. "What about Miss Landers?"

"No, but they should be here anytime."

"What if she changed her mind?"

He studies me for a second. "That might spare you. If she's not impressed when you're at your best, I can't imagine she'll be thrilled today."

"Thanks for your honesty, asswipe," I growl.

"You pay me to tell you the truth." He grins. "But I will give you major props for keeping it together. All this gossip... Ouch. I would've skipped out and hit the bar an hour ago."

"I'm getting another coffee. You want one?"

"I'm off caffeine for now. And are you *sure* you need more?" He meets my eyes. "I've never seen you like this, bossman."

I nod. "It's too damn early in the day to start drinking."

I make my way to the coffee bar for a water and smack into Cole Lancaster. He's all sandy-dark hair and smiles, a change in the scowling man I met on other occasions. Apparently, he's here pushing his revived coffee brand on other hotels after his rave success with mine.

"Can't believe you're still mentioning Winthrope Lanai in your peaberry brew ads. It's marvelous stuff, of course, but we won't do you much good now," I say pointedly.

He has a barista push a cup of his campfire brew over to me. Looks like I'm having one more coffee after all.

"You pulled my ass out of a tight spot, Winthrope, and the product is excellent. Don't care if you got the whole city sick, I won't hide our friendship."

Damn.

"You should. I don't want to be a drag on your business. If you want to take the Winthrope name off your stuff, I won't be offended," I say.

"I would, and so would Eliza and Destiny," he says. A fondness sparks in his eyes when he mentions his wife and daughter. "You want to talk sick? We're *all* sick as hell seeing what went down. Besides, I've already scored three more deals for Wired Cup this morning. I know something stinks. How the hell did it happen?"

"We're still working it out," I say bitterly, motioning like I need to go. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, though, Lancaster."

"I still owe you. If you need help with this—"

I shake my head vigorously.

"Sell your coffee and say hi to your people for me," I say.

When I walk back, I notice Keenan looking up at me.

"You okay?"

"Sometimes sympathy is worse than snide remarks," I mutter.

Keenan nods. "We agree on something."

"It's going to be a long damn day," I mutter.

And I'm absolutely right.

I sit there as long as I can stand it, slurping my coffee and watching accusatory looks fly around every time strange eyes land on me.

"I'm going for a quick walk," I tell Keenan, lurching up when my cup is almost empty.

I exit the ballroom just as more people are flooding in with drinks in their hands. They're starting to crowd the room for the big speeches, less than an hour away now.

*Where the hell is she?*

I stop by the exit door and watch people file through. No gorgeous blond hair or strawberry lips made to ignite my soul.

I look for Jennifer Landers instead. If she's here, she'll know when Piper is coming. More importantly, she might know what it'll take to make Piper speak to me again over more than this fucking catastrophe at the fashion conference.

I'm still wondering as the last of the line mashes its way through the door.

No Jennifer Landers, though.

Sighing, I head into the hall, walking the long corridor until I come to the fire exit. End of the line, so I turn around and start walking the other way.

I'm almost back to the ballroom when a tall shadow steps out in front of me with ruffled coppery hair.

"Now that's a sight for sore eyes!" Apollo Finch says with a sneer. "It would be so much harder gloating with you absent."

When my eyes focus on him, I have to dig my feet into the carpet to hold myself back from crushing his throat.

"You sick son of a bitch. If we weren't at this conference, I'd drag you out back and kick your ass black and blue. The only thing saving your shit-stack of a face right now is the fact that I can't stand doing *more* damage to my grandparents than you've already done."

My nostrils flare.

Every breath feels like inhaling a flaming sword.

I need to get the fuck away from this flying ass-monkey now.

"Sure, Winnie. Blame me for something that happened on *your* watch. Sad." He makes an exaggerated yawn. "Meanwhile, my shares haven't plunged into the basement. Our ratings haven't gone down. People are clamoring for a chance to stay—"

"At a boring hotel that looks like it's right out of *The Shining*? Clamoring. I'm sure," I snarl.

Finch leers. “Oh, Winnie, you always were a rotten fucking loser. And they said the same about me that year your lovely grandfather squeezed me out of first.”

“The year your wife left your sorry ass, right? I saw the police reports. How long did that court battle go on? And what’d you have to pay in the settlement to shut her up about the assault?”

His face tightens until I can see his cheekbones nearly breaking through his thin skin.

“It doesn’t matter. Not after today. I’m taking first—and your greedy entitled ass is *fucked*.”

“I didn’t lose yet,” I say. “Even after all this, even after your *worst*, I still have a functioning company.”

“Interesting interpretation. Your stocks are in freefall, your ratings are atrocious, and your guests are all ordering their food over delivery apps. We both know you’re not getting an award for anything but biggest loser of the year.”

“You poisoned my guests, you bitter fucking reprobate,” I flare.

His mouth goes round.

“Mr. Winthrop, watch your tongue. That sounds an awful lot like slander. I do hope you can back that up, or you’ll have another painful lawsuit headed your way. And I heard your legal team is already stretched rather thin.”

I want to knock his face off.

I want to kick his ass to Bainbridge Island and back, and then keep kicking it all the way into the Pacific.

But I’m at a professional conference with thousands of eyes.

If I go off like a raging maniac, it will rip what’s left of our reputation to shreds and land me in prison.

I’m going to take this vicious fuck apart, but not here.

Not today.

I just have to hold it together through tonight, and then expedite my plans with Fyo.

So for now, I do the only thing I can.

I turn and walk away, ignoring how my feet feel blistered with every step.



I'm searching for Pippa again the whole time, but of course I can't find her. Even if she's here, it's like finding Waldo in this foaming mess of people.

After a few more minutes, I throw myself back in the empty chair next to Keenan.

"Couldn't find her," I say.

"You will, Romeo. Relax."

I glare at him. "It's not funny. I need to talk to her tonight. Finch is here."

Keenan winces. "You knew he would be."

"Yeah. I wasn't prepared to talk to him."

His eyes widen and he stares through me. It's weird to see him speechless.

"What did he say?"

"I told him I knew what he did. He threatened to sue me for slander."

"Holy shit. Be careful! Do you think he'll follow through?"

I shake my head.

"Doubt it, and I really don't care. Let him. It won't be settled tonight, anyway, but what else is new?"

"Damn," he says quietly. "You're really fixated on Piper, huh?"

My lip curls behind my hand with frustration.

I hate that I'm so fucking transparent.

"Boss, it's okay," he says, clapping a friendly hand on my shoulder. "It's no crime to set this brawl aside for another night and find your girl. Go win her back."

*I will, damn you.*

*If it's the last thing I ever do, I'm bringing Piper home to my arms.*



## HOLD YOUR APPLAUSE (PIPER)



The Amtrak Cascades trip to Portland takes most of the day.

Jenn snoozes as the train churns along. I'm so wired I can barely breathe and repeatedly check my phone to keep my heart from fluttering away.

But there's nothing from Brock.

Not so much as a text by the time we're dragging ourselves into the train station and finding a ride to go straight to the event. I'm thankful there aren't any hitches with our credentials.

Just in the nick of time, too.

There's barely an hour to look around before the loud, raucous crowd starts flowing into the main theater hall for the awards ceremony.

With security light, we walk through a service door near the back of the convention center, hoping it leads us to the right place.

But hope turns to doubt as I stumble through the long, dark hallway in what feels like one long repeating loop. We're definitely behind the stage area, but where are the doors?

"What are we missing?" I mutter over my shoulder. "The rooms offstage must have an exit or two. Where's the one for Oasis Springs?"

Frowning, Jenn spins her phone's flashlight through the darkness. "No clue. I can barely see!"

Further down the hall, after some panicked running, we find the doors lit by a few dim emergency lights—including the one marked 44A for Oasis Springs.

I look at Jenn. “I can take it from here. You should go.”

“Jesus, Pippa. Are you sure? You don’t just want to go to the police?”

“We’re already here. Time to be brave.” I nod firmly as much to myself as her. “It’s the right thing to do for the company and those poor people. Show him he’s cornered.”

Jenn grabs my arm as I reach for the door.

“Wait! You shouldn’t go alone. What if he—”

“Jenn. We talked about this, remember? I don’t want you mixed up in it if something crazy goes down. It’s my risk. I technically don’t even work for Winthrope anymore, so Brock isn’t liable for me.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.” Her eyes search mine. “And just so you know, I don’t think he’d be thrilled about this plan either.”

“What Brock Winthrope thinks is none of my business,” I lie.

Jenn rolls her eyes.

“C’mon. Are we going to keep pretending he isn’t half the reason we jumped on a train to Portland? Right or wrong, he’s the whole reason you’re gearing up to storm a psycho’s room.”

I swallow thickly.

“He’s not. And I’m not ‘storming’ anything. I’m simply going to talk. Let him know I have ironclad proof, and ask him to come clean. Nicely.”

She gives me a doubtful look.

Yeah, I don’t believe it’ll be that easy either, but I have to try.

“Pippa, you don’t know what you’re going to run into behind that door. Let me come,” she whispers urgently.

“And I have to do this. I’m the only one who can act as a personal agent here without a direct connection to Winthrope.” Sighing, I gently grab her shoulder. “Lady, I love you like a sister. Get out of here and wait for me. If I’m not back in twenty minutes, call the cops. *Just go.*”

“I’ll wait outside, but I’m waiting *here*,” she says, glancing nervously. “What if you need backup?”

I smile. “If I do, what will you do? Throw an unflattering filter on him?”

“We could...hit him in the nads. These things are pointy!” she says, kicking up her heels.

Even with the tension suffocating me, I laugh.

“We did wear heels for a reason,” I say.

“Go be your badass Carmen Sandiego self. I’ll be waiting.” She stands there staring, then flings her arms around me in a hug. “Don’t be mad at me later.”

“I won’t be, Jenn. Sit tight.”

With one more fortifying breath, I turn and twist the knob.

There’s a second of relief, realizing it’s unlocked. I won’t have to knock as I push inside.

A woman in a crisp white button-down with the Oasis Springs logo on her breast whirls around and looks at me like I’m a ghost coming through the wall.

“Can I help you, ma’am? This is a private room.”

“Yes, I’m here to see Mister Finch.”

She frowns, picking up a black notebook from the table beside her. She glances down, flicking through a few pages, and then looks up at me.

“I don’t have any appointments listed for today. It’s very close to the ceremony, so I’m sure it’d be best if you reschedule.”

“He told me to come tonight,” I insist, stamping my foot impatiently. “I don’t have to tell you how he gets when he misses his appointments. You know the kind I mean.”

Yes, it’s a Hail Mary.

But if this guy is every bit the wretched creeper he seems, I’m hoping I have a shot.

The woman’s eyes narrow, then widen as the realization sinks in.

“Oh, you’re one of those?” She sizes me up in disgust for a few more seconds before she sighs. “Fine. I’ll escort you to his private suite. He always makes time for his ladies...”

*Big yikes.*

My stomach flips over at the thought, but that also means I’m in. I follow her through a couple more rooms to another closed door.

She knocks on it softly.

“Yeah?” Finch calls brusquely.

“There’s a woman here to see you, Mr. Finch. Special appointment?”

I’m motionless as we wait for his reply.

“Send her in!” he yells back.

There’s just enough edge in his tone to make the hairs on my neck stand up.

“Go ahead.” She opens the door, waving a hand in front of me like she’s inviting me into a Komodo dragon pen.

I walk through with my heart pulsing in my throat.

Inside, I find Apollo Finch waiting for me.

He’s wearing a traditional tux with a half-full champagne flute in hand, lounging in an armchair with one leg tossed obscenely over the side.

*Everything about this feels off.*

“Miss Renee, is it? Or do you prefer ‘Sunshine?’” A too-wide grin spreads across his face like a drawn sword as he stands. “I never expected this little surprise. Finally got sick of playing house with a loser wreck and came to your senses? I can’t blame you for that. Champagne?”

He gestures toward a bottle chilling in an ice bucket just a few steps away.

I shake my head.

“Brock Winthrop isn’t a loser,” I force out.

“*Oh-ho-ho.*” He manages to make it three words. “Here to plead his case for mercy then? You’re more loyal than most trophy girls, I’ll give you that. Did you want the champagne, love?”

My gaze sharpens. “And I’m not his messenger. I came here myself.”

He walks over to the champagne, pouring himself another glass before he looks at me again.

“Then why the hell are you here? Make it snappy. We’re half an hour from showtime.”

“First, a whole lot of people worked their butts off getting our ratings up—and you undid that hard work. You cheated your way to the top.” I fold my arms.

He stares me down as he takes an obnoxiously slow sip of his drink.

“Sore losers will run their mouths about a lot of things they can’t prove. You’ve heard the rumors we’ve bagged first place? I wasn’t sure if I should believe them until this morning, but when your competitors obviously do, it’s true. I *knew* this would be our year. Thanks for confirming the good news, I guess.”

I wish to God I could claw that smirk off his face.

“Yeah, about that—isn’t it a little tragic how your stunning success came by pure luck this year? And you’d have way more to brag about if an

insane kitchen disaster hadn't knocked your biggest rival out of the running."

His carnivorous smile disappears.

"Winnie has been circling the drain for some time. His latest big seasick disaster was just icing on the cake." He winces like the champagne suddenly tastes like mud. "I don't mean to insult your beau, short stack, but he hasn't been top-shelf competition for a while. Not since—*never mind.*"

The way his face twists scares me. It reminds me of a wounded animal, guarded and volatile.

"I'm not so sure. Someone's been paying an awful lot for fake reviews to drag Winthrope's ratings down. You don't usually do that when you're not sweating the competition."

His mouth twists sourly before he speaks. "Ludicrous. You're clearly mistaken and I—"

"Don't worry. I'm not implying it was you. I know it was," I interject. "Oasis Springs was always second-rate. I'm not sure anything less than another powerhouse luxury brand would be that worried about bringing down Winthrope...would they?"

He drains the rest of his glass and grinds his foot on the floor like he's stamping out a bug.

"I'm sure you've come to annoy me for a reason, so will you get to the damn point? I don't have all day to cry over Winnie's wounded pride. I have a speech to make."

"Oysters," I spit.

Laughing, he does a double take.

"Oysters? So we're still stuck on Winnie's miserable downfall? Honey doll, I don't order oysters for another man's kitchen. I only eat them, if you get my drift." That sick smirk returns. "However, I'm not willing to entertain your cloak and dagger conspiracies tonight, woman. You're too sweet to have his paranoia rubbing off."

*Oh, asshat, you have no idea.*

I grin defiantly. "I'm talking about specific oysters. No conspiracies."

"I *hope* so. It would hardly be appropriate for you to come barging into my room, raining on the biggest parade of my life. That's pretty fucking bitter, even for a Winthrope groupie." He spits their name like it tastes rotten.

“Your mistake. You told your assistant to send me in.”

“I was certainly mistaken thinking you had a better brain behind that pretty face,” he bites off, stepping forward. “What the hell does he want? If this is Winnie giving me some stupid conscience check, he has no right. After what he did, he fucking *owes me*.”

“What he did?” I echo weakly, backing up a pace. I can’t let him corner me.

“My award—Winthrop *stole* it. Winnie and his overblown shoe-in-ass of a grandfather,” Finch flares, gliding toward me with his fists clenched. For a second, I’m afraid he’ll snap the champagne flute still in his hand. “They cost me everything, you know. The stress, the planning, the letdown. *Her*, walking out on me, after I treated her like gold—”

I’m almost flat against the wall, barely breathing when he stops.

He seems to snap back into himself, pulling back and straightening his cuff.

“And now you’re here. Harassing me with these outrageous claims about some damnable oysters.” He snorts loudly, tossing his head. “I’ll tell you what, missy, you can take it up with my legal team. I don’t have time for this horseshit.”

No.

But apparently he has time to erupt over a grudge that I’m sure wasn’t caused by Brock and his grandfather. I wonder if Jenn’s ‘psycho’ remark was dangerously accurate.

Because he’s looking at me like he wants to hack me up.

“Well? Are you finished?” he demands, turning up his nose.

“Not quite.” I find my nerve and step toward him. “You infiltrated the catering company. You sent that poor, inexperienced kid on a wild goose chase to make sure he wasted time tracking down that stupid cheese. You made sure everything would show up spoiled and get smuggled into the kitchen.”

“Bah!” Finch swipes a hand through the air. “Your boyfriend needs to hire a better caterer—and a *real* PI next time. Because I know you have zero proof.”

“They were your people,” I fling back. “And FYI, he’s not my boyfriend—”

Finch blinks. “Then why are you here wasting breath?”



“Because it’s the right thing to do, and I know that wasn’t Brock’s people making mistakes. The chef from that catering company has worked almost exclusively with Oasis Springs for the past four years, and when he talked to the health inspector, he conveniently left out the driver’s account. Nobody mentioned sending the kid to three other stores and telling him to leave the oysters in a hot van. He never mentioned the kid showing him the melted ice—which your people made sure melted quickly.”

His jaw clenches.

“What do you know? You’re just some junior copywriter who slept her way up the promotion ladder. No one is going to believe you. I can see you’re upset, and believe it or not, I won’t take much joy in launching a libel case. So pick yourself up by that pretty skirt and move on if Brock Winthrope is done using you. The door is that way.” He stabs a thumb over his shoulder.

Oh, God.

I should knee him in the balls for the crap he’s talking, but I don’t have time to worry about that right now.

I just smile.

“I’ll save your lawyers the trouble. I brought receipts, Mr. Finch. Do you think I’d be stupid enough to come see you without them?”

He glares at me, his gaunt face reddening.

“Your theory is preposterous and outlandish. I’d love to see what kind of ‘proof’ you think you have. You can’t prove something that never happened!”

“I was afraid you’d say that—”

“What are you doing?” he snaps.

“You didn’t let me finish. I was afraid you’d say that, so when I found out the truth about the oysters and why they caused the food poisoning, I kept digging. I found another shell company that paid ten influencers for trips to Winthrope properties. All ten left bad reviews. I tracked those influencers down. They all had a guilty conscious, so they agreed to back me up—”

“That’s it? Pathetic. Visiting a property and bombarding it with bad reviews on Google and Yelp is no crime.”

“No, but I filled them in on all the coincidences with the food poisoning incident. They were shocked at how far you’re willing to go to sink the

competition. Some people actually die from food poisoning. So, they were all willing to admit they were paid to leave negative reviews on record. As any of your lawyers will tell you, that establishes a pattern of deliberate sabotage.”

His face glows redder. He throws his arms in the air wildly as he approaches, pushing me against the wall.

*Oh, no.*

So much for not getting cornered.

“Finch—”

“Enough! Get the hell out of here.” He’s only inches from my face now, enough to feel the disgusting spittle flying off his lips. “Get out before I drag you out mys—”

*Knock-knock!*

Saved by the door. *I hope.*

“What?” he screams, looking over his shoulder.

“Mr. Finch, I’m so sorry to bother you, but you’re expected on stage in twenty minutes for the award.”

“Fine.” He sucks in a breath and blows it out. “How much to end this stupidity and never lay my eyes on you again?”

“...what stupidity?” The question comes out before I realize what he’s talking about.

His eyes narrow.

“Don’t play dumb with me, bitch. You will not like the consequences.”

“You’re trying to bribe me? Even after I told you I have evidence?”

He rolls his eyes. “Blackmail typically is how this business works. Don’t tell me you’re here for moralizing? All beauty and no brains, I see.”

Heat rushes through my veins. “You’re so arrogant.”

“And you need to name your price and shut the fuck up. Before I *make you.*”

I gasp.

“You—you’ll never shut me up. A hundred trillion dollars wouldn’t make a difference. Everyone is going to know. You made people violently sick. There’s one old lady who’s still in ICU. You could have *killed* someone. Do you understand that? You could have murdered someone you’ve never even met over a fucking trophy.”

He closes the gap between us, invading my space, this menacing shadow of a man who looks too much like an evil scarecrow.

“Whatever proof you think you have, it’s not enough. I promise,” he whispers darkly.

“We’ll see. But that’s why I’ve been recording this little visit,” I say quietly.

He leers down, his lips peeled back. His hand flicks down his side, pushing into his pocket, where there’s the tiniest glint of metal.

*A gun? A knife? What’s he—*

My heart leaps up my throat and beats so loudly I’m not sure if I can even scream.

Jenn was right.

I’ve got to get out of here.

“Miss Shit-shine, I’m a gentleman at heart so I’m giving you one last chance to hand over your phone and delete everything. Understand, I’m trying to offer you an easy way out. You need to take it. You won’t like the hard way. Final warning,” he growls.

*Knock-knock. Knock-knock.*

“What?” he screams.

“Fifteen minutes! They’re expecting you backstage, sir,” a timid voice says behind the door.

*The door.* I need to get out of here.

I slip around him and start moving toward it, but he’s faster.

There’s just a dark blur of long legs and militant strides before Apollo Finch blocks off the only way out.

He grabs at my phone first.

I push forward, twisting my body wildly, trying to keep it out of his reach, but his arms are so long.

He grabs my wrist with a muffled snarl, throwing me against the wall. And everything starts spinning as his hand rises above his head, as his eyes flash pure rage, as he prepares to strike and—

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

The whole room vibrates with the sound of something pounding on the door.

He stops, his fist still up, ready to crash down on my face.

“...you’re wanted out there. You should go,” I venture, trying to buy precious time and wrestle my arm free, but his grip is a vise. The movement just twists my arm further. “That hurts! Please, let go.”

Great. Now I’m pleading with a total maniac.

And I’m about to try screaming again when there’s a deafening noise like a gunshot.

*Bam!*

That’s no knock.

More like someone trying to kick down the door.

Finch throws his body weight into my back and grips my arm harder, this mannequin of pure rage, too focused to even turn toward the ruckus behind me.

Then the door blows off its hinges.

“Sir! Sir, wait! You guys can’t go back there,” the woman from earlier screams. “Oh my God!”

Everything goes deathly still for a moment.

“She said you’re hurting her, you piss-poor excuse for a man.”

I look up and almost pass out cold.

Brock stands in the doorway with another dark figure behind him, his lip curled, his body bowed with pure vibrating rage. His eyes are fixed on Finch like a hunting hawk.

He’s only there for a second before he strikes.

Apollo Finch never even has a chance to look up.

Not before Brock’s bulk plows into him, throwing his weight off me, freeing my arm with a sudden pulling *whoosh* that echoes through me.

Holy hell.

For a second, I’m spinning, losing my balance before my shoulder bangs against the wall.

There’s another *thud!* on the floor.

Finch goes down, hitting the ground so hard I wince. Before he can even start struggling, there’s a groaning sound, like he’s being choked.

I look down to see the madman’s throat clenched in Brock’s hand.

“I-I c-c-can’t breathe,” Finch stammers.

“Then quit moving, dumbass.” Brock turns, raising his fist.

“Brock, don’t.” I run up behind him and throw my good hand on his back.

“Let me see your arm first. His razor-sharp blue eyes flash.

I slowly drop my good arm in front of his face.

“The other one,” he demands.

It’s red and swollen, but I show him.

“That’s what I thought.” He nods at me. “Why shouldn’t I slaughter him?”

“We’ll call the police, Brock. I have proof! Proof that he’s responsible for the ruined oysters, the poisoning, everything. And that he hurt me... So don’t hit him. You don’t need more trouble.” I’m pleading now, pulling lightly on his shoulder.

His grip on Finch’s neck only tightens and he bares his teeth, snarling through them, “If her arm is broken, I’m taking both of yours off.”

I gasp as he pulls Finch up into a chokehold and pins him against the wall.

He isn’t listening to reason—is he?

While I’m trying to decide, Finch’s dangling hand sweeps low, toward his pocket and the same blunt metal object I caught a glimpse of earlier.

“Brock! He’s got a—” I yell out a warning, only to be cut off by the dark, bulky figure leaping in front of me.

“Nyet,” a rough voice calls loudly, swinging a gun against Finch’s head. “One move, I pull the trigger. Hand it over.”

*Fyodor?*

The driver reaches into Finch’s pocket and yanks out a silver handgun. Once he’s clear, Brock lifts Finch up and slams him against the wall again with a bone-rattling impact.

The wretched man deflates like a balloon, fear glinting in his eyes for the first time, his face turning more purple by the second. He claws at Brock’s hand, now fully locked around his throat.

“You heard the man,” Brock rasps. “One wrong move and we do this the easy way, without any cops or lawyers. We’ve got a solid case for self-defense.”

He eases his hand off Finch’s throat, just enough for him to take a few gasping breaths and say, “Y-you f-fuck! What...what the h-hell do you want?”

“Brock,” I whisper over his shoulder.

But he ignores me and shifts his body weight, dragging Finch out the door and into the hall with Fyodor close behind them.

Jenn turns pale the second she sees us coming. She's standing in the hall with a couple Oasis Springs staffers who stare back with glassy disbelief. One starts reaching for his phone.

"No calls," Fyodor says sharply, grabbing the man's hand and pushing it back against his side. "That goes for everyone. Understood?"

The staffers share a startled look and nod uncertainly.

Who can blame them?

Holy hell, I still can't believe what I'm seeing. I also don't understand where this is going as I trail after them, still rubbing my arm.

"Pippa, are you okay?" Jenn reaches for my arm at the last second.

"Yeah, I...it's a long story."

And I don't have time to tell her when I'm chasing Brock. She scurries along, her breath rattling behind me.

God, I hope Brock doesn't lose it.

I have no clue what he's doing until we walk through another door and stop behind a massive curtain. We must be right behind the stage in the main room.

"You've got two options," Brock whispers, jerking Finch around like a ragdoll. "Option A, ten minutes in a back alley with me. No weapons. You won't walk away with a single bone intact. Option B, you get on stage right now and you deliver a very goddamned different speech than the one you had planned."

"Are you mad?" Finch snarls hoarsely, still struggling to wrestle himself free.

"You're about to find out. Choose wisely." Brock just holds him up, this tall, lanky thing struggling like a puppet whose feet can't quite reach the ground.

Jenn and I are right beside them now, hanging back a few steps, utterly breathless as we watch them struggle.

Fyodor stands behind Finch like a bulldog, his gun back in its holder behind his jacket, seemingly waiting for the slightest reason to raise hell.

Eventually, the fight goes out of Finch. Brock sets him down again, still keeping one arm locked around his.

"Well?" Brock clips. "Say it!"

“I’ll... I’ll give the damn speech, Winthrope.” Finch rubs his throat.

Brock gives a satisfied nod and stomps over to the curtain, tearing it aside.

Blinding yellow light shines in my eyes.

A collective gasp fills the huge room.

I scurry back with Jenn, and we flatten ourselves against what was backstage a minute ago, but now hangs open for everyone to see.

With Finch still prisoner, Brock frog-marches him to the podium in the center, where a baffled older man in a tux steps aside.

“Change of plans, everyone,” Brock growls into the mic. “Mr. Finch couldn’t wait another five minutes to speak to you. Anything you’d like to say?”

Finch hangs his head as much as he can in Brock’s grip, a sickly sweat gleaming on his brow.

Brock clears his throat roughly and looks over the crowd.

“I’m sure you recognize me, everyone. Brock Winthrope, but this time I’m not up here as a winner. I’m simply introducing this year’s guest of honor. Give it up for Apollo Finch.”

There’s some awkward clapping and a lot of tense murmurs flying back and forth, at least a hundred people wondering what the heck is going on.

“Would you like to say a few words, Finch?” Brock asks into the microphone.

“No,” Finch whispers.

“Don’t be so modest, Mr. Finch. I’m *sure* you have important things to tell the people. Confessions that get right to the beating black heart of this industry,” Brock says, his eyes shimmering like blue knives in the blaring lights.

There’s a long pause before Finch dejectedly lowers his mouth to the mic and clears his throat.

“Oasis Springs was very competitive this year. Along the way, I’m afraid we did some things that were less than civil, or fair—”

“Or legal,” Brock adds.

“Or *legal*,” Finch echoes, tossing his head back with his nose pointed at the ceiling like a defiant child.

“Louder, damn you. I’m not sure the microphone caught that last part,” Brock says.

Finch sighs loudly. The microphone definitely catches that.

“Or legal!” he screams. The words boom through the speakers, bouncing through the awestruck room.

Then everything falls dead silent.

“Tell them. Tell them what you did,” Brock growls.

“I...I rigged it,” Finch snarls through clenched teeth. “I showered Winthrop resorts with bad reviews. I swapped out the oysters in Seattle. I...I made over a hundred people sick so I could *win*.”

A few breathless gasps roll through the crowd before that crushing silence returns.

I rock back in disbelief.

Brock may have just done the impossible.

Apollo Finch is one arrogant, ruthless grade A asshole, and I never imagined he’d publicly confess to anything.

But as Finch looks back at him, Brock releases him with a shove, throwing him aside.

“Get off the stage.”

I watch Finch walk to the side, where Fyo intercepts him, grabbing his arm.

“We’ll wait together, Mr. Finch,” I hear the Russian say.

“What? But I gave him what he wanted! You can’t detain me.”

“I can’t, but the police will be here in minutes. And you just confessed to a crime.”

I’m expecting a struggle, but no.

A defeated Finch shoves his face in his hands and groans, then lets Fyo lead him away.

Beyond the stage, the murmurs are rising, frantic questions flying back and forth.

I swallow hard.

Brock taps the microphone until he has the crowd’s attention. “Now that the cheat is gone, I have something else I need to say.” He pauses.

*Wait, what’s he doing now? Damage control?*

“There’s an ugly side to this industry, and you’ve just seen the worst of it. I think we all know that. We all get caught up in the same rat race, and it makes us unspeakable jackasses, but that’s not the ugliness I want to focus on.”



I inhale sharply, holding it in.

*Brock, no!*

*I know you're still in shock. It's been a weird day for everyone, but this is so not the place to vent.*

"Brock," I whisper, knowing he can't hear me back here.

I just wish he'd let go, sit down, and breathe.

Before he says anything he'll regret.

"I'm not immune," he continues. "The same ugly side of this industry—the same perfectionism, the same ruthless competition, the same worries over reputation—that made Apollo Finch do what he did consumed me for a while. It chewed me to pieces.

"I forgot the hospitable in hospitality. I neglected the art of service. Worst of all, I lost the magic of travel—the joy of new experiences and the connections from sharing them with someone else—and the price was my own heart." He breathes in before he looks over his shoulder at me and then turns back to the mic. "Until it happened. An angel came down and gave me a sorely needed kick in the ass."

My heart stalls.

He turns to me again, but he's still half facing the audience.

Is he really talking about me? Here? *In public?*

My heart restarts with a flutter.

His piercing blue eyes meet mine with an urgency like they'll never let go.

"This isn't about me, or that damn award, folks. This is about Miss Piper Renee. You're beautiful and brilliant. You always find the silver lining. You're the most caring woman I know, and the most talented strategist who's ever worked for me. And when I thought someone might hurt you to get even with me, I lashed out. I lost my head. The thought of seeing you hurt—" He shakes his head. "Piper, I couldn't. I can't. I love you too much, and I'd rather make sure you know it than stand here collecting a thousand of these dumb awards."

Whoa.

My ears are ringing.

Did he really just say—

My heart takes over, overriding my other senses.

I blink back tears as I totter toward him on legs half turned to jelly.

He isn't even talking to the crowd anymore, who have halfway burst into their own startled conversations.

"Piper, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have let you go even for one day." He reaches out and captures my hand.

All the butterflies in the universe swarm my belly, tickling me until I'm wearing the biggest smile of my life.

"Sunshine, if you'll have me, that's a mistake I'll never make twice," he rumbles. "I'm sorry it's taken me this long to find a way to apologize—to tell you the truth—and I won't let you go again. I love Winthrop and this business, but not with my all. Not when my whole heart belongs to you. Piper, I fucking love you completely and I always will."

*Shredded.*

A tear runs down my face. Since I can't speak, I just fall forward, and he catches me.

His arms close around me.

I would hug him too—hold him forever—but I can't. I'm floating away.

Especially when his lips close over mine.

The audience breaks into applause.

This kiss tastes better than the hundred desperate fever dream kisses I've had since the day I walked out of his house.

And he only ends it to lead me off the stage and into the hallway behind us, where he pushes me against the wall.

"Let me see your arm," he orders, breathing so raggedly.

I shudder as I hold it up.

It's sweet that he cares, but this banged-up arm is the last thing on my mind.

His lips left me totally spellbound.

"Swollen. Bruised," he murmurs, gently squeezing down the length of it. "I'm glad you're okay, but fuck. I never should've let this happen."

"I'm not okay, Brock," I whisper. "I'm pretty sure I'll die if you don't kiss me again."

My eyes haven't left his lips this whole time.

His lips twist into a smile as he leans in closer.

"Goddamn, I love you." His lips brush mine, barely holding back just to say, "I love you so much, Sunshine. Never leave me again. I'll do my best not to be a jackass. Promise me."

“I promise,” I manage, my heart pounding.

This cozy warmth floods me, tingling from my fingers to my toes.

His arms wrap around my waist and he moves in.

His tongue flicks against my lips, claiming and so, so hot.

I open my mouth, savoring the way he caresses me with every movement.

This kiss feels like coming home.

And he kisses me until I can't think.

When he pulls away, leaving us both breathless, he tucks my head against his chest, stroking my hair.

“I'm sorry as hell I have to ask, but I need to know. What did you want?” he asks.

“Come again?”

“Your note. You said I never gave you the one thing you wanted. Whatever it is, it's yours.”

Butterflies go bursting out of me again.

*This man.*

*This wonderful, strong, adorably clueless lunk of a man.*

“You really don't know? Brock, you just gave it to me. And it wasn't a penguin, as cool as that was,” I giggle, breathing him in.

“I did?” His brows knit together.

“Yes! Just now.”

“But I didn't give you anything. Just made a big speech.”

I'm laughing again as I kiss him and say, “That speech was everything. I loved it and I love you, Brock.”

He's about to move in for another kiss, but Jenn comes flying toward us.

“Sorry, guys! But they just arrested Finch and it took me a few minutes to rip myself away from the craziness.” Her eyes flick to me and then Brock. “Um, are you two okay?”

“Never better,” I say sincerely. My eyes never leave Brock's.

“Sooo, not to interrupt the big victory party but...shouldn't we reassure everyone in Seattle? I know that's kinda Keenan's job, but...”

He nods slowly.

“Good call, Miss Landers. You'll have a ride home with us this evening on my jet.”

“Oh, good.” She looks at me again. “Will I see you at work Monday, Pippa?”

“No,” Brock answers. “We’ll both be taking a few days off. Sweetheart, do you still work for me?”

I stare at him slowly, biting back a smile. “I guess that’s up to you.”

He shakes his head. “No, ma’am. It was always your choice. If you’re back, though, you’re not starting work until next week.”

I giggle, leaning into him. “Because—”

“Yeah. You’ll be busy as hell.” His mouth takes mine again and leaves me dizzy.

I barely hear Jenn call back a weak, “Behave, you crazies!”

When I look up again, she’s gone, and so is the entire rest of the world.



## PHOTO FINISH (BROCK)



*Two Weeks Later*

“**Y**ou’re still going to be named in the lawsuits,” Price, the attorney, says. “But I don’t think you’ll get much for damages, considering the question of who’s responsible.”

That makes no damn sense.

It could be because my brain is still trapped in the last week, where I went home with Piper and practically chained her to my bed. When I wasn’t buried inside her, she was dozing in my arms, finally and forever home.

“If Piper hadn’t caught him and found the evidence, he would have gutted my entire business. Why aren’t we getting damages?” I wonder if I need a new Legal chief.

“Apollo Finch’s net worth was nowhere close to what he claimed, and it’s a criminal matter now. Indemnification will wipe him out. The mountain of suits he’s facing makes yours look like Everest next to a molehill.”

“Seek damages anyway. If he has so much as a rusted out shitbox car, I’m taking it. Assuming he ever gets out on parole...”

“Are you sure that’s how you want to play this, Chief?” Keenan asks. “You’re not usually so—”

“Vindictive? Damn right, I am. If I hadn’t shown up when I did, he would have broken Piper’s arm, maybe worse. If he ever owns anything

again, it's *hers*."

Keenan grins. "I thought you said *you* were taking it."

I glare at him.

He laughs. "It never gets old."

Price clears his throat, directing our attention back to him. "Rest assured, Mr. Finch will be facing serious time. Possibly a life sentence. Between the recording Piper got and the confession you pulled out of him on public record, he may well face terrorism charges. Of course, I've filed the assault charges for Miss Renee as well."

I try not to grit my teeth.

The attorney looks at me.

"That shit still rattles me. I should have been there sooner—"

"Boss, you didn't know she came to lock horns with your archnemesis." Keenan shrugs. "The girl has guts. But I have to admit, you saved her. You've got nothing to cry about except the missing cape."

I snort, wishing I could muster up the energy to stare him down again.

Price takes the hint, packs up his briefcase, and walks out a minute later.

"How are the reviews coming, anyway?"

"Most of our properties are coming back to life," Keenan says. "And since we had a proven criminal incident in Seattle, I've reached out to the review platforms to remove the one stars related to the oyster meltdown. We've got a ways to go, but the influencers are doing their thing. Marketing has this."

"We're in good shape then," I say, almost with a hint of disbelief.

He nods. "We are."

I look at him. "Is my plan crazy? Be honest."

"The traveling with Piper for three months part or the working remotely part?"

"The second."

He laughs. "Well, this place won't fall apart without you, and I'll still be here. The vibe on other floors is mostly relief. Plus, they loved the whole romance hero finish in Portland. So, yeah, we'll be fine. I mean, you'll still be around yelling at people—just over video. Are you sure you want to go gallivanting off with your girl that long, though?"

"I've never wanted anything more," I say sincerely.

He smiles without a hint of his usual smart-assery for once.

“Cupid got you good, huh? Never thought I’d see the day. Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

I’m about to tell him where I hope he goes when my office door opens.

A blond drink of radiance sails into the room, stealing my soul like she does every day.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were in a meeting...”

“Not anymore. It’s almost time for the party, isn’t it? Let’s go.”

Her cheeks redden around her smile, and dammit, I can’t help but grin back.

As I push out my chair and she bounces into my arms, I don’t even care about Keenan’s smug smile.

“I’ll go on ahead of you guys and scope it out to make sure they’re ready. This is just as much an 'our butts are saved' bash as it is a going away party.” Keenan walks out the door, leaving us alone.

Finally.

“I missed you,” I say, kissing the top of Piper’s head.

“What? You saw me a few hours ago.” She giggles.

“And I can’t stand it when you’re not around. That’s why we’re doing this.”

“Yeah. I love you.”

She burrows into me like the rare, beautiful creature she is, her warm breath tingling on my neck.

Call me hopelessly addicted.

I don’t care.

No matter how many evenings we share in front of the fireplace with Andy, no matter how many stolen kisses, no matter how many nights blur by in fits of gasping passion, it’s never enough.

“Love you, too.” I close my arms around her possessively.

We fall into another sticky kiss that strokes my dick hard before I rip myself away.

“We should go.” She gently taps my chest. “Your staff put a ton of work into this thing for us. We have to show up.”

Together, we take the elevator down to the large conference room that’s been decorated with regional themes from everywhere we have Winthrope properties. Each table has a small game and its own food booth.



Piper heads for France and picks up a bowl of cremé brulee. I follow her.

“How did I know you’d go for the best dessert country first?” I take a shot of brandy.

“Pippy, you’re here!” Maisy comes bounding in with her dad behind her.

Piper hugs her little sister while I shake hands with her old man. Damn, he’s looking better, and I’m glad I’m part of the reason why.

“I’m so glad you guys came! It feels weird not seeing you every day,” Piper says.

She’s been staying with me ever since we got back from the conference. I’m not the least bit sorry.

“You’ll have to get used to it when we’re in Europe for three months,” I say, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“Livin’ the dream!” Maisy agrees. Genuine happiness and maybe a spark of jealousy twinkles in her eyes.

“I’ll take you somewhere for winter break, Mais. I promise,” Piper tells her sister.

“About this European getaway,” Harold says, clearing his throat. “I trust you plan to take care of my daughter, Winthrop?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

We lock eyes.

I also know damn well I’m planning to ruin her every night and probably most mornings too, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Don’t let her out of your sight unless she’s with your grandfolks,” he says, frowning like she’s fifteen and going off on a band trip for the first time.

Piper throws her head back and laughs.

“Dad, don’t encourage him. He’s already crazy enough. I’ve traveled alone plenty of times.”

“Yeah, well, that was *before* Pat Bateman tried to break your arm. You’re lucky he’s in custody, or I’d put him somewhere worse, let me tell you.” He tugs on his flannel sleeve, rolling his fist. “But I reckon he’s proven he can keep you safe, honey.”

“I’ll take care of her, Harold. Don’t worry.” I drape a protective arm around Piper, drawing her closer.

“I’m more worried about who’s taking care of you. Don’t forget your follow-up next week,” Piper says.

“Oh, I’ll be fine with Maisy,” her dad fusses. “I keep telling you, I don’t feel the least bit sick anymore. Had to take up night walks just to burn off all this energy. You just won’t believe me.”

“I’ll keep him entertained, guys.” Maisy smiles.

Then Jenn Landers appears at our side. “Sorry I’m late! Just got off a phone call with a new influencer for the Chicago property. It’s that guy you wanted months ago who wouldn’t give us the time of day.”

I smile, loving how they’re all crawling back now that the truth is out.

Jenn glances at the small bowl in Piper’s hand and beams. “...is that *crémé brulée*?”

Piper nods. “French station.”

Jenn darts behind us, grabs her own dessert, and moves beside Piper again.

“I’m so pumped about your big TikTok relaunch! Especially now that you’re focusing on places I might actually be able to afford. *Someday*,” she adds.

“Travel should be for everyone. I hope it’s a hit,” Piper says.

I bend down and grab her hand, bringing it to my lips. “I need to say some goodbyes. I’ll be back.”

She smiles up at me as we part ways.

I make it quick, taking my compliments in stride and ensuring all the departments are in good hands. Then I track down Keenan and we run through the logistics one more time.

“Enough already! Have I ever let you down?” he asks, adjusting his glasses.

“No,” I say.

“Right. We’ve got this. The only thing that changes is you conferencing me in more often—and hopefully, you’ll be in a better mood because you’re getting laid.”

I glance around the room and back at my dumbass assistant. “Watch your mouth. We’re in a room full of people.”

Keenan laughs. “Romeo, you’re taking her away for three months. Nobody thinks you’re just going to hold hands. Lighten up on the Victorian England stuff.” He takes a drink of his seltzer.

“She’s a lady,” I growl back.

This time when he laughs louder, he loses a spill of water down his shirt.

“Ugh, maybe it is Victorian England.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t spray me.” I shake my head. “Take care. I have to find my girl.”

She’s still talking to Jennifer and Maisy and she’s cuter than ever, waving her hands around as she tells them about her plans to drag me all over Europe.

“Sunshine?” I offer her my arm.

Her eyes sparkle like green gems when she looks up.

Goddamn, will she always blush like that every time she looks at me?

I hope so as she takes my arm.

“They’re getting Andy on the plane now and everyone’s waiting. We should go.”

She hugs her dad and the kid one more time before I lead her out of the building to the SUV waiting at the curb.

Fyo holds the door open for us. We share a rare handshake.

“Thank you again. For everything,” I say.

“Boss, seeing your face like this is all the thanks I need,” he says.

“Like what?” I demand, touching my face.

He nods at the window. I catch my reflection in the tinted glass. I’m glowing too damned much to deny it.

He’s right—and it’s entirely Piper Renee’s fault.

“Fill me in on this new travel channel,” I demand once we’re in the car.

“Kiss me first.”

“Gladly.” With a low growl, I bring her lips to mine.

She explores my mouth with her tongue.

I skim my fingers down her sides, loving how she gasps and hating that I need to pull my hand the fuck away before I throw her down in the back of this car.

“Travel channel,” I clip. “Tell me right now.”

“Okay, well...” She laughs, a glorious sound that will never get old. “I’m shifting focus to simple places and secret treasures that don’t necessarily cost much to enjoy. Historical markers, parks, that sort of thing.”

“Everything worth seeing. That’s good for business,” I say, moving in to inhale her again.

Smiling, she pushes at me playfully. “That’s good for the soul, Brock. Not everybody who checks out my videos needs a fancy-schmancy Winthrope resort. A cheap AirBnB will do just as nicely.”

“I like how you think, Piper Renee. Just as long as I get to keep this pretty little head,” I whisper, pinning her to my shoulder.

“Lucky you, it’s always been yours.”



PIPER PLANNED out most of this trip, but we’ve had to compromise between the small bed and breakfasts and homey inns she loves and staying in Winthrope properties.

Mostly so I can cross-check to make sure they’re running as smoothly as Keenan claims.

God help me, I won’t be caught with my pants down again.

And Venice had to be the Winthrope Italia.

I insisted, if only so we could have this moment, standing on the private balcony with the silvery water sparkling under the full moon with my woman in my arms.

“Up there. Jupiter again,” I say, pointing at the bright star hanging over the lazy lights from ships below.

“Space dork,” she sasses back, wriggling in my arms.

I lean down and kiss her neck. “Are you enjoying our trip so far?”

“How is that a question?” She turns to look at me with a smile wider than her face. “This place is magical, but it wouldn’t be nearly as great without you.”

I chuckle, tilting her head back for a proper deep kiss.

“I’m feeling more than magic with you, woman. You’ve got me downright bewitched,” I admit.

She beams like the sun.

“That sounds like a cheesy pickup line...but I like it.”

I kiss her again to show how serious I am.

“Honest to God truth. But is it working?”

She laughs louder. “You think you still need a line? Um...”

“Need to woo you somehow,” I whisper, nipping at her ear. “You’re a woman of high class and higher standards, Miss Renee. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She twines her arms and legs around me, spinning around with this moonstruck look on her face.

“What? Don’t tell me you’re dizzy?”

“Worse,” she says, batting her eyes. “Sometimes I think you’re just too good to be true.”

Goddamn, how is this my life now?

How is this my woman?

I bring her closer, lifting her up—*after that, how can I not?*—and carry her inside, shutting the door behind us.

Her lips brush mine the second we’re inside and I bask in her heated look.

“Since the boy’s down for the night... I have ideas,” she whispers.

I glance at the corner. Andy snoozes in the dog bed by the crackling fireplace, exhausted from his first international trip in ages.

I wondered if he’d hold up okay, but when the vet cleared it with some extra allergy meds, we couldn’t leave him. He spent the day mapping Venice with his nose and scattering birds in damn near every park.

“What ideas?” I growl, smiling as I trace the seam of her lips with my tongue.

She parts her mouth, and our tongues meet deliciously.

Tonight, she tastes like spun silk, creamy and incredible and no matter how greedily I drink her in, it’s never enough to leave me sated.

My cock jerks in my pants.

Her arms slide down my neck to my shirt, and she goes to work on the buttons, popping one at a time.

Soon, I’m tumbling her onto the bed with my shirt hanging open, every bit the starving beast I’m sure I resemble.

She sits on her knees, her small hands pulling my shirt open more.

Then she pushes a hand down my chest, stroking a slow, neat line to my slacks. The button above the zipper opens.

I’m fucking steel as the zipper follows and my pants drop.

The way she sucks at her bottom lip cuts me open.

“Piper, fuck,” I whisper, moving my hand over hers.

She traces the edge of my boxers with her fingertip and hooks her thumbs just inside the waistband.

Almost heaven.

*Almost.*

I let out a sigh, fighting the imminent feeling of her lips wrapped around me.

“Not yet,” I grind out, grabbing her hand.

“No?” She stares up at me.

When she stops moving, my hands roam her sides. I grab fistfuls of the cotton sundress hanging off her and hoist it over her head.

She’s bare underneath like I know she’s been since dinner.

No bra.

No panties.

No shame.

Just Piper at her sexiest, and my eyes burn like coals when I see her naked glory.

“It’s a crime,” I whisper, my eyes searching hers. “How can you be this fucking stunning?”

“If it’s a crime...” she whispers shyly. “Maybe you should stop me.”

*Gladly.*

I run my hand from her collarbone down the gap between her breast, over her abdomen and belly button to her waist.

“You had every man in the city staring today. I almost caused an international incident a few times,” I tell her.

“So jealous.” She giggles, but her eyes smolder, too serious to ignore.

“Do you know what you do to me?” I demand.

A rhetorical question I’ll soon answer in punishing strokes and snarling kisses.

I shove my boxers the rest of the way off and climb into bed with her, pushing her down until she’s flattened. My body eclipses hers in the soft orange light.

We break into another fit of kisses, of burning fingers, of flaring gasps and teeth hellbent on finding their mark.

Her little hand wraps around my cock and strokes my lust to new heights.

I respond, pushing my fingers deep inside her, teasing that spot on her wall that takes her to pieces, but holding back until she obeys.

“Ride my hand, Sunshine. Fucking go.”

She tries to hold back—the little minx—fighting me with her tongue sweeping up my throat.

And she marks me too, sucking at my neck, tempting me to flip her over and tan her lush little ass red.

But I need her to come for me first.

I need her undone.

I need her so wet and ready and helpless we’ll both be ruined when I slide into her.

So I wrap my free arm around her and pin her down, holding her against the mattress as I quicken my strokes, grinding my thumb against her clit.

Her moans sharpen, telling me I’ve done the job.

“Brock!” Her eyes pinch shut as she comes to the edge. “Brock, I just —”

“Hush. You just light the fuck up for me, Sunshine. Come.”

The way her pussy tenses around my fingers is almost too much before she explodes, bucking back at my hand, grinding out her pleasure through clenched teeth.

This woman is so much more than stunning.

When she’s in rapture, she’s a fucking masterpiece.

I barely stop to let her breathe when it’s over, pulling her body over mine after I’m flat on the bed. I drape her small limbs over me, loving her weight and the sweat-slicked heat of her skin.

Tangling her hair in my fist, I tilt her head back, just enough to fuse her mouth with mine.

“Legs open,” I whisper as I break away. “Follow me.”

And she does as I grab my cock and slowly push inside her.

Her velvet hugs me so intensely there’s a second where I’m afraid I’ll blow too fast.

Then we find our rhythm, her body rising and falling with mine, riding me so sweetly I feel like a savage prick for chaining this angel to earth.

She’s my angel, though.

My sunshine.

My exquisite little toy with every whimper, every brush of skin, every moan spilling out of her as I rock us closer to ecstasy.

Our movements turn frenzied.

She reaches back and claws at me, too well fucked for words, and I'm close behind her with a growl exploding up my throat.

Goddamn.

"Pippa, *go*. Go, baby girl, I'm with you. I'm—"

I never finish that thought.

Not with words.

My hips crash against hers one more time, burying my cock so deep her pussy strokes my whole length.

My spine ignites.

Pressure explodes at the base of my balls, and my entire universe collapses into a raging fireball.

I'm more animal than man when I'm filling her, grinding against her ass, feeling her tighten around every inch of me as her climax hits.

Fuck, this is it.

Greedy and aggressive and so fucking crazed.

This is what she does to me, and what I know she'll always do.

This lick of sunshine turns me inside out until I'm roaring, coming so hard I wonder if I'll find pieces of myself blown across the room later.

When it's over and we're panting together like the last distant rolling thunder after a heat storm, I deepen our kiss, staying inside her.

I'm so damn hard we wind up going again a few minutes later.

The night is still young.

Hours pass with touching, teasing, caressing.

It's tender and beautiful. Rough and relentless. Wicked and divine.

All the contrasts, all the flavors of life I never imagined before Piper struck me like a thunderbolt.

When I wake up late the next morning, I find her fully dressed and sitting at the table in our kitchenette. There are several plates with silver covers in front of her.

She smiles at me.

"Breakfast just came, lazy bones. Hurry up and eat or we'll be late for the art tour."

Andy pounces on me in agreement, yipping loudly in my ear.



“Oof. For a cocktail weenie, you don’t know your own strength,” I mutter, scratching behind his ears as I push him away and sit up.

“You might want to hurry,” she says, pulling the covers off the food. “He’s trying to steal your bacon.”

“Andy!”

I march over, slinging myself into the chair. I throw him a piece of meat after he flops down so we can eat our food in peace.

Even with the day’s rocky start, she’s perfection incarnate with her easygoing smiles. I watch her as we eat with the sunshine spilling through the blinds, turning her hair to spun gold.

Dammit, yeah.

My mind is made up.

If I had any lingering doubts about what’s coming, they’ve just disappeared in a glorious burst of morning.



WITH FYO TAKING Andy for a walk, we sail through a canal, gondola spotting.

“Look, there’s another one!” Piper points to a fork in the canal, where another long ship lazily glides through the water.

She points her phone, filming until it passes out of view.

“You win. I think you’ve found twenty,” I say.

Our gondola pulls to the side a short while later. I pay the guide, get out, and help my girl disembark.

“That was awesome! Where to next?” she asks.

“A hidden treasure for your channel,” I tell her.

“Cool! Um, what is it?”

“You’ll see when we get there.” We walk through the streets, hand in hand, until we’re heading up to San Maurizio.

I hope this is the right place. I thought she was less likely to know about this one.

“Another church?” she asks as we walk up to the gorgeous old building. “It’s beautiful, but I think it’s going to be hard to outshine the basilica.”

“It’s the local music museum with a special Vivaldi exhibit,” I say, loving how her eyes light up.

“Wow! And it’s free? I looked all over for free museums before we came and didn’t know Venice had any.”

“There aren’t many. Fortunately, lots of little secrets turn up when you own a black card and use the concierge.” I hold the door open for her. “They say the instruments date back to the seventeenth century. Go nerd your little heart out.”

She giggles. “Amazing! It’s open, though, right? How come no one else is here?”

“It’s a hidden gem, remember?” I try to keep a straight face.

“And it’s cool to record here?”

I shrug, looking around. “No sign that says not to.”

She makes a satisfied sound and pulls her phone out, sweeping the main room. “Hey-o, this is Pippa and we’ve stumbled on a Venetian gem!” She pans the phone out to catch my face. “That’s my man, Brock. Isn’t he cute when he smiles?”

I give her my grumpiest look.

“We’re in Venice, Italy, at—” Her voice goes up like she’s asking a question.

“Il Museo Della Musica,” I tell her.

“Il Museo Della Musica!” she repeats.

“Sunshine, why don’t you use your tripod? Might be easier.”

“Oh, I didn’t bring it. But with the conversation I’ll have to edit out, I guess I should just start over.”

“I put your tripod in your purse,” I say.

“You didn’t, right? Because that would make you the best boyfriend ever.”

*Not for long. I hope,* I think to myself, biting back a smile.

She reaches in her purse and pulls out the small folded metal stick with a massive smile.

While she’s distracted setting her up stuff, I see my chance.

I pull the tiny grey box out of my pocket and drop to one knee, waiting.

Waiting.

And waiting some more.

A frigging eternity passes before she turns around.

“Brock? Oh my God, what—what *are* you doing?” When it hits her, she gasps.

“Setting the world right side up,” I tell her.

“W-why?” she stammers, tears already welling in her eyes.

“Because. Some idiot overbooked my room in Lanai one night, and I had a really awkward meeting with a sun angel. After one day trying to fix my mistakes, I already knew she was special.” I pause, clearing my throat. “I expected it to be a one-time deal. But she fell back in my life and ran off with my heart. Piper, you’ve always been the light of my destiny and my morning star. Because I’m a greedy prick, I want to keep you. I want to wake up with you every single day. I want to travel the whole world and make love on every continent, and then I want to come home and do it all over again. And we both know there’s only one way that happens.”

I flick the velvet box open with my thumb, revealing an antique English wedding ring.

It’s all ornate gold with a blue diamond in the center, surrounded by a halo of more white diamonds.

“Oh, wow,” she breathes, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Brock, wow.”

My heart catches.

I need an answer.

“Is that a yes?” I whisper.

She answers by closing the space between us, dropping her hands to my shoulders, and nodding until her forehead rests on mine.

“God, yes. Now will you stand up and kiss me?”

“With pleasure.”

First, I take the ring from the box and grab her left hand.

She’s trembling as I slide the ring on her finger, bring it to my mouth, and kiss what’ll always be mine.

“Woman, it’s done. We’re in this forever.” I can barely get the words out around the damnable lump in my throat.

Before I stand, she kneels down and kisses me with her all.

I don’t know how long I’m on the floor with her, kissing my bride-to-be before a very loud throat clears. It startles Piper, too, and she jumps.

There’s a frowning priest behind us with his arms folded.

“Sorry, I had to borrow this place. I’m marrying her,” I say in broken Italian, grabbing Piper’s hand and holding up the ring as proof.

He throws back sharp words.

My Italian is shit, but I understand enough to know we’re being kicked out. On the way, I pull out a wad of US dollars and Euros and leave them in the collection box.

Piper grabs her phone and tripod, giggling the whole time. She doesn’t even care that she barely got any shots.

I lead her to the door and both of us burst into laughter.

“Good thing I took a few shots upfront! That’s one hidden treasure we won’t be capturing again.”

We tumble outside in the golden light, laughing and kissing, and I wonder how she can be so clueless.

I’ve got my hidden treasure, and I’ll be holding on to her with all my might.



## COBBLESTONE ROAD (PIPER)



*Eight Months Later*

“Wow!” Maisy whispers for the dozenth time. “Pippy, when you promised to take me to Europe, I didn’t think we’d be staying in a castle!”

She bounces up and down on the balls of her feet.

“It’s technically not a castle. Just an old English estate,” I say.

Honestly, though, she’s right to wonder with its soaring towers and turrets and beautifully archaic stone walls.

This house is huge and historic and intimidating even for me, and I’ve been here before. When we did the three-month tour, his grandparents hosted us.

English roses climb the iron gate that protects it from the modern world.

“Estate? So, he *is* Mr. Darcy,” Maisy says with a laugh. “Don’t even try to deny it.”

“Better. He’s just Brock.” I smile because the man I’m about to spend forever with is never 'just' anything.

“Seriously, lady. How did you get so lucky? You fell facedown in a fairy tale!” Jenn says, spinning around and taking in the mudroom.

I laugh. “Guys, come on. You know who Brock’s grandparents are and I don’t just mean rich. They’re wonderful people. It’s no big deal, really.”

Actually, it's a huge deal.

I'm not even sure Dad would have felt comfortable with a Winthrop Seattle wedding, and this place puts every breathtaking resort they own to shame.

I glance around in awe as we head for the main door. The courtyard is covered with flowers. Fragrant bursts of color pop everywhere, perfuming the spring air as we walk up broad brownstone stairs to the house.

I knock on the door.

"Miss Renee, how are you?" The butler answers a second later.

"Of course, there's a butler!" Jenn whispers with a laugh.

"Splendid, Geoffrey. How are you?"

"Fine, indeed. I'll let Mr. Winthrop know you've arrived."

"I'm aware. Thanks." Brock appears in a silver suit right behind him and reminds me he's learned a few manners.

His suit fits his sculpted bod like a glove over a workman's hand.

And he thieves my breath away, even before his piercing blue gaze meets my eyes. "Welcome back, Sunshine. It's been too dark around here."

I smile, blushing as I step toward him.

Jenn and Maisy exchange a look and trail in behind us.

They stop when they hear a skittering sound rapidly flying toward us.

Andy's bark sounds about a second before he comes tearing around the corner. He flies in from a long hallway and darts between the butler's legs.

Poor Geoffrey almost stumbles over the dog's long body. Andy barks some more as he untangles himself and marches up to my feet.

He licks my shoe and sits at attention, his little dark eyes brimming with excitement.

"Hi, hot dog. I missed you." I scoop up all thirty-something pounds of pup, holding him like the overgrown baby he is.

Brock closes the space between us, drapes an arm around me, and moves me to his side so he can see everyone else.

His eyes light up when he sees who's behind Maisy and Jenn.

"How was your trip over the pond, Mr. Renee?"

"Too damn long. Makes you wonder why they ever retired the Concord. But since you're marrying my little girl, you can start calling me Harold."

They lock hands and exchange smiles, melting into their own conversation.

Later, when we sit down for dinner, Maisy looks at the silverware beside her plate.

“That’s...a lot of forks and knives. Why do I have so many again?” She picks up the fish knife and holds it up. “And why do I have a scalpel?”

Brock chuckles.

“It’s a fish knife,” I say.

“Huh. That’s no fish knife I’ve ever seen,” Dad grumps.

I’m really worried about how this is going when Mrs. Winthrop says, “You know what? I’m exhausted with these stuffy formal dinners. We’re supposed to be having fun!”

The maid stops pouring wine in her glass and looks appalled.

Mrs. Winthrop meets her eyes. “Why don’t we do drinks in the family room?”

“The cook won’t be prepared, ma’am,” the maid says.

Mrs. Winthrop stands.

“Oh, I’ll help her. It shouldn’t take long to throw together sandwiches from the ham. We have a pile of cakes too. Since we’re skipping the formalities, why don’t we go straight to dessert?”

“Ha, I knew you folks knew how to cut loose. Always wanted to eat my weight in sweets in a castle,” Dad says.

Everybody laughs.

The tea dinner in the family room is a dream. It’s sandwiches, chips, and several heaping cakes and fruit pies that shame every bakery I’ve ever visited.

Even better, everyone actually relaxes. Comfortable conversations and easy laughs fly around the room.

*Crisis averted.*

Brock wraps an arm around me as I breathe a sigh of relief. We turn back to the newcomers sitting across from us, a tall couple who look like casual royalty.

Meeting Brock’s parents feels less awkward than I expected.

Dalton and Katherine Winthrop are—something, all right. Very modern, highly educated, quick to boast about their travels and their charity work, and weirdly indifferent to the fact that their son has his wedding tomorrow.



I get why he's closer to his grandparents. Still, they're not bad people, and I'm pumped that I'm getting two awesome new grandparents out of this deal.

The evening draws on with drinks flowing. Ross Winthrop adds another log to the crackling fire in a hearth that looks like the mouth of a cave.

And every time Brock gets up to refill our glasses—and sneak in a break from his parents—he steals quiet kisses that tell me just how grateful he is that our knots are about to be permanently tied.

After everyone fades off to their rooms for the night in the massive house, I sneak into Brock's room.

"What are you doing here?" He leans down and kisses me. "Tomorrow's the big day. It's tradition not to see each other overnight."

"New tradition—I don't go into my wedding missing you like mad," I say with a laugh. "I love your grandma, by the way. She totally saved the day."

He grins. "She's an amazing hostess and a better human being. Is that all you came to tell me?"

"No. I came for my kiss."

He gently grabs my neck and tilts my face, pulling my mouth to his.

*Fireworks.*

As long as I live and whatever we become, I will never, ever get sick of tasting his growl.

"Lights out, Sunshine. We have a big day tomorrow."



I'M NOT sure where dreams end and real life begins.

Here I am, wearing a dress that's been passed down through the Winthrop's family since Queen Victoria reigned. It's a striking old-world mix of champagne and blue silk. A sleeveless dress with a fitted bodice and floor-length silk. A clasped jewel button holds it together just below my breasts, and ribbons flow from the elbow of the sleeve to the floor.

They pulled off a minor miracle modifying it to fit my modern body.

And I feel like my best self as I carry a heavy bouquet of roses that cascades out of my hands.

“Jesus. They have a chapel in their castle. Now I’ve seen everything,” Dad says, shaking his head.

“It’s a big house, Dad.”

“With a *chapel*.”

“With a chapel,” I agree.

“Chapel or not, it isn’t close to how pretty you are today, Pippa,” he says, looking me over. “That man ought to get down on his knees and thank God you said yes.”

I smile so wide it hurts.

“We’re both grateful. You look pretty sharp yourself.”

I’ve actually never seen him in a tux before. I can probably count on one hand the few times he ever showed up in a secondhand suit when I was young.

“Yeah, well, if I’m gonna be stuffed into a monkey suit, at least it’s a *nice* one. Are you ready, though?” he asks, his eyes twinkling.

I nod heavily.

“I think so. Are you?”

“No. I never met a man who’s ready to give up his oldest daughter, but hell. He’s a good man, so it could be a lot worse. He’s the kind of fella I always hoped you’d find someday.”

We share a quick hug before we come to a stop in front of the huge door.

Then we share a look, I nod, and he knocks and takes my arm.

The heavy wood arched door with a frosted glass window opens with a soaring swell of music behind it.

*Ready or not, here we go.*

Suddenly, I’m walking into every girl’s fantasy.

A gorgeous chapel with old dark pews stuffed with people.

Everyone I love raking me with happy looks. Jenn and Maisy both look like they’re about to explode on the spot. Vanessa and AJ wave to us, who I met just yesterday, two more lovely people who’ll always be in our lives.

Marvelous stained glass and blue walls that fade into a darker blue behind the altar. It’s painted with gold stars to mimic the night sky.

But nothing could ever be more beautiful than the god just a few more paces ahead.

Brock turns to look at me from his place at the altar.

My breath drops out of me so fast I don't know how I'm still moving.

He looks immaculate in a black tux with a silver vest and bow tie.

Maisy's wrong. He's not Mr. Darcy.

He's Prince freaking Winthrop, and soon, he's all mine.

Dad walks me past a couple empty pews near the front covered in fresh roses.

My eyes flick back at Maisy for a second, and she gives me a teary grin, holding up her phone, diligently filming for my travel channel.

I smile back at her. Winthrop International thought the wedding would be good PR, and so did I, but we didn't want to turn it into a circus.

Since micro-weddings are all the rage now, I told him I was giving myself the exclusive.

The music swells louder and my entire world condenses into one striking man.

We stop and Dad places my hand in Brock's.

"She's yours now. Treat her like gold," he says.

"I will," Brock promises, and they embrace quickly.

I can't believe how everything blurs by in a haze of happy words and quiet vows.

You know how these ceremonies go.

Ours might be a little grander and prettier than most—especially when Takishido the penguin comes waddling up as ring bearer to everyone's delight. But large exotic birds aside, it's the same as every happy wedding.

Big promises.

Bigger hearts.

And when the priest gives permission, the biggest toe-curling kiss of my life that makes our first starry kiss in Lanai feel like a chaste peck.

Holy hell, I'm *that* girl now.

The girl who found herself a man who will always give her everything.

When we finally break away and Brock leads me through the roaring crowd—complete with a honking penguin flapping his flippers—Mrs. Winthrop welcomes us to the terrace. I'm glad to have a minute alone with my new husband.

“Give me more, Mr. Winthrope. Everything you couldn’t in front of the peanut gallery,” I whisper.

Smiling, he brushes his lips to mine.

“Married for three minutes and you’re already high-maintenance,” he growls, digging his teeth into my bottom lip. “Patience, wife. There will be plenty of time for all the volcanic kisses you could ever want tonight.”

He pulls me closer, his strong arm pinning me to his side, and that’s how we walk out to the terrace.

“All joking aside, this is the best day of my life,” I say.

“Mine too.”

We wait for the crowd to stream through the door and find their places around the white tables. It’s a beautiful spring day for a reception.

We have tea and delicious hors d’oeuvres, champagne, and a tower of open-faced sandwiches next to another silver stack of pastries and petit fours. The ornate wedding cake looks like it could feed an army, and on top, there’s a small golden telescope with a sparrow figurine perched on it.

Yeah, I’m in heaven.

Even the usual wedding photos aren’t torture. The Winthropes’ photographer makes things fast and fun.

And before we leave, I toss a bouquet to Jenn, who catches it with a red-faced squeal.

“Not fair. I’m your sister!” Maisy says.

“You’re still seventeen,” I say. “No need to stress Dad out.”

“I agree, Mais, you’ve got at least five years before I let any man steal away my youngest. Deal with it,” Dad says.

“You both suck,” Maisy whines.

“So, where’s the honeymoon again?” Dad asks, sipping a beer he’s had someone sneak into a champagne flute.

“Honeymoon?”

Oops. I hadn’t planned one. I kinda thought we did the honeymoon thing in reverse with the European tour back in autumn.

Brock throws an arm around my waist and gives me a reassuring squeeze.

“You’re not the only one who can plan a trip, Sunshine. We’re off to Iceland tomorrow,” he tells my dad. “And if I’m not mistaken, we’ve got a pretty sweet ride waiting.”

A gasp slips out of me.

I can't even get my questions out as he walks me to the iron gate. The entire wedding party follows behind us. Another housekeeper opens it for us and I'm afraid to believe my eyes.

Two tall white horses stand in front of a sleek black carriage that looks like it just arrived from 1910.

"Oh my God!" I'm so overwhelmed I can't help it.

Grabbing his head, I pull his face to mine and attack his lips with excited kisses.

Good thing he's always game to match my intensity, even as I fall down in his arms and he dips me with a low bow, giving every camera in sight a photo finish.

"Get a room!" Maisy yells.

Brock straightens and helps me up with a chuckle.

"Shall we, Mrs. Winthrop?"

"One minute," I say, turning back to the family gathered closest.

I have to show respect one more time for making this day so incredible. His grandparents take turns hugging me and his parents do the same.

When I spin around again, I meet Brock's gaze as he holds out a hand.

I smile and nod.

Brock knocks on the side of the carriage and the footman opens the door for us.

"Shall I help you, ma'am?" the footman asks.

Yeah, I think my face is about to get stuck smiling.

Never, in a million years, did I ever dream up a wedding like this.

"I'll help her up," Brock says with a jealous growl that makes me laugh. "What?"

"Your possessive streak is kind of cute."

"Glad you approve. It's worse now that you're wearing my ring," he warns.

A few seconds after I've tumbled into the carriage, straightening my dress, there's a high-pitched noise that startles me.

*Yip! Yip!*

"What's that?" I ask.

Before he answers, Andy peeks out of a wicker basket on the floor and comes sliding out in all of his sausage-dog glory. He's decked out in a big

purple bow.

The pup tries to climb my dress and licks my hand before we settle him back on the floor.

“So, um, Iceland?” I say, resting my head on his shoulder. “I’m thrilled, but how did you choose that for our honeymoon?”

“It’s a place neither of us have been. We’ll enjoy nature. We’ll eat lots of fish. Plus, I really want to get you naked in the hot springs,” he rumbles in my ear.

God, he’s too good to me, even when he’s burning me down.

He holds me so tight the rest of the way, occasionally stealing a kiss, but after that we don’t really say much.

This day has been too wonderful and my husband is magnificent. I need a moment just to absorb it all.

But the carriage is definitely slower than a car, and wooden wheels on the cobblestone road make for a bumpy ride.

“How much farther?”

“A few more miles.” He chuckles. “Too rough for you?”

I shake my head fiercely.

“No way. I like being Cinderella’d for a day.”

And my face heats when I realize how true that is.

She was a simple girl who married a prince and set her father’s legacy right. I’m a fisherman’s daughter and now I’m hitched to a billionaire after he saved my dad’s life.

Sometimes when fiction comes true it takes your freaking breath away.

Finding Brock Winthrop naked in my shower because someone overbooked his room was more than a coincidence.

It was magic.

It was fate.

It was unbreakable.

“I’m not sure you’re Cinderella,” he says with a wicked grin.

I glance at him, almost offended.

“Why? Because I’m not that nice?”

“Hard to imagine anyone locking you up, woman. To me, you’re more like Belle.”

*Wow, nice save.*

“You tamed a beast and saved me from myself,” he explains. “You also helped me kick a pompous asshole inside out. I’ll always be grateful.”

I lean up and we fall into another round of sultry kisses.

We don’t stop until the carriage suddenly jerks and nearly throws me off his lap. Thankfully, he catches me just in time.

“What happened?” I ask.

“We’ve arrived. It’s a little abrupt sometimes. Sorry.”

He covers my eyes with his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Making you enjoy the surprise,” he says.

The door opens and a warm breeze brushes my face.

“Shall I help the lady down?” the footman asks.

“In a minute,” Brock says. He stands us up with his hand still over my eyes. “Be careful. We’re moving toward an open door.” He lets Andy hop out first and guides us down to the carriage door.

“You could just move your hand,” I say.

“Patience.” A firm grip comes around my waist, steadying me.

We stride forward a few paces on the ground before he stops and slowly lowers his hand.

“Okay, you can look.”

It’s like a painting.

We’re nestled in thick trees with a running creek that divides this gorgeous land. On one side, there’s an old English cottage made of huge stones, different hues and earth tones blending together. The architecture is simple, but the door is arched, heavy, and wooden.

“Wow.” Once I’ve caught my breath, I say, “This has been here for a while, hasn’t it?”

“At least a hundred years. Of course, it’s been renovated several times.”

“Awesome vacation spot.”

Brock just smiles.

He stops me as we get to the front door, winding his arms around my waist. “It’s yours now.”

“Mine?” I turn in his arms, wide-eyed and numb.

He shrugs. “I’m not sure how much you like my grandparents’ estate, and I know your family found it overwhelming. They’ll like this place better and we’ll have more privacy whenever we come back here. Just a

short hop to everything you could ever want in London. My grandparents were planning to make it a wedding gift, but I told them to put it in your name.”

If it weren't for Andy rubbing against my legs and wagging his tail, I'd be sure they're gone. I can't feel them anymore.

“...holy crap, I'm... I'm sorry I don't have a wedding gift for you.”

*Ugh. Why didn't I get him something?*

“Wrong. You're the whole package, Sunshine,” he whispers, taking my hand and leading me inside this fantastic place.

I could say the same about him, but I don't need to.

Not when this man reminds me with every breath how rare, how special, and how loving he'll always be.



### *One Week Later*

WE'RE SNUGGLED underneath an electric blanket together on the deck of our dome in rural Iceland. Even for April, it's nippy at night, but the skies are so beautifully strung with stars I barely care.

My teeth chatter as he pulls me closer.

“Someone's cold,” he says.

“W-we need an-nother blanket.”

He strokes his hand up and down my arm. “You know we can head inside anytime?”

“No! W-we're not m-missing this.”

“Sunshine, this isn't practice for the Antarctic cruise next year. Don't torture yourself for my sake. The skies are clear enough to see the northern lights inside. There are plenty of windows and I packed my telescope for a reason.”

He's not wrong. There's a whole wall of windows and the sky is like glass here.



But he works his way out of the blanket, stands, and tucks it around me tighter before he picks me up. Snuggled in his embrace, we stare at the beautiful scenery and twinkling lights for a few more minutes before my lips are turning blue and begging to be kissed.

This time when he carries me inside, I don't protest.

I'm beyond giddy as Brock drops me on the bed and cranks up the gas fireplace. He opens the blinds before joining me.

Fully cocooned, I smile as I push my ice-cold feet against his thighs.

His face screws up.

"Brat! You'll pay for that," he growls, laughing as he pushes his forehead to mine. "If you're that cold, I can think of better ways to stay warm."

"Oh?" I whisper.

With a sharp look, he slips a hand under my shirt, stroking up and down my back. "I can be your furnace and teach you some respect at the same time, Mrs. Winthrop."

I bite my lip. "I might like that."

"You definitely will. By the time we're finished, you'll need to crawl outside to cool down."

And his face disappears under the blanket, stamping my skin with fiery kisses, proving his point.

My God, does he prove it.

For hours.

We finish together for the last time with our lips joined, basking in the rare glow of the northern lights streaming in through the window.

"This is the life." He kisses me tenderly, stroking my face with his thumb.

"No," I whisper. "This is a fairy tale come true."

And he kisses away the hot, sweet tear that rolls down my cheek while I vibrate with awe.

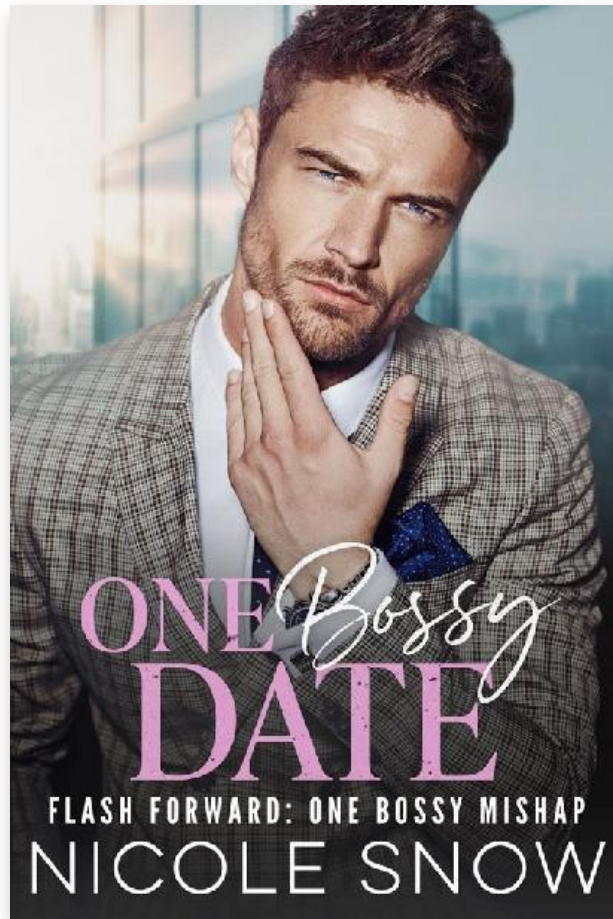
Once, I thought my paradise ended after one bossy date that was never meant to be.

But actually, it's barely begun with this magnificent, grump-tastic, heartstrong man who'll always be my brightest star.



**THANKS FOR READING *One Bossy Date!***

Want to see more adorable surprises in store for the Winthropes after the Happily Ever After?



Check out [this special flash forward story.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/o9t6k07ftv) -

Then read on for a preview of a grumpy single dad bossman as Cole Lancaster collides with Eliza Angelo in *One Bossy Dare!*

## ONE BOSSY DARE PREVIEW

### Shut The Cup Up (Eliza)

Some people imagine their life has a soundtrack.

A background score of meaningful songs to pulse and highlight and push along every drama that touches their lives.

Not me. My life has always had a *smell* trailing it like sweet perfume, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

I never get down to business until I'm adrift in coffee-scented heaven.

"Thanks for letting me in early, Wayne. It's easier to focus before you're officially open." I brush a thick strand of dark hair out of my eye.

"Anytime, Eliza. I'm a sucker for good company." Wayne slides a steaming cup of Wired Cup's latest brew across the counter, picks up a dish towel, and swipes it across the gleaming espresso machine.

It's a comforting, familiar routine I've watched a hundred times.

Bringing the cup to my mouth, I slowly take a sip. This isn't just chasing a caffeine high. Ever since I had my grandmother's stovetop insta-coffee, this is my waking ritual.

"Dark roast." I take another small sip, smacking my lips. "...with notes of cacao?"

"Close! It's a Sumatran roast," he tells me, scratching his thick beard.

"Heated at one eighty?"

He gives me a derisive look. *Obviously, lady, what kind of newbie punk do you think I am?* He doesn't even have to say it for me to hear him

thinking out loud.

When it comes to coffee, it takes one to know one.

I narrow my eyes at him anyway.

“Oh, you’re serious? Yes, all our drinks in this class are heated at one eighty. Company policy.”

“That’s what I thought. This is just...well, better than the usual. I can taste the layers. It’s pretty decent—” I pause, giving him an exaggerated shrug. “For a chain, anyway.”

Wayne throws his head back and barks a laugh.

“Coffee snob. I knew I kept you around for some reason.”

I smile. “I’m not. You know how open-minded I am. Good brews are like fingerprints—they give a time, a place, a memory. You never know where you’ll find yourself until that next cup. Magic.”

“Shit, lady, don’t put me on a pedestal. I’m no coffee wizard, just a guy making a living.” He starts organizing tall bottles of flavored syrups on the back counter.

When Wayne looks back at me, there’s a grimace on his face.

“It’s like the evening crew never even works,” he mutters. “If you want magic, you won’t find it in this crapsack. Maybe try Sweeter Grind. Their coffee slaps and I hear those big-ass cinnamon rolls they’ve got are to die for.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Dude. You’re not supposed to be pimping the competition.”

“Eh, they don’t pay me enough not to. But listen, I can’t talk as much as I’d like today. I have this meeting soon with management. I’m probably gonna get a second asshole ripped in my skin if I don’t get this place in shipshape. Evening crew *always* makes us look bad.”

I nod politely and take another long pull from my perfectly decent brew. I understand.

What you’re seeing is what Wired Cup has done best for decades—good, easy, reliable coffee without any frills or hipster wackiness. It’s entrenched as the second strongest coffee chain in Seattle for a reason.

The people are a lot like the coffee, too.

Wayne, for instance. He’s a good barista—always remembers my coffee order and graciously gives me this quiet space to think and breathe and

experiment—but he takes his job seriously. He’s almost like a battle-hardened soldier who’s numb to the daily grind.

I’d better leave him be. Grabbing the hot cup with one hand and my purse with the other, I slink over to a table against the wall where I’ll be out of the way.

My handbag swings off my elbow, big enough to command its own zip code, banging my hip with every step. As soon as I sit, I let it tumble to the floor and pull out a notebook and pen, along with a small mason jar that holds the goods.

*I know.*

It isn’t polite to bring other drinks into a place like this—not even beverages I made.

Good thing Wayne doesn’t care.

And Wired Cup is just corporate enough not to make any moral muscles twitch.

I discreetly open the mason jar holding my latest blend for research and take a long, thoughtful sip of the dark, potent liquid inside.

*Hello, flavor town.*

*Population: me.*

I’m legit proud of how my fire-roasted coffee tastes smoother than velvet, and it’s about a hundred times stronger than the Wired Cup offering. Smoky, loud, and intense enough to make my toes scrunch up in my shoes.

God.

I’m either way too addicted to playing coffee chemist or in desperate need of getting laid.

My eyes fall to the Wired Cup brew again. Their new featured flavor is definitely good, for a chain. But there’s still something too generic about it.

I pull out a water bottle to clear my palate and then sip from the paper cup for comparison.

Yep. Hints of cacao, faint as a whisper.

That’s the big difference between this new “featured flavor” and their usual drip. The cacao is nice and smooth for a dark roast, playing at being mocha-lite. But you’d better believe the average person still needs two cups of this to get through a morning. I’m sure I’d need four.

It gives me an idea, though...

*S’mores coffee.*

If I combined my latest creation with just the right sweetness, it could actually work.

I've been working on this campfire brew for months, ever since a guy in a homeless camp introduced me to the original version. It gives the beans a unique buzz no chain like Wired Cup could ever replicate if they ever even worked up the appetite for risk.

What if a little cacao is the missing ingredient I need to make this a mouth-gasm?

I smile. A few cacao beans added to the campfire blend, plus caramelized sugar and vanilla. Pair it with a cookie from a Belgian chocolatier to stand in for a graham cracker.

*Hell. Yes.*

My muse is on *fire* today. Even if the coffee doesn't work—and let's face it, some of my concoctions are pretty out-there—it won't be hard to find tasters in this town with Belgian cookies attached.

I take a hefty swig from the mason jar, trying not to moan.

*So good.*

It tastes like a summer camping trip with old-school coffee brewed by a couple of hot lumberjacks in flannel. As a s'mores coffee, it could be devastatingly awesome.

I just need to work on the name.

*S'mor'ofee?*

Meh, it's a work in progress.

But it *is* a summer morning. A peaceful one.

I don't have any deadlines staring me in the face, so I'm not desperate for caffeine to be functional. And the Wired Cup brew is still warm. I go to the condiment bar, drop in sugar and cream, and sit down to savor the warm coffee with a few add-ins to change the taste.

It's not Eliza Angelo campfire good, but it's nice enough.

I start jotting down notes in my worn black leather journal that holds the last three years of my coffee recipes. Someday, my pretties will live for a bigger audience than yours truly and a gaggle of tasters.

On virtual assistant pay, it'll be a hot minute before I can fund my own shop.

But when I do, I'll have my drinks and baked goods paired up and ready to go.

“God, Dad. It’s so early and I’m already bored.” A new, squeaky voice drifts through the cafe. It sounds too much like *Gossip Girl* to be Wayne.

“Destiny, sit,” a man replies gruffly.

I look up from my notebook. The whole vibe in the store has shifted.

Now there’s a tension so thick it could curdle the air. A whole pack of suits are standing in front of Wayne’s counter, clustered together like wolves.

*What the hell?*

Oh, he *did* mention a meeting with management and his morning helpers aren’t here yet, which is a little strange. But I sort of imagined the usual middle-aged, soccer-mom-type manager from the franchise.

Not pure Wall Street. Though I wonder about the kid I heard and why’s she tagging along with this school of corporate sharks?

I quickly scan the room.

A teenage girl in a black dress wanders through the tables, empty except for mine. She flops down in a seat at the table across from me with a book—probably because the other chairs are still upside down on their tables. The place isn’t technically open yet.

*Interesting.*

The gaggle of execs form a neat line in front of the counter. They stare down at everything like they’re after world domination rather than cornering coffee markets.

My thriller brain screams mafia shakedown or CIA sting.

Wayne slides a cup across the counter with a forced smile I’ve never seen on his face.

A tall man with sandy-brown hair seems like the leader of the pack.

He reaches for the drink, flanked by a man on one side and a woman on the other. They both step away like it’s taboo to share the same breathing space with the kingpin.

Here we go. It’s Godfather time. *I’m gonna make you an offer you can’t refuse...*

His navy-blue jacket strains with packed muscle as he lifts the cup. For the briefest second, his eyes catch mine.

Oof.

Air stalls in my lungs.

I melt into my chair.

Forget the old, saggy middle-manager type who could stand to lose fifty pounds. This guy is younger and infinitely better looking than Marlon Brando, even if his gaze could challenge an actual mafia don.

Sculpted face. Aquiline nose. Eyes stolen from the crisp blue sky.

They hide whatever he's really thinking about the weird girl ducking down in the corner, startled and desperately trying not to blush.

I mean, he's *not* my type—do I have a type?

He's a human bulldozer stuffed into an expensive suit.

A Franken-hottie machine who looks like he was brought to life by some mad scientist with lofty dreams of crafting the perfect destroyer of ladybits.

For a second, I wish *I* was that dark-blue jacket hugging the contours of those wound, chorded muscles. But only for a second.

That scowl he's wearing could scare the paint off the walls.

He's still giving the whole store the evil eye as his mouth disappears behind the cup in one brutally long sip ending in a displeased groan.

And his manners aren't any kinder a second later when he yanks the plastic lid off the cup, points at the brew, and says, "You call this a featured roast?"

Oh, God.

My heart stalls.

He sounds like a flipping prosecutor charging Wayne with running over a baby. I'm instantly angry and worried for my friend.

He'll probably have a horsehead in his bed tonight thanks to this bosshole.

*Not fair.*

The teenager across from me lowers her book, meets my eyes, and bites her bottom lip to keep from—laughing? Wincing? I'm not sure.

The pained grin she tries to hide shows her dimples.

"Don't worry. He's in a good mood today," she whispers.

Holy hell.

If this is a good mood, what's he like with a bad one?

He's rocking the hot villain vibe, at least, but other than that, all I get from him is a modern prick playing at being Ozymandias.

*"Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"*



My friend and former roomie, Dakota, would be laughing her little poet head off. I just wish I had coffee strong enough to resurrect Percy Shelley and put this guy in his place.

Godfather isn't the right description with the crap falling out of his mouth. *Grumpfather* feels more accurate.

I'm surprised he bothers tasting the coffee again.

His posse of suits stare in absolute awe—or is it terror? A couple young-looking intern types behind him shift their weight nervously.

Ugh.

There goes my peaceful morning.

I glance at my notebook again, teething my bottom lip and trying like hell to mind my own business.

I should just finish picking apart this coffee and slip out the back door, leaving Wayne to his fate. He's a proud guy and we're coffee shop besties, but not close friends. He wouldn't want me fighting his battles like an overprotective sister.

At least he's holding his ground against Crankyface. He has the patience of a monk, really, hidden behind this subtle, eerily calm smile that just looks *tired* more than anything else. He clears his throat, waiting for the inevitable death by insult.

Grumpfather sighs and pounds the cup back on the counter. "It's passable. Barely. It's just not what we're looking for going forward. It's remarkably ordinary at best."

I swallow hard, averting my eyes when Wayne glances over.

It's basically impossible to concentrate on these notes when his boss sounds as outrageous as he looks.

Also, I'm no fan of rudeness, but this guy is going the extra mile to piss me off.

It's a chain shop. What does he expect? A handcrafted slow brew pulled from a small batch of hand-roasted beans?

"Ordinary, my ass," I whisper under my breath, rolling my eyes.

I forget that the girl is still in earshot until I hear her muffled snicker.

"Well, yeah. You're right, Mr. Lancaster, but—" Wayne pauses. "I can do better. I'm excited for the new drinks, wherever you're taking us."

His delivery is so deliciously numb I try not to laugh.

Come to think of it, Wired Cup is where I got my first cup of coffee when I first moved to Seattle. Wayne made it. Coffee shops have more staff turnovers than burger joints sometimes, but Wayne has been here every day for years slinging coffee with a friendly joke or a kind ear, rain or shine or—well, more rain because this is Seattle.

If there was ever a reliable barista grunt, it's him.

He does *not* deserve what he's getting.

Just who the hell does this jackass think he is? By the looks of it, he sits in some office and stares at a screen all day. He wouldn't know the first thing about making good coffee if it splashed him in his stupidly handsome, growly, grump-face.

He grabs the cup again and sniffs it before passing it to the woman beside him. "Katelyn, have R & D dig up their files on this drink. I want to see what else they were doing in development, if they ever pinged on anything to spice it up."

*Oh, lovely.*

So he's one of *those* guys. All corporate paperwork and prone to getting pissy when reality won't conform to models on a screen.

Or maybe he's just some district manager douchebag.

I've known plenty in my odd jobs over the years. I've *dated* them.

They think they poop diamonds, and that gives them the right to order around the underlings.

It makes me a little sick. It also reminds me why I'll never take a job answering to any sanctimonious jerkwad ever again. They're too delusional for life.

In the grand scheme of things, what's a district manager of a second-rate coffee company?

He can't hear me thinking out loud, though.

He just slurps the coffee again and says, "Goddammit. If our summer depends on *this*, the Mermaid will eat us alive."

No joke. The big green mermaid is an international chain.

Wired Cup still owns its slice of the West Coast coffee pie, mostly because the Pacific Northwest doesn't worship international chains.

"For the record, I followed the exact recipe," Wayne says, showing some grit.

I smile across the space at him.

*That's the style, buddy. Throw it right back.*

"Did you?" Grumpfather frowns.

"Like I said, I can do better," Wayne starts. "If you want me to throw together a new one with the customizations we like in the shop, I'll just—"

"To hell with your customizations." Asshat doesn't even let him finish. "You're one barista in one store in Seattle. The Sumatra roast itself is the backbone, and you can't improve on boring, no matter how well you craft drinks. This bean has already been bulk shipped as far as Boise. I doubt it would taste much better anywhere else. Shit is still shit."

*Yikes! The coffee isn't that bad.*

Squeaky teenager makes a sad hissing sound and shakes her head, flipping her long dirty-blond hair over her face to hide. She drops her book on the table and pulls a phone from her stylish pink purse.

I take that as a cue to grab my own bag and stand.

We're done here.

There's no way I can focus with this drama flying around, but before I head out, I march up to Coffee Lucifer himself.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I wait until blue-eyed death sees me. "What the hell is your problem?"

Wayne's jaw drops.

I smile at him. *Don't worry, buddy. I've got your back.*

Grumpfather cocks his head, staring down at me like he wishes I'd drop through the floor.

"Depends. Who the hell's asking?"

I snort. "I'd like to ask you the same question. I'm just wondering what kind of rich ass-clown gets off on starting his mornings by verbally torturing a barista?"

"The kind who owns the place," he bites off.

"Oh. Right, right, right." I laugh harshly. This guy thinks he's something else, doesn't he? Talk about exaggerating your title.

Like the owner of the entire Wired Cup franchise—a multi-billion-dollar corporation—shows up in random stores just to grump at people making minimum wage plus tips.

*No way.*

I'm sure Mr. CEO has flawlessly pressed espresso served on silver platters, all while lying poolside at some exotic villa, somewhere far, far

away from here.

“Are you finished? You don’t have to self-insert into business that’s not yours,” he growls.

Somehow, it feels like he grows another inch, towering over me higher with every snappy remark.

“And you don’t have to be a huge jackoff to this barista. The coffee’s *fine*. It always is when Wayne’s at the helm. He’s easily the best guy here,” I say matter-of-factly.

He stares through me.

“I have nothing to prove to you—whoever the hell you are,” he mutters.

I hold up my paper cup.

“Look. I just had a cup of the same new drink you did. The coffee’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with it. For a big chain, it’s pretty dang good. Now, I’m sorry the coffee isn’t up to your high and mighty tastes, but don’t those come from *your* recipes?”

His glare hardens, so venomous I have to clear my throat to keep breathing.

“All I’m saying is, you don’t have to scapegoat. Why take it out on the person grinding away to sell your product while he deals with rude customers and scalding hot liquid all day?”

Grumpfather is so not impressed with my feedback.

His eyes never flinch.

The fact that the man could win a staring contest with an owl hints that I should probably shut up and go.

Guess there’s just no reasoning with some people.

Too bad I’m not done.

“Also, I kinda doubt you’d know a good cup of coffee if the beans pelted you in the face.” I fold my arms, stretching on my toes to reach closer to his eye level.

“You already nailed it. Everything that’s wrong,” he says slowly.

“I—what? I’m not sure what you’re—”

But the way his face lights up cuts me off mid-sentence.

When the Grumpfather smirks, he looks like a god.

“‘The coffee’s fine.’ ‘There’s nothing wrong with it.’ ‘For a big chain.’” He throws my words back at me with an icy calmness that sends shivers up my back before he continues. “Very astute observations for someone with

no filter. Sales are slumping with the younger crowd. ‘The coffee’s fine’ won’t cut it in a few more years. Nobody under thirty wants to be caught dead with a drink from a big chain in Seattle and Portland. They’re I-G-ing cozy little shops.”

“I-G-ing?” I repeat.

The teenager behind him laughs. “He means Instagramming, but it’s stupid, right? No one in their twenties Instagrams much anymore.”

“Dess, enough,” he snaps.

“Wow. I apologize, mister. Looks like I had you all wrong,” I say softly, my blood heating.

He gives me a questioning look.

“I thought you were just a suit having a bad morning. But you don’t stop at chewing out Wayne. You just have to yell at a kid because she’s right, huh? Oh, and by the way, I’m under thirty and I biked across town just for my big chain featured drip this morning. You’re welcome.”

He flashes the girl an annoyed look. “Everyone’s on Instagram. The metrics don’t lie. If our sales are ever improving, the product has to lead the way.”

My turn. “While you’re stuck on improvements, can we talk about your attitude?”

His lips part, and he stares at me, speechless.

*Burn.*

“Usually, my ‘attitude’ saves me from taking hideous advice from strangers who feel a burning need to interject themselves into private business.” He scoffs. “Just this once, though, I’ll give you a chance to enlighten me. Where does everyone hang out online?”

“TikTok,” the girl—Dess—and I say at the same time.

Grumpfather glares at me.

In one second, he’s gone from angry demigod to warrior. He turns his head and glances at Wayne before looking back at me.

“The clock app? Why am I not surprised you share a fifteen-year-old’s taste in social media?” He shakes his head.

I roll my eyes right out of my head.

“Someone has to. Just like somebody needs to give you an attitude check. It sounds like everybody else lets you go stomping, snarling at

problems. And I haven't heard a single solution since you started your spiel."

Uh-oh.

He stares Wayne down again, his nostrils flaring. "I hope she's not an employee, and if she isn't—why is she here? This store was supposed to be closed for our meeting."

Wayne turns beet-red and hangs his head.

"I, uh...may have forgotten to lock up again when I came in this morning. I meant to, of course, but once the doors are open, habit kicked in." He scratches the back of his neck loudly. "If it helps, Eliza's a friend. One of our best customers. I didn't think it would hurt for her to have her coffee here. Uh, don't fire me?" Wayne throws a nervous look around the room, tugging at the end of his gnarled beard.

Grump-zilla looks me over like he's examining some squished animal his limo just ran over. "Hmph. Your 'friend' might be right about the attitude adjustment needed at our stores."

Wait, what?

I didn't say the *stores* needed an attitude adjustment.

I said *he* did, but now might not be the best time to point that out.

Because Wayne? He looks like a hardboiled egg dyed pink. And ruining his entire week isn't what I'm after. I wanted to *help* him—not get him fired.

"—there needs to be more respect for the rules, for starters," the Grumpfather says when my ears ping back on the conversation.

The kid behind us mutters something, but I can't make out what.

I almost regret jumping in and hate that it's too late to bow out.

I can salvage this, though.

"Excuse me, but Wayne is a gem. He's the reason this store stays open and keeps half the neighborhood coming back. He's like a coffee superhero. Don't tell me you're going to lay the hammer down on your best barista? If you want to boost business, this is the worst way to do it."

The stuck-up suit presses his lips together. "I've met feral raccoons less frustrating than you."

I fake a startled gasp, slapping my hand over my mouth. "Oh! Did they bite you, too? Because I have urges."

He squints in confusion, then lets out a hefty sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re annoying as hell.”

“Cool. You’re Mr. Arrogant.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I should give you a lifetime ban from every store.”

My heart skips a beat. I don’t know whether to laugh or worry or smack this Neanderthal across the face.

“Go ahead. Right after you do, I’ll hop on the Tok and review your ‘perfectly fine big chain’ coffee. I’ll be sure to mention why I’m banned. You want to see big numbers on social media? Just wait for *that* drama.”

His lip curls, baring a hint of polished white teeth as I inch closer, breathing in his ear.

My entire body bristles.

I want to believe it’s just hot rage as I brush his shoulder—but damn him, those biceps are ripped.

“Are you fucking done yet?” he whispers back.

“No. While we’re waiting for TikTok to blow up, I’ll call corporate for good measure. Someone needs to tell the powers that be that some little pencil-dicked district monster goes around impersonating the owner and harassing customers and senior employees. How does that sound?”

For the girl’s sake, I try to keep it down.

Apparently, it doesn’t work.

A couple shaky gasps spill out of the crowd around us.

He raises one eyebrow. He’s either disgustingly amused or about to shove me to the floor.

Also, he has the bluest eyes God ever made. *Annoying.*

I wish those eyes weren’t attached to a throat with a tone that’s condescending enough to curl my hair when he says, “When you do that, you’ll talk to Katelyn Storm, my lovely assistant. She handles my incoming calls to corporate. She will tell you that pencil-dicked monster signs his papers with an instrument bigger than an oak branch. Because I’m the owner.”

Eep. I swear, it’s just the anger that’s making me blush redder than poor Wayne.

“You can cut the crap. No way do I believe a CEO of a company this large just walks through into some downtown store. You’re a bad liar.”

For a moment, he stares at me. I'm just waiting for laser beams to shoot out of his eyes.

"You really don't believe me, lady?" His voice is a rumbling storm.

"Lady? Is that how you talk to your customers? I thought the northwest was more progressive."

"Huh?"

"You don't even know me," I throw back.

"Yeah, and I wish we'd never met," he whispers with a cutting glance. "You're right about why chains fail—we don't know our customer. Where are you from?"

"San Diego, originally. I came here a few years ago."

"That would explain it. Seattleites aren't so in-your-face."

I stare at him, trying to decipher what sounds like a backhanded insult.

A couple of other baristas just trailing in for the morning rush appear behind the counter. They stand around Wayne awkwardly, their eyes flicking to the corporate sharks, wondering what they've walked into.

Whatever. I don't have time to worry about them.

I need to deal with this jerk and scam. We've both got better things to do than carry on a grudge match in a coffee shop.

"So you're saying it's totally cool to harass customers? That's not the Seattle I know." My lip juts out as I hit him with my best resting bitch-face.

"When the customer decides to involve herself in corporate matters she knows nothing about—"

"Oh. Okay. Because you don't plaster your stores with signs welcoming feedback." I turn and gesture to one on the opposite wall. It has a smiley face with lightning bolts for eyes and says, *Share the Spark! Review us today.*

The kingpin stares like he's trying to decide just how much he'll have to pay some hitman to chuck me into the Puget Sound.

I'm in this far, so why stop now?

"What? No nasty comeback?" I snap. "Do you have a PhD in coffee chemistry from the U of Ego to go with your area manager role?"

"Eliza—" Wayne clears his throat loudly.

"I'm not a damn manager." Suit cuts him off. "If you were listening, you'd know I own this chain. I halfway grew up on a coffee farm. So yes, I know more about coffee than some dramatic SoCal girl who grew up



lounging around on Carbon Beach and training her mouth to choke on conflicts with strangers.”

Holy shit.

My jaw drops before I reel it in and set my mouth so tight my teeth hurt.

*He didn't.*

*But he did.*

He also made one big fat mistake that's going to cost him dearly.

“Eliza—” Wayne warns with a choppy wave.

I put up a hand to quiet him. It's all right. I've got this.

Wayne doesn't need to fight my battles with this rattlesnake of a man who shouldn't even be in charge of dusting the place.

“Okay, *chain owner*, if that's truly what you are,” I say slowly. “I get it. No need to rub it in. You were so busy mastering coffee that you didn't learn geography, right? Because San Diego is over a hundred and twenty miles from Carbon Beach, genius.”

A collective gasp fills the room, starting with entourage and spreading behind the counter.

One of the young girls on Wayne's crew bolts, covering her mouth to hold in terrified laughs before she flies out the back exit.

The shop goes dead silent.

All except for the teenager in the corner letting out slow, strained laughter through her fingers.

“Eliza!” Wayne's eyes are bulging now. His barrel of a chest rises and falls in shallow breaths behind his apron.

Oops. I've crossed the line where I'm doing more harm than good.

The Grumpfather clears his throat like he's been chewing broken glass, drawing my attention back to him.

“Okay, okay.” I hold my hands up defensively. “That came out a little harsh. I've submitted my feedback, so if you don't mind I'll just—”

“You're going to rue *ever* having this conversation with me, I think, when you finally learn the truth,” he rumbles, his brows pulled low like storm clouds.

Hey, at least I tried.

I let out a hissing sigh.

“You want the truth?” I ask quietly. “I'm guessing not, but apparently everyone who works here is way too scared to say it. I don't have anything

to lose except Wired Cup access for life. So, here it is—you, sir, could sink in a pool of perfectly pressed dark roast and not know you were drowning in good coffee. This—” I hold up the cup again. “This serves its purpose, and I know my coffee—”

“And what do you think its purpose is?” he clips.

“It makes Wired Cup what it’s supposed to be.”

He tosses his head impatiently, as if to say, *spit it the fuck out*.

“Familiar. Comfortable. Easy,” I say. “It’s a decent brew of a decent bean that’s easily accessible to busy and decent middle-class people.”

He exhales sharply. “Forgive me if I don’t find a college kid calling my family’s legacy ‘decent’ until the word loses its meaning high praise.”

I don’t bother telling him to drop the act again. That ship has sailed.

“I’m not a college kid.”

“And I, apparently, am not the owner of this business.”

“Eliza...” Wayne sounds defeated, like a man begging for his life after he’s already been crushed up in a wreck.

Ouch. Now I remember why we’re doing this as I look at him.

He gives me a miserable look and says, “Sorry. I should have spoken up sooner. Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Cole Lancaster, the owner of Wired Cup Incorporated—and our CEO.”

Every eye in the room sticks to me.

I wonder if they can hear the floor crumbling under me.

“CEO? *Him?*” I hiss, pursing my lips.

Wayne nods heavily.

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## ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

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Thanks for reading. And please remember to leave an honest review! Nothing helps an author more.

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