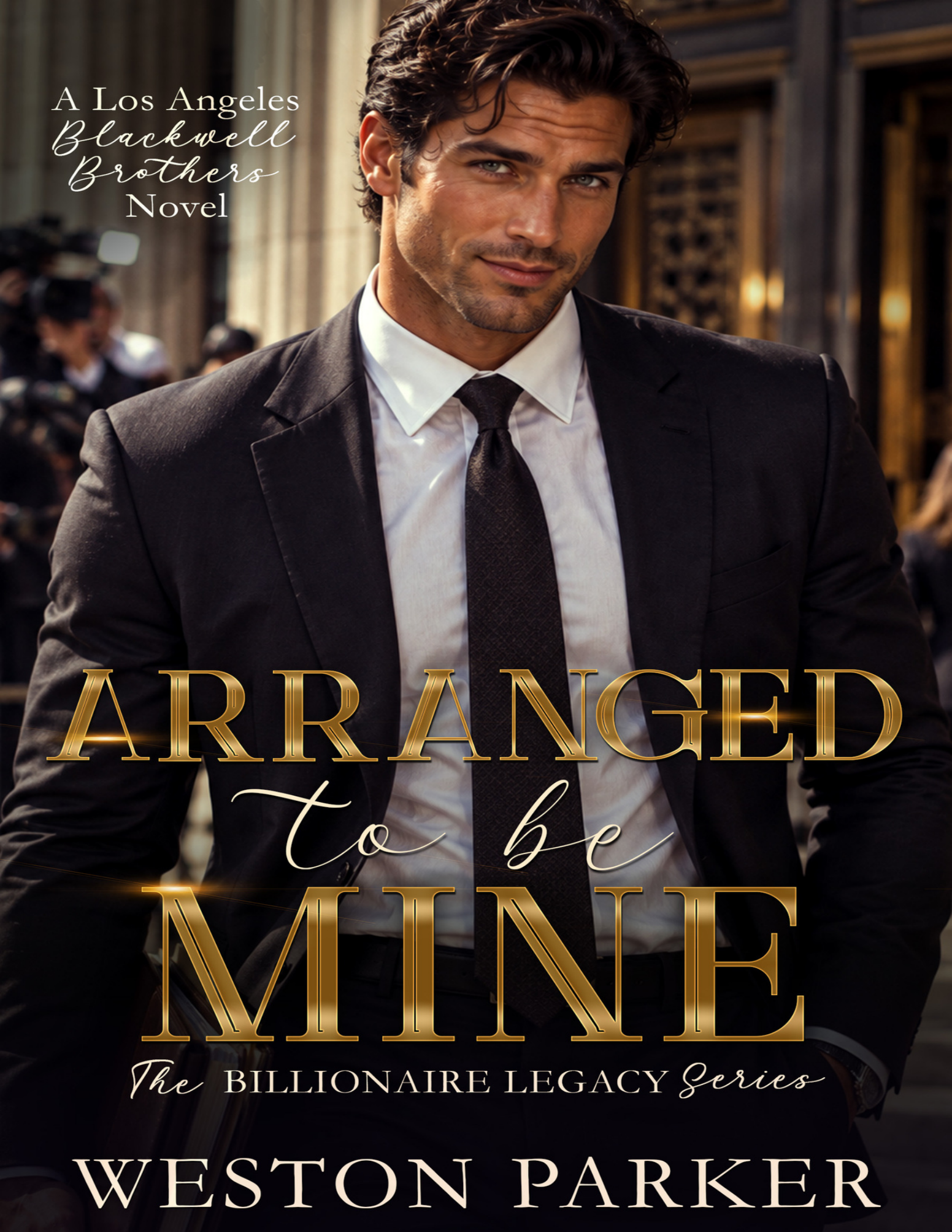


A man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred city street scene.

A Los Angeles
*Blackwell
Brothers*
Novel

ARRANGED
to be
MINE

The BILLIONAIRE LEGACY *Series*

WESTON PARKER

ARRANGED TO BE MINE

WESTON PARKER

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FIND WESTON PARKER!



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DESCRIPTION



I can win over a jury before lunch.

Apparently, one icy blonde is going to be harder.

She's brilliant, beautiful, and about to take over a billion-dollar jewelry empire.

She also has a reputation problem.

The woman selling engagement rings has somehow convinced the world she doesn't believe in love.

Her father hires me to fix it.

I'm an entertainment lawyer, not a miracle worker, but getting beneath the Ice Queen's perfectly controlled exterior sounds like the kind of challenge I can enjoy.

Then one kiss for the cameras changes everything.

Suddenly, I'm her fake boyfriend.

And the more time I spend with her, the less interested I am in pretending.

I want the woman who glares when I tease her.

The one who plans everything, carries her own bags, and would rather wrestle control from my hands than admit she needs anyone.

I want to make her laugh.

Make her let go.

Make her understand that letting me take care of her doesn't make her weak.

The problem is, she's spent her entire life proving she can do everything alone.

And I'm starting to want something she never agreed to give me.

Something real.

If I push too hard, I could lose her.

If I walk away, I lose the first woman who's ever made me want more than the next case, the next win, or the next easy night.

I've built a career convincing people to see things my way.

Now I just have to convince the most stubborn woman I've ever met that this arrangement stopped being fake a long time ago.

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Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)

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A NOTE TO THE READER

I don't use AI in my books.

I'm a straight-shooter, so I'll say it upfront: every story I write comes from me or me and my sister, Ali Parker. It starts with a rough idea, a "what if," and characters who don't always behave the way they should... but that's kind of the point. I spent years in the fire service, where things were real, fast, and unpredictable, and I guess I carried that into my writing. These stories have grit, edge, and a little chaos built in.

This book was written the old-school way. Late nights, early mornings when I had to, and a whole lot of time at the keyboard figuring these characters out. No AI. No shortcuts. Just me, my imagination, and a solid team of real people behind the scenes helping make sure the story hits the way it should.

I know what it's like to need an escape. For me, it used to be adrenaline and the job. Now, it's building stories that pull you in and give you somewhere else to be for a while. If this book gives you that, even for a few hours, then it did its job.

Everything in here: the tension, the attitude, the chemistry, the mess, was built word by word, intentionally. These guys don't always play nice, but they show up when the girl needs them. That's the kind of story I like to tell.

Thanks for being here and giving it a shot.

Weston Parker

This work is a product of original imagination and creative effort. No generative AI tools were used in the creation, ideation, writing, co-writing, or editing of this manuscript.

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The plaintiff's council slid his hands into the pockets of his five-thousand-dollar suit pants. He rocked back on his heels and delivered his closing remarks with the sort of casual indifference of a man who knew just how good he was in the courtroom.

But I was better. And about to prove it.

"Jack Montana is a lot of things." I rose, buttoning my Blackwell Couture suit jacket and stepping out from behind the table where my client remained seated. Jack tracked me with his eyes while he leaned back in his chair and stroked his jaw with his forefinger and thumb, a nervous tic I'd come to notice over the past several weeks of working as his defense attorney. In this moment, he wasn't the hotshot Hollywood actor who'd recently starred in Micah's film, *Breathless*. He was a victim. And I was his redemption.

I met the eyes of each jury member as I approached the jury box.

"He's an international acting superstar. Loving husband. Philanthropist." Another beat as I made eye contact with a few of the women before moving back to Number Four. "But one thing he is not... is a llama farmer."

A ripple of soft laughter moved through the box. A couple of people bit down on smiles. Number Four's mouth twitched and she looked down at her hands clasped in her lap.

“It’s ridiculous when you say it out loud, isn’t it?” I nodded like I was agreeing with myself. “Jack Montana isn’t running an illegal llama farm out of his Hollywood mansion.” A few heads moved with me. That was good. That was exactly what I wanted. “You can’t believe you’re hearing it,” I said, “just like I can’t believe I’m saying it.”

I let them sit with that for a moment.

“It’s ridiculous that you good people had to get up this morning, put on your nice clothes, take time away from your family and your work, drive into downtown Los Angeles, and show up here.” I shook my head like it was the worst thing in the whole damn world. To be fair, LA traffic was a tragedy.

“And why? Why are we all here?” I spread my arms and turned in a full, dramatic circle. When I turned back, they were all focused on me. Eating this shit up. “I’ll tell you why. Because Jack Montana’s neighbor cannot tell the difference between a handful of beloved family pets living on a private estate and an agricultural enterprise designed for profit.” I drooped my shoulders, my disappointment evident. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

From the corner of my eye, I watched the plaintiff’s table as Lou Corwin, sixty-something, silver-haired and filthy stinking rich, glared at me.

The only person he should be mad at was himself for wasting all this time and resources.

“Are llamas traditionally kept as pets on the grounds of a Hollywood mansion?” I asked, putting my hands up in a friendly gesture. “I think we all know the answer to that is no. But Jack Montana is not a traditional man. He’s a man in love.” I smiled and let that breathe. “He bought his wife, Chantilly, one llama, because she’d always wanted one and he’d move a mountain for her. She loved it. Naturally, he bought her another one. And yes, at present, there are ten llamas living on the Montana estate, but they are beloved *pets*. They have *names*. They have a dietary specialist. They have a vet who comes to the house.” I paused. “What they do not have is a sales listing.”

Number Seven, a middle school teacher, was definitely on my side. She nodded eagerly and white knuckled the straps of her purse. A llama sympathizer in our midst. *Perfect*.

“Mr. Corwin is a powerful man, and Corwin Gems is a household name. He is accustomed to getting what he wants, and when he doesn’t get it, he is

capable of doing whatever it takes to make that problem go away.” I looked at his attorney and then back to the jury. “He used the full weight of his legal resources to bring this lawsuit.” My tone was filled with disgust. “A lawsuit built on baseless accusations in order to bully a husband and wife into giving up their beloved pets. I think we can all agree that Jack Montana is not intimidated by bullies.” I looked at Number Four again. “And neither are any of you.”

I walked the length of the jury box. “Our pets are family. These llamas, Carl and Cookie, they’re harmless. Little Coco and Cricket just want to have fun. Cleetus, Caramel, and Cotton love their human parents. Cinnamon and Clyde, yes, they ate some leaves, but we’ve proven those leaves were on the Montana property. And when Cheddar got a little frisky, it was in the privacy of his own yard.”

I couldn’t believe I remembered all the fucking names, but I didn’t get paid the big bucks for nothing. And watching the expressions on the jurors’ faces when I humanized the foul-smelling, spitting, mopheaded, gangly creatures told me I was so going to win this case.

“If you don’t like what you see happening on someone’s property, quit watching,” I looked directly at Corwin with that one. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, thank you so much for your dedication to this court. I trust you all to make the right decision and to consider the wellbeing and happiness of the animals that are so loved on Mr. Montana’s private property.” I moved back to Jack’s side. “The defense rests.”

I unbuttoned my jacket again and sat down.

Jack leaned over. “Nailed it.”

I hid my smirk behind my hand and pretended to scratch my cheek. Some guys jumped out of airplanes for an adrenaline rush. Some climbed impossible mountain peaks.

I went to trial.

A courtroom and twelve pairs of eyes on me. That was what got my juices flowing.

I listened as the judge gave his instructions and then it was time for the jury to file out to start deliberations. I watched them go, cataloging every micro-expression.

“Come on,” I said to Jack, pushing back from the table. “Let’s get out of here.”

We made our way into the hallway, the courtroom doors swinging shut behind us. The marble floors echoed with footsteps and murmured conversations. Jack loosened his tie and let out a breath.

“Chantilly’s going to be pissed she missed this,” he said.

“Chantilly being here would have been a disaster and you know it.” I leaned against the wall, crossing my arms. “Half the jury would have been too busy judging her wardrobe. That first day nearly tanked our case.”

“She’s a fashion icon.”

I rolled my eyes. “She likes attention.”

Jack grimaced but didn’t argue. His wife was a devoted llama mama, a social media powerhouse, and kind of sweet when you got to know her, but she was polarizing as hell. People either loved her or wanted to tear her apart. Keeping her away from the trial had been a strategic necessity.

Down at the other end of the hallway, Lou Corwin stood huddled with his attorney. Even from this distance, I could see the tension in his shoulders. This was not the same version of him that had walked into court this morning with his head held high and his shoulders pushed back.

Good.

A smile tugged at my lips. I’d earned that. Every hour of prep in front of the mirror in my bedroom paid off. I had planned every calculated pause. I knew what to wear and when to smile and when to look sad. It had all led to that look on Lou Corwin’s face.

His attorney had been practicing law longer than I’d been alive with a success rate that earned him an hourly rate that would make even a Blackwell do a doubletake. Going up against him? It felt like donning gladiator armor and facing off in the Colosseum of ancient Rome.

Lou’s attorney caught me watching them. I nodded, giving him the respect his career deserved. He sneered back, which almost made me laugh. He should have anticipated someone would knock him on his ass eventually. I decided to go grab a bottle of water from the vending machine behind them, just to ruffle their feathers a little more, but drew up short when the clicking of high heels announced the arrival of a petite, icy blonde bombshell stomping toward Lou.

Her pantsuit fit her like armor. *She looks like way more fun to go toe to toe with*, I thought, wishing Lou had chosen her as his representation. She moved with power, purpose, and precision.

How many strings would a man have to pull to unravel all that? I mused.

She wore her platinum-blond hair in a thick braid that hung down her back, not a single strand out of place. The kind of braid that said she'd perfected it over years of practice. I immediately knew chaos wasn't welcome in her world. Her skin was pale, almost luminous under the harsh courthouse lighting. And her eyes were cold blue. The color of a frozen lake. Those icy baby blues swept the hallway like she was marking threats.

Her gaze passed over me but I honestly couldn't say if she saw me. It was a half-second scan before she dismissed me.

Ouch.

I wasn't used to being ignored. Not an ego thing. Just a fact thing.

Her lips were pressed into a firm line, the corners turned down slightly. Not a frown exactly, but close. Like she'd looked at the world and found it wanting.

Damn.

"Who is that?" I asked, not taking my eyes off her.

Jack followed my gaze. "Oh, that's Corwin's daughter. Darcy, I think?"

Darcy Corwin. I filed that away, watching as she leaned in to say something to her father. Whatever it was made Corwin's expression tighten further. She wasn't there to comfort him, that much was obvious. She was there to assess the damage.

So not a lawyer, I thought, but not just his daughter here to offer support, either. Before I could think too much about it, a bailiff appeared at the courtroom doors. "Jury's back."

Jack's eyebrows shot up. "That was fast."

"That's a good sign." I pushed off the wall, already feeling the victory humming in my veins.

Quick deliberations almost always favored the defense in cases like this. We just needed them to see the obvious.

We filed back in. The Corwin contingent took their seats at the plaintiff's table. I noted the way Darcy positioned herself directly behind her father, her posture rigid, those icy eyes fixed forward.

I wondered why she hadn't been in court all week.

The jury filed in. I watched their faces. Number Seven had a small smile on her face. Number Four looked relieved.

Yeah. We had this.

The foreperson stood when prompted.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

"We have, Your Honor."

The paper was passed to the judge, reviewed, passed back. Standard procedure, but my heart still kicked up a notch. It always did, right at this moment. The precipice before the fall.

"In the matter of Corwin versus Montana, asking the court to force the removal of the Defendant's animals, how do you find?"

"We find in favor of the defendant, Jack Montana."

Jack's hand landed on my shoulder, squeezing hard. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and grinned.

"The jury has found that the defendant is not operating an illegal llama farm," the judge continued, and I swore I heard a hint of amusement in her voice. "Case closed. Court is adjourned."

The gavel came down.

"Holy shit," Jack breathed. "We actually won."

"Was there ever any doubt?" I turned to him, letting the satisfaction wash over me. This was the part I lived for. The moment when all the work paid off and I had the chance to see my clients drop hundreds of pounds of figurative weight from their shoulders.

"Steaks," Jack said, pointing at me. "We're doing steaks. The biggest, most expensive steaks in Los Angeles. My treat."

"You're damn right it's your treat. Do you know how many llama names I had to memorize?"

Jack laughed, clapping me on the back. "Cheddar thanks you for your service."

"I'm not going to ask how you came up with the names."

"I didn't. Chantilly did."

"Of course."

I shook my head, still grinning, and let my gaze drift across the aisle to the plaintiff's table, where Lou Corwin leaned toward his attorney and spoke in low, clipped tones. He spoke with urgency and held up a hand when his attorney tried to speak. Lou wasn't happy.

The hair on the nape of my neck suddenly rose and I glanced slightly to the right, where Darcy Corwin's blue stare dragged me into her orbit. Her brows, nearly as blonde as her hair, drew together, and she shifted to rest her weight on one hip while crossing her arms under her breasts.

Nice. Real nice.

I tried not to stare. But damn. The woman had the kind of curves that begged a man to fall to his knees before her and worship her the way she deserved. The way it was intended.

I smiled at her. Gave her a little nod of acknowledgment and indulged in checking her out one more time.

Her glare intensified. If looks could kill, I'd be bleeding out on the courtroom floor.

I laughed. Couldn't help it. Her jaw tightened and those pretty lips pressed even thinner.

Darcy Corwin turned away from me with deliberate slowness, shutting me down as thoroughly as I'd just shut down her father's case.

I was still smiling as Jack dragged me toward the doors, already talking about which steakhouse we should hit.

I glanced back one more time but she wasn't looking at me. I had a feeling she wouldn't think about me again. Which was why I was thinking about what annoying thing Jack might do next to get his neighbor to sue him again.

Hopefully, his daughter would sit in court with him next time.

I had spent my entire life preparing to run Corwin Gems. Apparently, that didn't mean I knew how to protect it from my own father.

The offices of Corwin Gems occupied the twelfth floor of a sleek building in downtown LA. We weren't flashy. We didn't need to be. Our reputation spoke for itself.

Or it had, until yesterday.

I stepped off the elevator at five minutes before eight in my perfectly pressed Armani suit. My heels clacked across the tile floors and my head ached. Perhaps I'd done my bun a little too tightly, but I wanted to send the right message: don't fuck with me.

The receptionist, a young woman whose name I could never remember, looked up with a smile that faltered when she saw my expression. She stammered out a polite greeting that I returned with a nod before continuing past her desk and deeper into the office. I didn't slow down. Didn't stop to exchange pleasantries or ask about anyone's weekend. I had one destination and one purpose.

My father's corner office.

The door was closed, but I didn't knock. I never did. I pushed it open and found him exactly where I expected, sitting behind his massive mahogany desk, silver hair perfectly combed, and wearing one of his expensive custom suits.

He looked up when I entered. Didn't smile. Neither did I. He knew I was pissed at him.

"Darcy."

"Father."

I closed the door behind me and crossed to one of the leather chairs facing his desk. I didn't sit. Sitting implied this would be a long conversation.

"You've weakened us," I said. No preamble. No softening. "As a family. As a company. You've made us look petty and vindictive over a handful of *llamas*."

He didn't argue. Didn't defend himself. He just nodded once like a man accepting a verdict he'd already handed down to himself.

When he told me he was suing *the* Jack Montana, I thought he was joking. All bark and no bite. A silly neighbor argument. And then that stupid attorney actually took the case. There was no talking my father out of it once that blowhard convinced him he could win. Was he planning to slaughter the damn things?

"That whole thing was an exercise in futility and humiliation," I snapped.

"I know."

Good. At least he wasn't delusional about the damage.

I crossed my arms, studying him. The tension in his shoulders hadn't eased since yesterday. If anything, it had settled deeper, becoming part of his posture. He was a man who had lost a legal battle against llamas. And he had lost *very* publicly.

"Jack's lawyer," I said, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. "He made you look like a rich bully trying to steal a family's pets."

My father's eyes flashed with something dark. "That son of a bitch made me look like a fool. And he made that fucking twit Jack Montana look like a victim." He shook his head, disgust evident in every line of his face. "The man has ten llamas. Ten! On a residential property. But somehow *I'm* the villain."

"You should have hired *him* for the lawsuit."

The words hung between us. My father's mouth twisted into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Maybe next time."

I uncrossed my arms and moved to the window, looking out at the City of Angels. All glass and ambition and people scrambling over each other to

get ahead. Beautiful people all hoping to become the next big Hollywood star, like Jack Montana.

“Did you really think Jack was running a farm?” I asked without turning around.

He audibly sighed. “Well, he might not be breeding them to sell them, but they’re definitely breeding.”

I turned to face him, one eyebrow raised. “Is that the problem? You don’t like witnessing the miracle of llama conception?”

“My fences are high enough that I never see them.” He paused, and then his lips curled back. “But I can hear them.”

“Ew.”

He nodded, eyes glazing over. “It’s relentless, Darcy.”

“Well,” I said, shaking off the thought of llama sex noises, “you’ll have plenty of time to figure out that situation now that you’re stepping back from running the company.”

He nodded with a faint smile. “Yes, I will. The next few months will be transitioning you into the CEO role. Time to step out from the shadows and let the world see who you are.”

My chin raised a fraction. “I’ve been working toward this my whole life.”

“This afternoon’s press conference will be the first step in that direction,” he went on. “You need to be flawless today. It’s nearly the season to get people in the ring-buying mood. The holidays are our biggest sales opportunity. The runway to prepare is shortening.”

“I know. Lovey-dovey. Sentimental. Sappy. I can do that.”

“This is important, Darcy. If you want to prove you can fill my shoes, it starts with this press conference.”

“I won’t let you down.” I turned on my heel and left his office, my mind already running through the thousand things I needed to accomplish before three o’clock. This was my moment. Once I made the announcement, things would start happening.

My office was smaller than my father’s but no less meticulously organized. Every file in its place. Every surface clear except for the items I deemed necessary. A laptop. A phone. A single framed photo of my mother that I kept facing away from visitors.

That picture was for my eyes only.

I settled into my chair and pulled up the press conference notes on my computer. The PR team had sent over a draft of my remarks yesterday, and I'd already read through them four times. Five wouldn't hurt. It'd be great if I didn't have to look at the teleprompter at all.

Fall in Love collection. Twelve unique engagement ring designs. Ethically sourced diamonds. Modern settings with classic elegance. Available in two weeks, just in time for the holiday proposal season.

I mouthed the words as I read, feeling them settle into my muscle memory. Public speaking wasn't my strong suit. I was better behind the scenes, making decisions that made money rather than standing in front of cameras trying to look all warm and fuzzy. The kind of person who sold love for a living.

I never claimed to be a saleswoman. No happy couple wanted to walk into one of our stores and see me standing behind the glass cases. I didn't sell the whole fantasy. I didn't kiss ass and tell every potential bride she was lucky. I didn't ooh and ahh when I heard the proposal stories.

Blah, blah, blah.

This was *my* moment. Today was my chance to show the world that Corwin Gems wasn't just my father's company anymore. I was stepping up. There was a new sheriff in town.

Unfortunately, people would be watching and judging every move I made the first year. And it all started with the press conference. I refused to be seen as a product of nepotism. I earned the job through blood, sweat, and tears. That didn't matter, though. I still had to prove I was worthy.

And once I did, I would hit the ground running. I had big plans for growing the company. My father had lectured me many times about making too many changes too fast. He was stuck in the last decade. Changes were necessary.

The hours slipped by faster than I expected. Meetings blurred together. Budget reviews. Marketing approvals. A brief argument with our head designer. All the nonsense tedious stuff that I would eventually delegate once I moved into my father's chair.

Before I knew it, my assistant, Margot, was knocking on my door.

"It's two forty-five, Ms. Corwin. They're ready for you in the conference room."

I stood, smoothing down my blazer. Navy blue today. Professional but not severe. The stylists had suggested something softer, maybe a blush pink,

something that said *romance* and *engagement rings* and *love*.

I'd told them where they could shove their blush pink.

"The teleprompter?" I asked as I walked past Margot into the hallway.

"All set up. PR loaded your statement this morning. They made some minor changes to the phrasing, but you just have to read it." She fell into step beside me, her tablet clutched to her chest. "They've also prepared some talking points in case anyone asks about the lawsuit."

"No one's asking about the lawsuit."

"Right. Of course." She nodded quickly. "But just in case."

"There is no just in case, Margot. We're announcing the Fall in Love collection. That's the story. That's the only story. No one gives a shit about llamas. They'll ask questions about the direction of the company. That's what they care about."

She nodded again, wisely choosing silence.

The conference room had been transformed into a press staging area. Rows of chairs filled with journalists. Camera crews positioned along the walls. A podium at the front with the Corwin Gems logo displayed prominently behind it.

And there, mounted just below eye level where the audience couldn't see it, was the teleprompter.

I took a breath. Squared my shoulders. Walked to the podium with my heels clicking out a steady rhythm. The room quieted.

"Good afternoon," I said, my voice clear and controlled. "Thank you all for being here today."

My eyes went to the screen that looked like a toddler had finger painted on the damn thing. It was smudged all to hell.

No worries. I didn't really need it. It was nothing more than a crutch.

The teleprompter scrolled smoothly. I let my eyes track the words as I spoke. It was easy. Almost too easy. I talked about the collection and the inspiration behind each design. I went into the spiel about Corwin Gems evolving to meet the needs of modern couples while honoring the timeless tradition of commitment.

The words flowed. The cameras flashed. I was doing it.

And then, toward the end of my speech, the words I had practiced weren't the ones appearing on the screen. The PR team had changed more than a few details. I glanced at the teleprompter for help, but of course, the smudges were right where I didn't need them.

I kept going, trusting my preparation.

"I'm honored to announce that I will be transitioning into the role of CEO over the coming months," I said, lifting my chin slightly. "The Fall in Love collection represents my personal vision for the future of Corwin Gems. These rings are more than jewelry. They're a promise. A beginning."

I squinted slightly, trying to make out the words through the blur.

"Under me love gives up hope."

The words left my mouth before my brain caught up.

Gives up hope.

Not gives us hope.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Someone in the back let out a small, startled laugh.

My stomach dropped and my armpits turned swampy.

I should have corrected myself. I should have laughed it off, made some self-deprecating joke about needing more coffee and turned it into a charming moment that humanized me. That's what someone used to giving speeches would have done. That would all become clear in hindsight.

But I wasn't a public speaker. I wasn't charming or self-deprecating. I was a god damn perfectionist and I had just fucked up.

"Thank you for your time."

Hands shot up.

"I won't be taking questions," I heard myself say, the words clipped and cold.

I turned and walked off the stage. Not walked. Marched. Like a soldier retreating from a battle she'd just lost. The doors swung shut behind me, cutting off the confused murmur of the press corps.

Margot was waiting in the hallway, her face pale. "Ms. Corwin—"

"Don't."

I kept walking. Past the conference room and my father's office. I didn't stop until I reached the emergency stairwell. I pushed through the door and let it slam shut behind me.

The concrete walls echoed with my ragged breathing. I could already see the headlines. I would go viral on Twitter.

Corwin Gems CEO: Under Me, Love Gives Up Hope.

I'd just announced to the world, on live television, that under my leadership, love didn't stand a chance.

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The day after my courtroom victory, I was riding high. I wouldn't say I strutted into the office, but I did. I nodded at my receptionist, Melissa.

"Good morning, Mr. Blackwell." She smiled.

"Good morning. Is Anne in?"

"Yes. No. She was. She brought your coffee and then went to get your dry cleaning and the usual errands."

Anne, my assistant/therapist/right hand. I paid her very well to do all those jobs.

"Any calls?" I asked.

"I put the messages on your desk."

"Thank you, Melissa."

I strolled through my office. Mine. I could be working for some big firm with ten different names on the door but I didn't need the names. I had the only one that mattered.

Three years out of law school and I had this office. This view. A client roster that read like a who's who of Hollywood elite. Some people might call that luck. I called it busting my ass.

I took off my jacket, hung it on the hook, and picked up the coffee that was still nice and hot. I sipped, testing the temperature, and found it to be exactly the way I liked it.

I leaned back in my Herman Miller chair. The twelve-hundred-dollar one that my brother Callum had called an unnecessary extravagance until he

sat in it. Some things were absolutely necessary, like my cherry wood executive desk.

The Corwin file was closed, but I had a stack of new cases demanding attention. A pop star whose ex-boyfriend was shopping around a tell-all book. A cheating husband that got himself into some trouble.

Hollywood never ran out of problems. Which meant I never ran out of work.

I was halfway through drafting a cease-and-desist letter when my office door swung open without so much as a knock.

“Surprise!” Cleo breezed in like she owned the place. Her smile was the one that meant she was up to something. She was dressed like she was prepared to hop on a runway should the need arise.

“You know,” I said, not looking up from my laptop, “most people knock.”

“Most people aren’t your favorite sister.”

“You’re my only sister.”

“Exactly.” She dropped into one of the chairs across from my desk, crossing her legs with the elegance of a queen. “Which makes me the favorite by default.”

I finally looked up, unable to stop the smile tugging at my lips. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I told you. Surprise.” She gestured toward the door with a flourish. “Ta-da.”

Jeremy walked in.

My youngest brother looked like he’d just stepped off a magazine cover, which made sense considering that was literally his job.

He was all tanned skin from whatever exotic location he’d been shooting in. Hair artfully tousled thanks to the thousand-dollar haircut. Designer clothes that he probably jacked from his latest shoot for our cousins’ Blackwell Couture label.

“Holy shit,” I said, pushing back from my desk. “When did you get back?”

“Last night.” Jeremy grinned, spreading his arms wide. “Miss me?”

“Australia, right?” I stood and pulled him into a hug, clapping him on the back. “How was it?”

“Hot. Sunny. Full of beautiful women with sexy accents.” He shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “You know how it is.”

“I really don’t.”

“That’s because you’re boring. And stuffy.” He dropped onto the leather couch against the wall and stretched out. “All you do is work.”

“Some of us have real jobs.”

“Standing in front of a camera for twelve hours is a real job.”

“Standing in front of a camera while people do your hair and makeup and tell you you’re pretty,” I corrected. “Very strenuous.”

Cleo laughed. “Boys, play nice.”

Jeremy flipped me off, but he was smiling. He looked good. Rested. The modeling gigs with our New York cousins had been keeping him busy. According to our mother, too busy. She complained that she never saw him anymore.

“How long are you in town?” I asked.

“Two weeks. Then I’m off to Milan.” He said it casually, like jetting off to Italy was as mundane as a trip to the grocery store. “After that, who knows? Paris, maybe. Or back to New York.”

“Must be rough.”

“Someone has to be the pretty one in this family.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

Cleo stood and moved to examine the awards on my bookshelf stuffed with various accolades I’d collected over my short but meteoric career. “We came to kidnap you for lunch,” she said. “You’ve been working too hard. Jeremy just got back. We should celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“Being young, successful, and devastatingly attractive.” Jeremy sat up, running a hand through his hair. “Also, your llama thing. Cleo told me about it. Hilarious.”

“It was a serious legal matter.”

“You defended a movie star’s right to keep ten llamas named after cheese and candy.”

I couldn’t help but grin. I *had* done that.

Jeremy snorted. “God, I love your job.”

I glanced at my laptop, then at my siblings. The cease-and-desist could wait. The harassment claim wasn’t going anywhere. And I hadn’t seen Jeremy in almost two months.

“Fine,” I said. “Let me send one more email and we’ll go.”

“That’s what you always say,” Cleo complained. “One more email turns into five more emails turns into ‘sorry, I have a conference call.’”

“One email. I promise. And shouldn’t you be working?” I asked. “Last I heard, you had brides fighting for you to design their dresses.”

“I work all the time,” she said with a sigh. “My waiting list is a year out, which means one lunch is not going to make a difference. If they don’t like it, they’re welcome to find someone else to design their dresses.”

I laughed. “It’s always nice to have so much work that you can turn people away.”

I sat back down and pulled up my inbox. I fired off a quick response to my paralegal about the plagiarism case, then started to close my laptop.

That was when the notification chimed.

Google Alert: Corwin Gems.

I’d set it up back when Lou Corwin’s lawsuit hit my desk. Know your enemy and all that. I’d meant to turn it off after the verdict, but I hadn’t gotten around to it yet. The headline made me pause.

Queen of Diamonds or Queen of Ice? Corwin Gems Heiress’s Press Conference Takes Awkward Turn

There was a thumbnail image of Darcy Corwin at a podium, her face frozen in horror. Like she’d just witnessed a crime.

“Holy shit,” I said.

“What is it?” Cleo hopped up, came around the desk, and leaned over my shoulder.

“Ooh, is that the daughter? The one from the llama case?”

“She wasn’t part of the case,” I said.

Cleo leaned closer. “Click it. I want to see what happened.”

“What is it?” Jeremy asked. He came around to stand on my other side.

“Click it,” Cleo said.

I clicked it. The video loaded. Darcy stood at the podium in a navy blazer, her platinum hair pulled back. She looked polished. Professional. Completely in control.

“These rings are more than jewelry. They’re a promise. A beginning.”

I shrugged. “This—”

Cleo shushed me.

“Under me, love gives up hope.” Darcy’s words hung in the air.

“Oh shit,” Jeremy said with a laugh.

Darcy's face went through about six different emotions in the span of two seconds. Confusion. Realization. Panic. And then nothing. A wall slamming down.

"Thank you for your time," she said, her voice suddenly clipped. "I won't be taking questions."

And then she walked off. The video cut to a news anchor trying very hard not to smile.

"Oh, that poor woman," Cleo said, her hand pressed to her chest. "That was painful."

"Why didn't she just correct herself?" Jeremy asked. "Like, laugh it off? No one would have cared."

"She panicked," I said, watching the video loop back to the beginning.

"Clearly." Cleo shook her head. "But running off stage like that? Now it's going to be everywhere. The social media people are going to eat her alive."

"Man, I fell on a runway once," Jeremy said. "The rule is to get up, maybe make a joke, and no one cares. She's fucked."

The internet was merciless, and Darcy Corwin had just handed them a gift. They'd be feasting on her for at least a week.

"Come on," Cleo said, tugging at my arm. "You can doom-scroll later. I'm starving."

I closed the laptop and grabbed my jacket. The Corwin situation wasn't my problem.

We ended up at a trendy spot in West Hollywood. The menu didn't have prices because if you had to ask, you couldn't afford it. Jeremy got recognized twice before we even sat down, which he pretended to be annoyed by but clearly loved.

"You could wear a hat," I said. "Sunglasses."

"Why?" He grinned. "They'd still recognize me."

"So," Cleo said once we'd ordered. "Mom's gala is next week."

"The charity thing?" Jeremy asked, scrolling through his phone. Probably checking how many new followers he'd gained since breakfast.

"Yes, the charity thing. She's raising money for hungry kids. It's important to her." Cleo fixed Jeremy with a look. "You're going."

"I'm going, I'm going." He held up his hands in surrender. "I just got back. I haven't even unpacked. But yes, I'll be there in a tux, looking gorgeous, making Mom proud."

“Beau?”

“I’ll be there,” I said. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Good.” Cleo smiled, satisfied.

“I can make some calls,” I offered. “A few of my clients might be interested in the tax write-off.”

“Always the lawyer.”

The food arrived. A salad for Cleo, a turkey burger for Jeremy, and a BLT for me. We ate for a few minutes before Jeremy pointed his finger at me.

“So. The gala. You bringing a date?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m not seeing anyone and I’m certainly not going to cold call some random woman.”

Jeremy shook his head. “Beau, brother. You just won a big case. Take a night off. Find a beautiful woman. Have some fun.”

“I have plenty of fun.”

“Work doesn’t count.”

“I go on dates,” I said defensively. “Casual things. Here and there.”

“Here and there,” Cleo echoed, her eyebrow arched. “That’s not dating.”

“It works for me.”

“You’re going to die alone.”

“At least I’ll die with a corner office.”

Jeremy laughed, but Cleo just shook her head. “What about you?” I asked her, eager to redirect. “You bringing someone?”

Her expression soured. “No. I don’t have time to meet people in real life, and online dating is a minefield of disappointment.”

Jeremy snorted. “Amateur hour.”

“What about you?” I asked him. “Let me guess. You’ve got women lined up from here to Milan.”

“I’ve narrowed it down,” he said with absolutely zero shame. “Six possibilities.”

“Pig,” Cleo said in disgust.

I held up my hand, which Jeremy quickly slapped.

“You’re both pigs.”

We finished lunch with the usual bickering and laughter. It felt good being with them. I spent so much time in courtrooms and conference rooms

that I sometimes forgot what it was like to just exist with people who really knew me.

We headed out, all of us checking our phones. Cleo hugged me goodbye.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she said.

She shoved Jeremy playfully. “I’ll see you two piggies later.”

Jeremy climbed into his Uber, Cleo into a cab.

I checked my app to see where my Uber was. My phone vibrated in my hand. The name on the screen made me freeze.

Lou Corwin.

“Shit,” I muttered.

This couldn’t be good. He was going to hold me personally responsible for whatever llama catastrophe happened. Did he witness more llama lovin’? Oh God, if they ate some royal rosebush, we were going to be dragged back into court.

I swiped to accept and brought the phone to my ear. “Mr. Corwin, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Mr. Blackwell.” His voice was gruff, which told me this was not a friendly phone call. “I have a proposition for you.”

“I’m listening.”

“I want to hire you.”

“You know that would be a conflict,” I said.

“Not to go against that jackass Jack. I want to hire you to help with my daughter’s image.”

I almost laughed. “With all due respect, sir, I saw the press conference. She definitely stepped in it. But I’m not a PR guy. I’m an attorney.”

“I know exactly what you are.” There was a pause and then a sigh. “What you did in that courtroom and to me is exactly what I’m looking for. If you can convince a jury that Jack Montana was the victim in our legal dispute, you can polish anyone’s image.”

I blinked. “Well, jury trials are all about optics. It’s not just about the evidence. So I suppose you’re not entirely wrong.”

“Look, I need someone who can change the current narrative going on with my daughter. And that’s you.”

I stepped back from the curb and out of the way of the many pedestrians. “Is your daughter on board with me helping?” I asked.

The pause that followed told me everything I needed to know.

“She’ll be on board if I tell her to be,” Lou said finally.

“So that’s a no.”

“It’s a ‘she’ll do what she’s told to save her ass.’”

Those icy eyes could be weapons. Her dismissive glance. The glares. She was going to hate this. She would hate me.

“Sounds like a challenge,” I said.

“Is that a problem?”

I smiled. “Mr. Corwin, I don’t have problems. I have opportunities.” I stepped back up to the curb. “I’ll give it a shot.”

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I did what any self-respecting CEO-in-waiting would do after publicly declaring that love was hopeless under her leadership. I hid. I went home, changed into my oldest sweatpants, and spent way too long in my greenhouse. I talked with my tomatoes and strawberries. Told them all about my worries.

My house was my sanctuary. A four-bedroom remodeled home in Bel-Air. It was my own little oasis in a loud, sprawling city. Gardens, my greenhouse, and a pool all surrounded by lush greenery to give the illusion I lived alone on an island.

I'd spent time renovating it to make it mine. Italian leather furniture. A fireplace I'd never used but always planned to when I had time one chilly January day. Art on the walls that a consultant had picked out because I didn't really give a shit about art. I preferred to look in my backyard. Better yet, I preferred to be in my backyard listening to the birds and appreciating nature. I was five minutes away from buying one of those bird feeders with a camera. I heard it was supposed to lower your stress level. At the rate I was going, I'd need fifty.

I stretched out on the couch, contemplating whether I could feasibly never leave this house again, when my doorbell rang.

I didn't move. Whoever it was could go away. It was a gated community, which meant it was a neighbor or someone on my approved

list. Since that list was very short, it wasn't difficult to figure out who it could be.

I still didn't move. The doorbell rang again. Then my phone buzzed.

Open the door. I have pizza.

Dad. Bingo. Mystery solved.

I dragged myself off the couch and padded to the front door. When I opened it, he stood on my doorstep holding a pizza box and a six-pack of beer. He was still in his suit from the office, though he'd loosened his tie. His silver hair was slightly disheveled, which for him was the equivalent of looking like he'd been through a hurricane.

I had done that. My disaster was raining down on him.

He walked past me into the house without waiting for an invitation. I followed him to the kitchen, where he set the pizza box on the marble island and started opening beers. The smell hit me immediately. Pepperoni and mushroom. Our go-to anytime there was something big going on. Combination pizza was for after a long day. Hawaiian was for celebrations. Today was definitely a pepperoni and mushroom day.

Pizza was our thing. Had been since I was eight years old and Mom was gone and Dad didn't know how to cook anything that didn't come out of a box. He worked constantly back then, building Corwin Gems from a regional jeweler into a national brand. But he never left me at home with the nannies or the housekeepers. Every night, no matter how late he worked, I was there in his office, doing homework on his couch or coloring at his conference table while he took calls and reviewed contracts.

And when it got late enough that we were both starving, we'd order pizza. It wasn't fancy. It wasn't the kind of parenting that showed up in heartwarming movies. But it was ours. Pizza meant Dad was there, even when everything else was falling apart.

He slid a beer across the counter to me. I took it and drank straight from the can because I might be a Corwin, but I was also a girl who appreciated a cold beer with the aluminum taste.

"So," he said, flipping open the pizza box. "That could have gone better."

I laughed, though there was no humor in it. "You think?"

"I'm not upset with you."

"You should be." I grabbed a slice and bit into it, needing grease and carbs to soothe my bruised soul. "I just announced to the entire world that

under my leadership, love gives up hope. That's going to be the headline for weeks. Months, maybe. Every time someone Googles my name, that's what they're going to find."

"Probably."

"The board is going to question whether I'm ready. Everything I've worked for gone with a single two-letter word."

"Darcy." His voice was firm but not harsh. The voice he used when he needed me to stop spiraling and listen. "I'm not mad at you."

I took another drink of beer. We were going to need more at this rate. "Why not? You should be furious. I had one job. Stand up there, read the teleprompter, don't screw up. And I screwed up."

"The screw-up wasn't misreading the prompter. It happened when you panicked."

"I know."

He took a long drink of his beer, studying me with those sharp eyes that had seen me through every crisis. "You know what I taught you, growing up?"

"A lot of things."

"Never let the world see you fall apart." He set down his beer. "That's what I drilled into you. When things go wrong, you don't cry. You don't show weakness. You handle it privately and present a strong face to the world."

"I've tried my best to follow that advice."

"And that's exactly what you did." He shrugged like it was obvious. "You were about to fall apart up there. I could see it. So you got yourself away before anyone could see you crack."

I stared at him. "That's not a defense. That's the problem. I should have been able to handle it. I should have laughed it off, corrected myself, moved on. Instead, I ran like a scared little girl."

"Maybe." He grabbed another slice of pizza. "But you did what I trained you to do. You protected yourself. You didn't let them see you vulnerable." A pause. "That's on me, not you."

I hadn't realized how much I'd needed to hear that. Not absolution exactly but understanding. Recognition that I wasn't weak or incompetent.

"It's still a disaster," I said quietly.

"It is. But it's a fixable disaster." He met my eyes. "Which is why I hired someone to help."

I straightened. "Already? Who?"

"The man you told me I should have hired for the lawsuit."

It took me a second to process that.

"No." I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

"It's done."

"The guy who made you look like a fool in court? He stood up there and called you a rich bully trying to steal a family's pets? That's who you want to help me?"

"Yes."

"Are you insane?"

Dad fixed me with that look. The one that said he'd made up his mind and arguing was pointless.

"That case should have been unwinnable for Jack," he said. "And somehow, Beau Blackwell made that jury believe that I was the bad guy for not wanting a barnyard next to my home."

"I agree I need help, but I was thinking more along the lines of one of those PR guys. The guys that make a cheating husband who knocked up his mistress look like a saint."

He shook his head. "He's good, Darcy. You don't need a PR strategist. He knows how to sell a story. He has some magical power to make people believe what he wants them to believe." He wiped his mouth. "If anyone can turn your image around, it's him."

"I don't need my image turned around. I need people to forget this ever happened. Does he have a magic wand?"

I grabbed my beer and drained half of it in one go. Very unladylike.

Beau Blackwell. He had the audacity to laugh when I glared at him. He was everything I despised. All smooth, charming, and the kind of person who could talk their way out of anything.

And now my father wanted me to work with him to repair my very public mistake.

"There has to be someone else," I said. "A PR firm. A crisis management specialist. Someone who doesn't have a personal history with our family."

"There are plenty of PR firms. None of them have what Blackwell has."

"And what's that?"

"The ability to make people love someone they shouldn't." Dad's voice was matter of fact. "You saw what he did with Jack Montana. By the time

Blackwell was done, the jury thought he was the victim.”

“So he’s good at lying. Awesome. Man of the year.”

“He’s good at telling stories. At changing the narrative. That’s what you need, if you want to save face.”

I didn’t need some slick lawyer to come in and fix my problems for me. I’d spent my entire life proving I could handle things on my own. I was capable and competent and worthy of the position I was about to inherit.

“You’ve got a few months before you officially take over as CEO of Corwin Gems,” Dad said, his voice gentle. “That’s enough time to turn this around. But you need to actually turn it around. The investors need to see that you can handle pressure. You have to prove you can face a crisis and come out stronger. Right now, all they’ve seen is you running away from a mistake.”

I groaned and dropped my head. “I know.”

“They need to be as confident in you as I am.”

He believed in me. Even after today.

“I need to think about it,” I said finally.

He nodded. “That’s fair. Sleep on it.”

We finished the pizza, talking about the latest Hollywood scandals and the nice weather. It was comfortable, familiar. The kinds of conversations we always had.

When he left, he hugged me at the door. “You’re going to be fine,” he said. “You’re a Corwin. We don’t stay down.”

After he was gone, I cleaned up the pizza box and the empty beer cans and tried to convince myself he was right.

I didn’t sleep well. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the press conference and the cameras capturing every second of my humiliation. It was going to follow me forever.

I tossed and turned until three in the morning, then gave up and went to my home office. If I couldn’t sleep, I might as well work. I’d wanted to run Corwin Gems since I was a little girl. I loved watching my father work and had decided I was going to be just like him.

And now, when I was finally about to reach the finish line, I’d tripped over my own feet. The worst part was I knew what I should have done. I’d replayed it a thousand times in my head. A quick correction and a pivot back to the script. Any decent public speaker could have handled it.

My instinct had been to panic and run. That wasn't going to work when I was in charge.

I hated admitting it, but maybe Dad was right. Maybe I did need help.

Not because I couldn't handle the job. Public speaking wasn't a skill I'd ever developed. I'd been too busy developing everything else.

After getting a couple hours of sleep, I knew what I had to do. I called my father after my second cup of coffee.

"I'll talk to him," I said without a good morning. "Beau Blackwell. I'll hear what he has to say."

"Good."

"I'm not making any promises. If I don't like his approach, or if he's as insufferable in person as he was in that courtroom, I'm walking away."

He chuckled. "I'd expect nothing less."

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I was never late. Not to court, not to client meetings, not to anything involving other people. Being late was disrespectful, and it was also a power move. I didn't need to play power games with people. I was already winning.

I showed up to the coffee shop ten minutes early, the scent of strong Arabica beans washing over me. I got in line behind a couple of teen girls carrying on about the concert they were at last night. I ordered an Americano and scanned the dining room in search of a table. A few women in workout clothes were sipping iced coffees in the corner. A tech bro sat with his laptop open, tablet beside it. He had on headphones and talked animatedly to whoever was on the screen.

Imagine my surprise when I spotted Darcy Corwin already sitting at a table near the window with a steaming cup in front of her. Her back straight, eyes locked on me. Her hair braided tightly down her back once again. Starched pantsuit that could probably stand in her closet and wait for her to jump in. No hangers need apply. It was a dull dove gray with a boring ass white blouse. She looked like she'd come straight from a board meeting.

I looked down at my own attire of dark jeans and a black t-shirt. It was Saturday. I didn't have a dress code for weekends. And we were having casual coffee, not negotiating million-dollar deals. Her stony expression was very judgy. I wasn't going to personally check, but I imagined there would be a stick shoved somewhere that would make sitting a challenge.

She was attractive. I'd give her that. Even with the expression that suggested she found the entire world faintly disappointing, she was genuinely pretty in a severe, untouchable kind of way. She also seemed like an absolute nightmare.

"May I sit?" I asked.

"I'd rather not have to stare up at you the entire time."

I smiled and pulled out the chair. "Beau Blackwell."

"I know who you are and you know who I am. We can skip the nonsense introductions."

Not a stick, a fucking two-by-four.

"Then let's get right to the good stuff," I said, refusing to let her get under my skin.

"My father hired you. I still don't entirely understand why. I agreed to meet you because I told him I would, not because I agree with any of this. Why? Why did he hire you?"

"Because I'm good at what I do."

"You're an entertainment attorney."

"I have done entertainment law. I handle other things as well. And I ran circles around your father's expensive attorneys." I leaned back in my chair. "Your father wanted the best, and that's why he came to me."

Her eyes flashed a dark blue before turning icy again. "What I need is a PR firm. A real one. With a team and a strategy and people whose entire job is reputation management." She sipped her coffee. "Instead I have you."

"Instead you have me," I agreed pleasantly. "Lucky you."

She did not appear to feel lucky. "I don't know what my father sees in you."

I leaned forward, dropping the easy grin for a second. "Look. I can walk away right now if you're not interested. I don't need this job and you don't need to sit here pretending you want my help, which you do as well as you handle press conferences."

Her mouth dropped open. That was a low blow, but she'd been judging me the second she laid eyes on me.

I took another drink, letting that little zinger fester for a second. "But before you decide, you should know what people are saying about you out there."

She went still, hands tightening on that cup in her hand that I hoped didn't get launched at me.

“They’re calling you the Queen of Ice. They’re saying love is being canceled under your watch. Engagement rings are for couples who don’t really mean it.” I watched her face. Nothing moved, but something tightened slightly around her eyes. “The narrative is that you’re cold, unromantic, and you’re trying to sell people the most meaningful purchase of their lives. The question everyone’s asking is, how do you buy an everlasting symbol of love from someone who doesn’t believe in it? Someone so cold.”

Silence.

Outside the window, a couple walked by holding hands and arguing about something, but they held hands while they did it.

I almost felt bad for her. I had come out swinging. That was what I did. I was an attorney and I knew how to land punches to get my message across.

I set down my cup. “Being branded the ice queen isn’t just a bad look. It’s a real business risk. Customers need to feel good about who they’re buying from. Right now they don’t.”

“I don’t need you to tell me about *my* customers.”

“Sure about that?”

She narrowed her eyes, and if there was ever someone who could freeze someone with a look, it was her. But I didn’t back down. I sipped my coffee and waited.

“Why does my father think you’re someone who could improve the situation?”

I laughed. “Hell if I know. I guess he recognizes talent.”

“You’re arrogant.”

“So are you.” I spread my hands. “Do you want my help or not?”

She looked at me for a long moment. Assessing. Running whatever internal calculations she ran before she agreed to anything. The teen girls were giggling and taking selfies behind her. Life happened all around her but she was locked in an internal war of her own making.

“Fine,” she said. “What’s your idea?”

“You need to live more publicly. Get out there and let people see you’re a human being. Not just the one press conference, not just a statement about a teleprompter. Actually get out in the world, being seen, being warm. Being a normal person that eats, breathes, and God forbid, smiles.”

She shifted in her seat and sat up impossibly straighter. That stick must run straight up her spine. “I knew being the head of the company would be difficult. That was never in question. But I didn’t expect this kind of immediate scrutiny.” Her jaw tightened. “We’ve already released a statement explaining that I misread the teleprompter. Isn’t that enough?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because everyone already assumed you misspoke. That’s obvious. A statement confirming the obvious doesn’t change anything.” I set my coffee down and leaned forward. “The teleprompter thing is a blip. What’s killing you is the narrative that’s building underneath it. You’re cold. You’re unromantic. You’re trying to sell engagement rings that are symbols of eternal love and commitment while looking like you’ve never experienced a genuine emotion in your life.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. Good. At least she felt something.

“Being branded the ice queen puts you in real danger,” I continued. “Customers don’t want to buy their forever ring from someone who looks like she’d rather be anywhere else. You look like someone that only cares about that bottom line. Selling expensive rings to get richer. It’s not sexy. Investors don’t want to back a CEO who can’t connect with people. So we need to get you out there. Let people see the real you. Warm up your reputation before it freezes over completely.”

She quietly processed what I said. I could practically see the gears turning behind those icy blue eyes.

“And how exactly do you propose we do that?”

“Come with me to a charity event. Next week.”

Her eyebrows arched. “A charity event.”

“Not as my date,” I clarified quickly. “As my plus-one. There’s a difference.”

“Is there?”

“Absolutely.” I smiled. “It’s a gala my mother is hosting. She runs a charity that raises money to feed hungry kids. Good cause, good people, good press. You show up, you smile, you let people see you care about something other than profit margins.”

Something flickered across her face. Hesitation, maybe. Or calculation again.

“Are there going to be kids there?” she asked.

I blinked. "Do you have a problem with children?"

"No, it's fine. I just want to wrap my head around the vibe."

"The vibe is rich people writing checks and feeling good about themselves. There might be a few kids for photo ops, but mostly it's adults in formal wear drinking champagne and congratulating each other on their generosity." I shrugged. "You'll fit right in."

She didn't look convinced, but she didn't say no either.

I let my gaze drift over her outfit again. The hair pulled back so tightly it probably gave her a headache. The black eyeliner that looked great for a night out but a little harsh on a Saturday morning.

"You can't dress like this, though," I said.

Her spine somehow straightened even more. "Excuse me?"

I gestured at her and shook my head. "Like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you just came back from a funeral." I tilted my head, considering. "Working as the mortician."

Those icy eyes turned absolutely arctic. "Excuse me? This is fucking Armani."

I chuckled at her F-bomb. Plenty of venom in her bite.

"I'm not trying to insult you," I said. "I'm trying to help you. That outfit says don't talk to me, don't look at me, don't even think about approaching me. That's the opposite of what we need."

"This is professional attire. Do you expect me to sashay around in yoga pants or whatever it is you're wearing?"

"I'm wearing jeans. That's what normal people wear in their downtime. No one walks around buttoned up all day every day."

"You don't know what I wear every day."

"You plan on running a board meeting in the next hour?"

She scowled. "No."

"Well, there you go."

"I don't need permission to dress the way I want," she snapped.

"This is armor." I gestured at her general direction. "You're dressed for battle, not a charity gala. We need people to see you as approachable. Warm. Human. Right now you look like you're about to fire someone."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. For a second I thought she might throw her coffee at me after all.

“I’m not used to getting dressed up for things like this,” she finally admitted, the words coming out like they physically pained her. “Galas aren’t exactly my natural habitat.”

“I know someone who can help.”

“Of course you do.”

I pulled out my phone and quickly fired off a text. “She’ll find you something that says I’m warm and approachable without making you feel like you’re wearing a costume.”

Darcy glared at me, which I realized was her default setting. I could see her weighing her options. She was looking for an out. A way to tell me to fuck off without upsetting her father and destroying her chance of being CEO.

“Fine,” she said at last. “Set it up.”

I grinned. “Was that so hard?”

“Excruciating.”

“See? We’re making progress already.”

OceanofPDF.com

The Blackwell Couture store in Beverly Hills was exactly what I expected and nothing like it at the same time. I'd heard of the place, obviously. I didn't live under a rock. I just never had a reason to shop there. I didn't wear the kinds of things the label sold.

The storefront screamed money in that understated way only truly expensive places could manage. A doorman in a crisp black suit nodded as I approached, holding the glass door open like I was royalty.

I wasn't royalty. I was a CEO-in-waiting who was being forced to play dress-up by a man I barely tolerated. It was insulting.

The interior was even more impressive. Everything looked curated, expensive and oddly welcoming. There was an actual café with a full bar because apparently rich people couldn't shop without access to coffee and cocktails.

Salespeople meandered around talking with customers. It was huge. Massive with an entire second floor. I walked toward the cafe where I was supposed to be meeting Beau.

He sat at a small table near the bar, looking annoyingly comfortable in the same jeans and that stupid shirt that was too tight. His dark hair was just a little long on top with what looked like some natural curl. In court, he had it all perfectly combed. Now, it was messy and tousled and too sexy. The fitted black t-shirt stretched across broad shoulders and showed off arms that suggested he spent time in the gym. His jaw was sharp and clean

shaven but I could already see the hint of a five o'clock shadow. His blue eyes were a warmer blue than mine, like summer instead of winter. They crinkled at the corners when he spotted me.

I really hated how attractive he was. That effortless handsome thing some people were born with. The rest of us had to spend a small fortune on skin care, salon visits, and makeup.

Another reason to be annoyed with him.

Across from him was a woman about his age with similar dark hair and the same striking blue eyes. She was dressed impeccably in a silk blouse, capris, and pretty sandals. She looked elegant and yet casual.

I approached the table, my heels clicking against the floor in the rapid staccato that accompanied me wherever I went.

"You made it," Beau said, standing. "Darcy Corwin, this is my sister, Cleo."

Cleo rose and extended her hand. "It's so nice to meet you. Beau's told me all about you."

"Has he?" I shot him a look. "I can only imagine."

"All good things," Cleo assured me, though her smile suggested she knew exactly what kind of first impression I'd made on her brother. "Please, sit. Can I get you something to drink? Bloody Mary? Mimosa? Martini?"

I hesitated. It was barely two o'clock. But the week I'd had called for it.

"Sure. Whatever you're having."

Cleo went up to the bar while I ignored the stupidly handsome man still watching me with amusement in his eyes. Within minutes, a cocktail appeared in front of me. Something pink and frothy that I normally would have dismissed as too frivolous. It was none of the options she offered. I took a sip anyway. It was really good.

"Is this your store?" I asked, glancing around.

"Our cousins own it," Cleo explained. "The New York Blackwells. But my company, Blackwell Occasions, has a corner of the store for our wedding stuff. I design wedding gowns."

"You design gowns?"

"I do." She smiled with obvious pride. "It's my passion. Helping brides find the dress that makes them feel like the most beautiful version of themselves. My parents wanted me to go into the family business, but I chose my own path."

I took another sip of my cocktail. “The family business?”

“Our parents work in the movie industry,” Beau said, leaning back in his chair. “Dad has his own movie studio. Mom is an actress. But none of us really went that direction. Cleo has her design business with our brother Callum and their friend Mandy. Hollis has a wellness brand. Drew works on the family investment portfolio. Our brother Micah just had his first big directorial debut. Jeremy, the youngest, models for Blackwell Couture.”

“And you became a lawyer,” I said.

He sipped his martini. “I started in entertainment law. Contracts, intellectual property, the boring stuff that keeps Hollywood running.” He shrugged. “But my clients kept asking me to handle other things. Disputes with neighbors. Image problems. Crisis management. I sort of became an all-purpose lawyer for the stars.”

“No criminal law?”

“God, no.” He made a face. “No thank you. I’ll defend your right to keep llamas, but I’m not touching anything that involves actual jail time.”

Cleo laughed. “Beau likes his cases colorful, not criminal.”

They were easy with each other. Comfortable. The kind of siblings who actually liked spending time together. I watched them trade jokes and finish each other’s stories. An ugly, oily feeling washed over me. Jealousy. It was a nasty emotion and I generally avoided it. I didn’t have siblings. I’d never had that kind of easy camaraderie with anyone.

“What about you?” Cleo asked, turning those warm eyes on me. “Any brothers or sisters?”

“No. Just me.”

“And you’ve been working at Corwin Gems your whole life?”

“Since I was old enough to sit in my father’s office without causing trouble.” I took another sip of my drink.

I waited for the follow-up questions. The probing about my childhood, my motivations, my personal life. That was what people did. They asked questions. Got all personal. I understood that was part of the process of making friends. I just didn’t find that kind of thing to be enjoyable.

Cleo nodded like that was perfectly reasonable. “That’s impressive. Not many people know what they want that young.”

I didn’t offer more. Didn’t elaborate on the pizza nights or the homework on my father’s couch. That wasn’t information they needed. And honestly, they didn’t care. It was polite small talk. Unnecessary.

An awkward silence fell over the table. They'd offered their life story and I told them I sat in my father's office. Scintillating.

"So," Cleo said, clapping her hands together. "Shall we look at some options? Beau mentioned you need something for Mom's charity gala."

"Apparently my current wardrobe screams don't approach me."

"It does." Beau shrugged.

I glared at him. He smiled back, completely unbothered by my withering look.

Cleo stood and gestured for me to follow. "Let's see what we can find. I promise this will be painless. Beau is going to sit here and keep his male opinions to himself until we ask."

I doubted it would be painless and I seriously doubted Beau would keep his opinions to himself, but I followed her anyway.

The store was massive. Cleo led me upstairs to a section of eveningwear. Gowns in every color and style imaginable were on display in gorgeous shadow box style exhibits. She moved with the confidence of someone who knew exactly what she was looking for. Like she shopped for gowns all the time.

"What do you usually wear to events like this?" she asked.

"I don't usually go to events like this."

"What about work functions?"

"Suits, mostly. Pantsuits." I touched the sleeve of a dress as we passed. The fabric was impossibly soft. "I don't really do dresses."

Cleo stopped and turned to face me. "When's the last time you wore one?"

I had to think about it. "My college graduation, maybe? Wait, no prom."

"That's a long time," Cleo replied with no judgment in her voice.

"I never needed them. Suits are professional. They send the right message and I'm not worried about bending over and trying to remember if I shaved my legs.

Cleo laughed. "And what message are you sending?"

"That I'm serious. I'm here to work, not to be looked at."

Cleo nodded slowly. "I get that. I really do. But here's the thing." She pulled a dark blue dress off a rack and held it up. "You can be serious and still wear something beautiful. The two aren't mutually exclusive."

I stared at the dress. It was gorgeous. Elegant but not over the top. The kind of thing I would have dismissed as impractical with the slit in the skirt.

She tilted her head, studied the dress, and put it back.

We moved to another section. She pulled a black cocktail dress, held it out, and scrutinized.

"This is ridiculous," I said, the frustration bubbling up before I could stop it. "My father never had to deal with any of this. No one ever told him to soften his image or wear something more approachable. He could show up to events in the same three suits and no one said a word. He didn't have to think about whether he was showing too much skin or not enough."

Cleo's expression shifted to something sympathetic. "You're right. It's completely unfair."

"But I still have to do it." I sighed.

"Unfortunately, yes." She put the black dress back on the rack and pulled out another navy one instead. "Men have like three speeds. Suit, khakis and a collared shirt, and living in their own filth. No one expects anything more from them. But women? We're supposed to be put together at all times. Hair done, makeup perfect, outfit carefully curated to send exactly the right message without looking like we tried too hard." She shrugged. "It's bullshit. But it's also reality."

I hated that she was right. It was bullshit I was standing in a designer boutique trying to find something that would make people see me as warm and approachable when my qualifications should have been enough.

"Fine," I said. "Show me what you've got."

Cleo's smile was triumphant. "That's the spirit."

Cleo led me to a fitting room with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on two sides. Plush seating. Soft lighting that somehow made everything look better. A button on a touch pad gave you lighting options. Damn. I never considered purchasing anything with lighting options in mind.

A fashionista, I was not.

She hung up the dresses we'd selected. There were five in total. Each one made me want to break out in hives.

"I'll be right outside," she said. "Come out when you're ready and we'll see what works."

I stared at the dresses after she left. A purple one with long sleeves and a deep V-neck that I did not like, but she told me it would look amazing on me. A boring champagne-colored one I chose but she'd already vetoed.

I reached for the black one first. Black was safe. Professional. Black was what I always wore when I had to wear something formal.

I slipped it on and immediately knew it wasn't right. It was beautiful, but it was severe. Exactly the kind of thing that would reinforce every ice-queen comment floating around the internet.

I stepped out of the fitting room anyway. Cleo's face told me everything I needed to know before she even opened her mouth.

"It's stunning," she said carefully. "But it's not what we're going for."

I almost laughed. "Fair enough."

I went back in and tried the purple next. The color was rich and deep, and the long sleeves meant I wouldn't feel exposed. I zipped it up and turned to look at myself in the mirror.

It was better. But something still felt off. I walked out and Cleo tilted her head, considering.

"The color is gorgeous on you. But I think we can do even better."

The next one had an open back that had me very concerned I'd be flashing ass crack.

"Nope," I said, walking out. "Absolutely not."

Cleo laughed. "Not a fan of the open back?"

"I feel like I forgot to put on half the dress."

"Fair. Next."

The royal blue was the last one. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. It was so feminine. So not like anything I ever wore. I slid my hand over the silk chiffon before slipping it on. The bold color made my pale skin look almost luminous.

It was strapless, with a bodice that gathered and folded across my waist before twisting into a series of elegant pleats. The fabric didn't cling so much as skim, following the curves of my body instead of highlighting those areas I was a little self-conscious about. The long A-line skirt fell all the way to the floor.

There was nothing fussy about it. No beading. No lace. No unnecessary embellishment. It didn't need it. When I turned in front of the mirror, the skirt shifted around my legs. It made me look exactly like the woman everyone seemed to think I was supposed to be.

I stepped out of the fitting room.

Cleo's face lit up. "Hell yes. That's the one."

"You think?"

"I know." She stood and walked around me, examining the dress from every angle. "It's perfect. How do you feel in it? That's what matters."

I turned back to look at myself in the mirror. I barely recognized the woman staring back at me. Not because I looked different, exactly. But because I looked softer. Like maybe I wasn't about to bite someone's head off.

"Beau!" Cleo called out. "Get up here!"

The elegant designer was just a normal sister hollering for her brother.

Beau appeared a minute later. He froze when he saw me, making me suddenly very self-conscious. I looked down to make sure one of the girls hadn't fallen out.

All good.

"Oh shit," he said quietly. "That's perfect."

I felt heat creep up my neck. "You think?"

"That's exactly what we need."

"See?" Cleo said. "I told you we'd find something."

Beau nodded. "Make sure you wear diamonds," he said. "Something from Corwin Gems. Represent your business."

I rolled my eyes. "Obviously."

But even as I said it, I knew if he hadn't mentioned it, I probably wouldn't have thought of it. I would have been so focused on the dress and my hair and not tripping in heels that I would have forgotten the most obvious marketing opportunity sitting right in front of me.

"I'm changing," I said, anxious to get away from his gaze.

I put on my armor and carried the dress out, draped over my arm. Cleo smiled at me. "Want to look around for anything else?"

"No. Thank you, but enough shopping for me."

She laughed softly. "For today."

I pulled up to Darcy's Bel-Air address in the back seat hired town car. I adjusted my bow tie one last time and stepped out of the car. "Two minutes," I told the driver.

The house was not what I expected for the ice queen. It was very Snow White and surrounded by enough greenery to create the illusion of privacy in a city where privacy was a luxury most people couldn't afford.

I didn't make it to the front door before it opened.

Holy shit.

Darcy Corwin walked out of her house and I forgot how to breathe for a second.

The dress looked even better on her than it had in the store. The royal blue hugged her curves before flowing down to the ground, elegant and feminine and alluring. Diamonds glittered at her throat and ears. Corwin Gems, obviously. The stones caught the evening light and sparkled like stars.

But it was her hair that stopped me cold.

Her platinum blonde hair was down for the first time since I'd met her. It fell in soft waves past her shoulders. The effect was night and day. I would almost believe this was her twin sister. She looked like a completely different person. Softer. The kind of woman I would absolutely approach and flirt with.

“You look very nice,” I said and immediately wanted to kick my own ass. No woman wanted to look nice when she was dressed like that.

“Thank you.”

“You look beautiful, not nice.”

She looked surprised and uncomfortable at the same time. “Thanks.”

I opened the back door for her. She slid into the back seat. I walked around to get in on the other side. The driver pulled out and we headed toward the hotel.

The silence stretched between us. I watched her fidget with the small clutch in her lap, adjusting it unnecessarily. Her posture was rigid, shoulders back, spine straight. Even sitting in a car she looked like she was ready for battle.

“You nervous?” I asked.

“No.”

“Okay.”

She shot me a look. “I’m not nervous. I’m just preparing myself.”

“For what?”

“For whatever hell you’re about to throw me into.”

I laughed. “It’s a charity gala, not a firing squad.”

“Same thing.”

“My family will be there,” I said. “A safety net.”

“I don’t need a safety net.”

“They’ll be there anyway. Fair warning, though. Blackwells are huggers. We treat everyone like family even if we just met them five minutes ago.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “You’re joking.”

“Not even a little bit.”

“I don’t hug people I don’t know. I don’t hug people I *do* know.”

“You might want to work on that.”

She looked genuinely alarmed, which I found oddly endearing. She wanted to run a multi-million-dollar company without breaking a sweat, but the thought of physical affection from strangers had her looking like she wanted to throw herself from the moving car.

It was cute.

“Relax,” I said. “No one’s going to force you to hug anyone. Just try to look like you’re having a good time. Smile. Make small talk. Act like a human being.”

"I *am* a human being."

"Could've fooled me."

She glared at me, but I caught the tiniest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Progress.

We arrived at the hotel and walked inside with a small crowd of others dressed for the event. The ballroom was already packed with people in evening wear, champagne glasses in hand and soft music filling the space. Photographers lined the entrance, cameras flashing as guests arrived.

"Breathe," I murmured as we walked inside.

"I am breathing. You say the dumbest shit."

I couldn't help laughing. "Thank you."

The ballroom was stunning. My mother had outdone herself. Round tables draped in white linens filled the space, each one decorated with elegant centerpieces that I knew were up for auction. A stage at the far end where she'd give her speech later. And along the walls, the silent auction items were displayed on tables with bid sheets next to each one.

"Beau!"

I turned to see my mother making her way toward us, looking radiant in a silver gown. Tiana Blackwell was a force of nature. One of the reasons she was so beloved by fans and the Hollywood community in general was because she was incapable of meeting someone without making them feel like the most important person in the room. It was an art she'd been born with.

"Mom," I said, pulling her into a hug. "Everything looks incredible."

"Thank you, sweetheart." She turned to Darcy with a warm smile. "And you must be Darcy. Beau told me he was bringing you."

Darcy extended her hand for a handshake. "Mrs. Blackwell, thank you for having me."

My mother ignored the hand and pulled Darcy into a hug instead. I did warn her.

Darcy's eyes went wide, her arms hovering awkwardly at her sides for a second before she managed a stiff pat on my mother's back.

"Please, call me Tiana," my mother said, pulling back. "I'm so glad you could join us tonight."

"Thank you," Darcy muttered.

"Come, let me introduce you to everyone."

My mother looped her arm through Darcy's and led her away before I could intervene. I followed, watching Darcy's shoulders tense with every step.

My father stood near the bar with Callum and his wife, Victoria. Max Blackwell looked every bit the distinguished patriarch in his tuxedo, silver hair perfectly styled.

"There's my boy," he said when he saw me. "And this must be Darcy."

My father shook her hand warmly and kissed the back of it before quickly releasing it.

"This is my oldest son, Callum," my father continued, gesturing to my brother. "And his wife, Victoria."

Callum extended his hand with a warm smile. "Nice to meet you, Darcy."

"You as well," Darcy said, shaking his hand.

Victoria leaned in next, her expression kind. "That dress is stunning. Blackwell?"

"Yes," Darcy said. "Cleo picked it out. She has incredible taste."

"She does." Victoria smiled.

The conversation flowed easily around Darcy, my family doing what they did best, making people feel welcome. I could see the tension in Darcy's jaw. She was trying, but this wasn't her natural habitat.

Drew appeared next with his wife, Kensey.

"Beau!" Drew clapped me on the shoulder. "Long time no see, brother." He turned to Darcy. "You must be Darcy. I'm Drew, the better-looking brother."

"Debatable," I said.

Kensey laughed and extended her hand to Darcy. "Don't listen to either of them. I'm Kensey."

Hollis and his wife, Juno, appeared next, followed by Micah and his wife, Grace. Then Cleo and Jeremy, both looking immaculate. I could admit my family were beautiful people. We got lucky. Our parents were attractive people and we were fortunate enough to inherit their good genes.

"Darcy!" Cleo exclaimed, pulling her into a hug. "You look amazing. I knew that dress was perfect."

"Thank you," Darcy said, managing a small smile. "You were right."

Jeremy gave her an appreciative onceover. "Damn."

"Jeremy," I warned. "She's a client."

He held up his hands. "What? I'm complimenting the dress."

The introductions continued, each family member warm and welcoming in their own way. But I could see Darcy growing more overwhelmed by the second. She was drowning in Blackwell hospitality and didn't know how to swim.

I caught her eye and jerked my head toward the auction tables. She excused herself from the conversation and followed me away from the crowd.

"You okay?" I asked when we were out of earshot.

"Fine."

"You look like you're about to bolt."

"I'm not going to bolt," she said, though her eyes darted toward the exit like she was calculating how fast she could make it in the heels she wore.

"Look," I said, stepping in front of her so she had to focus on me. "I know this isn't comfortable for you. I get it. But you need to loosen up."

She scowled. "Stop telling me how to act. I'm not a child."

"You're wound tighter than a spring. This is a party, not a board meeting. You're allowed to relax."

"I am relaxed."

"Do you ever smile?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I smile plenty."

"When? Give me an example."

"I'm not going to smile on demand."

"See? That right there. That's the problem." I gestured at her face. "You look like you're about to fire someone. People are watching you. They're taking photos. They're forming opinions. And right now, the opinion they're forming is that the ice queen showed up to a charity event and couldn't be bothered to pretend she cares."

Something flashed in her eyes. Hurt, maybe. Or anger. I couldn't tell. I didn't want to insult her or hurt her feelings, but I had a job to do. And I had a feeling she was the kind of woman who appreciated bluntness. This was not a woman that had time for bullshit.

"I do care," she said quietly.

"Then show it." I softened my tone. "Look, I'm not trying to be an ass. I'm trying to help. But you're making this harder than it needs to be."

She took a breath, her shoulders dropping slightly. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

“Let’s go look at the auction items,” I said. “Find something you actually like. Bid on it. Let people see you enjoying yourself.”

“Fine.”

We walked toward the auction tables. The items were spread out along the far wall, each one with a description card and a bid sheet.

There were vintage movie posters donated by my parents and some of their Hollywood friends. Several original prints from films my mother had starred in. A signed guitar from a famous rock band. Gift certificates to high-end restaurants. Spa packages. A weekend at a luxury resort. And a ridiculous amount of B Well products from Hollis’s wellness brand. The kind of stuff that rich people bought to feel good about themselves.

“Bid on some things,” I said, gesturing to the tables in general.

“Oh, what about that?”

I looked at the table she gestured at and saw an antique typewriter. I looked at her, making sure I was looking at the same thing. “The typewriter?”

“Yes.”

She walked toward it, touching the keys with her fingers.

“Of course you’re excited about office equipment.”

“It’s an antique.”

I noticed she had a little smile on her face while she looked at it. It was the first genuine smile I’d seen on her.

I looked around and noticed people with their phones out taking pictures. Several photographers were also capturing Darcy showing human emotion.

This plan might just work after all.

I wrote down a bid on the typewriter that was probably excessive, but I didn't care. It was a gorgeous piece, a 1920s Underwood with brass keys. My father would love it. He had a thing for antiques, especially ones with history. This would look perfect in his home office.

"Do you plan on writing your memoir on it?" Beau asked.

"No. I want it for my dad. He likes this kind of thing."

"That's sweet," Beau said. "Now find something for yourself."

I shook my head. "No, I don't need anything."

He snorted. "Everyone wants something."

"Not me. I'm very fortunate. I don't need anything." I couldn't remember the last time I'd wanted something without immediately finding a reason not to have it.

Wanting had always seemed like an indulgence. My father had taught me early that money wasn't something you threw around simply because you had it. You were supposed to accomplish something with it. He was a wealthy man that had committed to never spoiling me.

Even when I was a child, I'd learned to distinguish between things I wanted and things that were worth having. The difference mattered.

I wanted a pony when I was eight. Dad bought me riding lessons instead.

I wanted a ridiculously expensive dollhouse when I was ten. Dad pointed out that I had an entire bedroom I could turn into whatever I

wanted.

At sixteen, I wanted a sports car. He bought me a sensible sedan and told me I'd thank him when I was paying my own insurance.

Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped asking myself what I wanted at all. Wanting something simply because it made me happy had never been part of the equation.

"It's not about need. It's about want." He gestured at the tables stretching along the wall. "Pick something. Something just for you. Do something nice for yourself."

"I do plenty of nice things for myself."

"Like what?"

I opened my mouth to answer and realized I couldn't think of a single example. When was the last time I'd bought something purely because I wanted it? Everything I owned served a purpose. My clothes were professional. My car was reliable. My house was an investment. Even my greenhouse and garden, which I loved, were practical. I grew vegetables and herbs. Things I could use.

"See?" Beau said, clearly reading my silence. "You can't even think of anything."

"I have everything I want. I'm not a movie buff."

"Come on. Let's keep looking. One of those spa weekends."

"Which I can buy on my own," I reminded him.

"Except this way it would help hungry children." He shrugged. "But we can keep looking."

We moved down the line of auction items. I tried to focus on the task at hand, but my mind kept drifting back to his question. Why was it so hard to do something nice for myself? I had money. More than enough. And this was for a good cause. Every dollar spent here went to feeding kids. There was literally no downside.

And yet I couldn't pick up a pen and write down a bid.

I stopped in front of a small display table. Sitting on a black velvet cloth was a wooden sculpture of a fox. It was maybe six inches tall, carved from what looked like a dark walnut.

It was beautiful. Simple and elegant and completely impractical.

I loved it.

I stood there staring at it, not saying anything. My fingers itched to pick it up, but something held me back. Some voice in my head that sounded

suspiciously like my own telling me I didn't need it. It was frivolous.

I could afford it ten times over without blinking. And again, charity. Good cause. Hungry children.

Why did it feel so hard to just say I wanted something?

I caught myself hesitating and felt a flash of irritation. This was stupid. I was a grown woman.

"What about that one?" I said, pointing at the sculpture before I could talk myself out of it.

Beau looked at where I was pointing. "The fox?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, if you want it."

"I don't need it."

"Nope," he said, shaking his head. "You absolutely do need it. I'll get it for you if you don't get it for yourself." He glanced around the room. "Let me go ask my mom how much it would cost to just buy it straight up. I'll be right back."

He walked off before I could protest, leaving me standing there alone with the fox.

I stared at the little sculpture, wondering what it was about this particular piece that had caught my attention. Maybe it was that foxes had always fascinated me. Clever creatures. Survivors. The kind of animal that thrived by being smarter than everything around it.

I could relate.

"Darcy Corwin?"

I turned to find three women approaching me, phones already out and pointed in my direction. They were young, probably mid-twenties, dressed in cocktail dresses that showed a lot of skin. Influencers, I thought immediately. The kind of people who made a living by documenting every moment of their lives for strangers on the internet.

Great.

"You look great tonight," one of them said, her phone angled to capture both of us in the frame. "Nothing like the ice queen everyone's been talking about."

The others giggled like she'd said something clever.

Mean girls. I had only encountered them in the wild back in high school. I forgot how vicious they could be.

Where the hell was Beau? It was like these jackals had waited for him to walk away before they pounced.

“What do you think about that nickname?” another one asked, leaning in with her phone. “Ice queen. Does it bother you?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. Every instinct I had was screaming at me to shut this down. To not give them anything. I needed to walk away before they could twist my words into another viral moment. Don’t feed the trolls. Pretty trolls, but trolls, nonetheless.

I could hear Beau’s voice in my head telling me to loosen up, to show people I was human. Smile and make small talk. Dad basically said the same thing.

“It doesn’t bother me,” I said, trying to be blasé. “People are going to talk, right? Nature of the beast when you put yourself out there.”

“So you’re totally cool with the viral video and all the memes?”

Oh God. Memes? I was a meme? No, I wasn’t cool with it. But it’s not like I got to decide not to be a meme.

“Really?” The first one looked skeptical. “Because that press conference was pretty brutal. Love gives up hope? That’s rough.”

“I misread the teleprompter. It happens.”

“That seemed like more than just a misread,” the blonde testing the strength of that fabric across her chest said.

“Is it true you don’t believe in love?”

They were baiting me. Trying to get a reaction they could post for clicks.

Instead, I forced my expression to remain blank. Neutral. Ice queen, indeed.

“Are you really as cold as you seem? Or is there more underneath?” The other woman, a brunette with the whitest teeth I’d ever seen, asked.

Panic threatened to overtake me. The fight or flight urge was no joke. I glanced around, looking for an exit.

Before I could answer or run, a warm hand settled on my back.

“Ladies,” Beau said smoothly, appearing at my side like he’d materialized out of thin air. “What are you jokers asking my girlfriend about?”

The women’s eyes went wide, phones swinging to capture him.

“Beau Blackwell,” one of them breathed. “Oh my God.”

“Girlfriend?” The brunette’s perfectly microbladed eyebrows shot up toward her hairline. “Since when?”

“How serious is it?” the blonde demanded, her phone now aimed squarely at Beau’s face. “Are you two, like, official?”

My brain short-circuited. Girlfriend? What the hell was he doing?

More gossip. This was exactly what not to do. He’d fed the trolls.

This wasn’t part of any plan we’d discussed. I opened my mouth to correct him. We were definitely not dating.

Beau’s hand slid from my back to my waist, pulling me closer against his side. Before I could process what was happening, he turned toward me, tilted my chin up with his free hand, and kissed me.

His lips were plump and soft and perfect. Damn. He tilted to the left, me going to the right like we’d done this a thousand times before. Why did it feel like kissing him was the most natural thing in the world?

My heart thumped so hard I was certain everyone in the room could hear it. Could they see it? It felt like it.

I was hyperaware of everything. The cameras pointed at us, the gasps from the influencers, the eyes of what felt like every single person in the room locked on us.

This was a disaster. This moment would be everywhere by morning, dissected and analyzed and picked apart by strangers on the internet who had nothing better to do than judge my every move.

Anxiety clawed at my chest. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. I needed to pull away, needed to get out of here. Run.

And then something shifted.

Beau’s thumb traced a gentle circle against my jaw, his long fingers brushing across the sensitive skin at my neck. The touch was so unexpectedly tender that it stopped the panic spiraling through me. His other hand was in the small of my back, anchoring me against his body.

The kiss deepened, just slightly. Not aggressive or sloppy. It was just *more*.

I stopped thinking about the cameras. Hell, I stopped thinking about anything except the feel of his lips on mine.

Her lips lit a fire in me that I hadn't expected. I had to remind myself that I was just trying to help her out, not make out with her in front of half of Los Angeles's elite social scene. But the moment my mouth touched hers, something shifted. Something I hadn't planned for.

She tasted like champagne. For a few seconds, I forgot why I'd done this in the first place.

I'd seen her face when I walked back from talking to my mother about the fox. The look of barely contained panic had immediately made me concerned. And then I recognized the same expression she'd worn in the press conference video right before she'd bolted like a scared jackrabbit. Those influencers had been circling her like sharks, phones out, asking about love and all that internet bullshit that had been haunting her for days.

I'd heard enough to know where the conversation was heading. More ice queen content. More viral moments. More ammunition for people who wanted to tear her apart. More meme material.

I had to get them talking about something else. I would put all that talk to rest. I did the one thing that would prove without a shadow of a doubt that Darcy Corwin didn't have a heart of ice.

I lit the world on fire.

The kiss had surprised me almost as much as it had surprised her. But as I pulled away, the looks on the influencers' faces told me it had been the right move. Their jaws were practically on the floor. Their phones were still

recording, but now they were capturing something entirely different. Not the ice queen fumbling through awkward questions. A woman being kissed by a man who clearly couldn't keep his hands off her.

There was zero chance they hadn't picked up on that chemistry. It sizzled. The air felt electrified.

"Oh my God," one of them breathed. "That was so romantic."

"How long have you two been together?"

"Is this why you came tonight? To go public?"

"Are you in love?"

The questions came rapid-fire, cameras getting closer, the women pressing in and invading our personal space.

Darcy's body had gone rigid against mine. I could feel the tension radiating off her. I could feel her spiraling into panic mode again. She was ready to run. That would not help the story we'd just created.

I pulled her closer to my side, angling my body to block her from the worst of the camera angles. My arm stayed firmly around her waist, protective and possessive in a way that would look great in photos. And it kept her put.

"That's plenty for tonight, kids," I said, flashing them my most charming smile. "Now I'd like some time with my girl."

The emphasis on those last two words was deliberate. Let them chew on that.

For a moment, I thought they might push back. Influencers weren't known for respecting boundaries. But something in my expression must have convinced them because they backed off with knowing smiles and promises to tag us in their posts.

When they were finally gone, I looked down at Darcy.

"You're welcome," I said.

Her face stayed remarkably calm. Anyone watching would think she was gazing up at her boyfriend with love in her eyes. But I knew better.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Her voice was filled with venom, but that lovestruck look on her face softened it.

I almost laughed. Almost. "Come on. Let's dance."

Before she could protest, I guided her toward the dance floor where other couples were swaying to the soft music. I pulled her against me once again. We fell into an easy rhythm.

She followed my lead, which surprised me. I'd expected her to fight me every step of the way. She was still stiff but doing her best to look like we danced like this all the time.

"You should probably rethink being CEO of an international company," I said quietly, my lips close to her ear so no one else could hear, "if you can't handle a few questions from some random influencers."

Her fingers tightened on my shoulder. Not quite claws but close. "I had it handled."

"Not from where I was standing."

"Well, you didn't have to kiss me."

I pulled back just enough to meet her eyes. They were blazing with something that might have been anger or might have been something else entirely. Did I dare think she actually liked my kiss? I did dare. Because she had kissed me back. "Talk is cheap. I had to make sure it worked."

"By announcing to the entire room that we're dating? By kissing me without my consent?"

"Would you have said yes if I'd asked?"

"Absolutely not."

"Then there's your answer." I spun her gently, watching the way the blue dress flared around her legs. "Besides, you kissed me back."

Her cheeks flushed, which was fascinating. I didn't think the ice queen was capable of blushing.

"I was caught off guard," she hissed.

"For about three seconds. After that, you were a very willing participant."

"I was playing along. For the cameras."

"Sure you were."

She stepped on my foot. Deliberately, I was certain.

"If you would have tried to stick that tongue in my mouth, just know I would have bit it."

"Kinky. I like it."

"This is a disaster," she said through gritted teeth, still smiling for anyone who might be watching. "Do you have any idea what you've done? Now everyone thinks we're together. That's going to be everywhere by morning."

"That's the point."

“The point was to make me look warm and approachable, not to create a fake relationship scandal. Not to mention, you just kissed me like you were trying to get me in bed. Now, I look like a hussy.”

I chuckled. “You sound like my grandma.”

“My dad is going to see those pictures.” She groaned. “I’m humiliated.”

“But you looked hot,” I said. “No more ice queen.”

She rolled her eyes. “Stupid.”

“And what’s warmer than love?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but you’re going to tell me.”

“You’re not just approachable now. You’re desirable. You’re human. You’re a woman who gets swept off her feet at charity galas by devastatingly handsome lawyers.”

“Your ego is astounding.”

“Thank you.” I guided her through another turn. “Smile. Look like you’re enjoying yourself. Look like you’re falling for me.”

“I’d rather eat glass.”

I laughed again. “Tasty.”

I saw her lips twitch. Not quite a smile but close.

The song ended and another began. We kept dancing, mostly because I wasn’t ready to face the questions that would be waiting for us at the table. My family had definitely seen the kiss. Hell, everyone had seen the kiss. I needed a minute to figure out how to explain this.

“For what it’s worth, those women were going to eat you alive. The video they would have posted would have been brutal. At least now they’re posting something that makes you look good.”

“You could have just interrupted the conversation. Changed the subject. Literally anything other than kissing me.”

“Would that have worked?”

She didn’t answer, which was answer enough.

“They wanted blood,” I continued. “They wanted you to crack. The only way to derail that was to give them something bigger. Something more interesting than watching the ice queen squirm and flee in panic again.”

“So you made me into a romance story instead.”

“Everyone loves a romance story.”

“This is insane,” she finally said.

The song ended. I reluctantly released her, though I kept her hand in mine as we walked back toward the table where my family waited. Every

single one of them was watching us with expressions ranging from shocked to amused to deeply suspicious.

Jeremy was the first to speak when we sat down. “Did you two just kiss?” he whisper-shouted the question. “In front of everyone?”

Cleo leaned in from the other side. “Beau, what the hell?”

I kept my voice quiet, pitched so only they could hear. “Just go with it. We’ll explain later.”

“Go with what?” Jeremy demanded.

“The girlfriend thing. Just trust me.” I met his eyes, then Cleo’s. “Let’s just get through this party.”

They exchanged looks, clearly confused, but they were Blackwells. We knew how to present a united front when necessary. And maybe we’d inherited some of our mother’s acting ability.

“Fine,” Cleo said slowly. “But you owe us an explanation.”

“Tomorrow. I promise.”

Darcy sat beside me, close enough that it looked intimate but not so close that she couldn’t maintain her own personal space. She was struggling, but she looked pretty doing it. I snagged her another glass of champagne, giving her something to do with her hands while also making her look like she was actually enjoying herself.

She was a quick learner. I had to give her that. She laughed, smiled, and occasionally touched me.

“Oh, it’s time to announce the auction winners,” Cleo said. “Did you guys bid on anything?”

“Darcy bid on the typewriter,” I said.

And she won. Her bid had been the highest by a significant margin.

“Good job,” I said.

“It’s not like I had to do anything except write down a number,” she said.

“But you won. Winning anything is awesome.”

After the announcements, one of the event coordinators approached our table with a small package wrapped in tissue paper.

“Mr. Blackwell? The fox sculpture you purchased.”

Darcy’s head snapped toward me. “What?”

I took the package and handed it to her. “For you.”

“I can’t take that from you.”

“Sure you can.” I raised my voice just enough that the people at nearby tables could hear. “Anything for my girl.”

The look she gave me promised retribution. Slow, painful retribution. How weird was it that I was looking forward to it?

“I don’t remember them announcing this in the bids,” Darcy said.

“Couldn’t take the chance someone might outbid me.” I shrugged.

She rolled her eyes. “You bought it without bidding? That’s wrong. That breaks the rules.”

“Ah, and you are not a rulebreaker.”

“You’re an attorney. You’re not supposed to break the rules.”

I gave her a dry look. “Rules are meant to be broken.”

“Oh yes, lawyers are snakes. Reptilian creatures.”

“Are dragons reptiles?”

“Dragons aren’t real.”

I slapped my hand over my chest. “Don’t ruin my childhood fantasy. Dragons are real. I’ll be a reptile, but only if I can be a badass dragon.”

She stared at me. “Do you ever stop?”

“Stop what?”

She waved her hand at me. “This. Whatever this is.”

“Breathing? Living? Oh, wait, I know what’s got you confused. This is called joy. Stick with me Ice Queen, I’ll show you happiness. Delight.” And then I lean a little closer. “And if you’re really lucky, I might show you euphoria. Ecstasy.”

Her eyes widened and her breathing changed. I grinned and leaned back.

“You just don’t stop, do you?”

Another casual shrug.

She shook her head. “Do you actually think anyone is going to believe you and I are a couple? We couldn’t be more different.”

“Opposites attract.”

“That’s not a real thing,” she retorted. “Opposites lead to divorce.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. We’re already getting divorced? Who said anything about marriage? I know I’m a hot ticket, but this man is not trying to put a ring on any fingers.”

She scowled at me again. “Oh great. I get to be the flavor of the month. That will *definitely* help my reputation. Yay me.”

She wasn't wrong. I hadn't thought beyond the kiss. I wasn't trying to plan a whole scheme. It was a kiss. Some new content for the internet. A positive change in Darcy's narrative.

"How about we just enjoy our champagne?" I said. "Not everything needs to be micromanaged."

She sipped her champagne but it was clear the conversation had been tabled. It wasn't forgotten.

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I settled into the leather seat and leaned my head back, closing my eyes for just a second.

The kiss.

I played my part and pretended it didn't bother me, but holy shit.

"This wasn't part of the deal," I said, finally breaking the silence that had settled between us.

Beau shifted beside me. "I know."

"I'm not micromanaging. You just started a rumor. A massive one. Without consulting me."

"I know." He had the decency to sound at least somewhat contrite. "I went with the nuclear option without discussing it with you first. That wasn't fair."

"Fair?" I turned to face him, incredulous. "Fair doesn't even begin to cover it. By tomorrow morning, every gossip site in the country is going to be running stories about us. About our relationship. A relationship that doesn't exist."

He said nothing. I took the silence as an opportunity to stare at him without it being inappropriate. I was waiting for a response, so staring at him was acceptable. And damn. I liked looking at him. His profile was illuminated by the passing streetlights, highlighting the strong jaw and the nose that wasn't perfect, but perfect on him.

He turned to look at me in the dim light. “The question now is, do we keep it up? Or do I tell the world I was just kidding?”

I let out a bitter laugh. “And what would that look like? ‘Sorry everyone, that passionate kiss at the charity gala was actually just a prank. My bad.’”

“When you put it that way.”

“There is no good way to put it.” I pressed my fingers to my temples, feeling a headache coming on. “If we say it was a lie, it draws more negative attention. I become the woman who lied. A woman who couldn’t get a hot guy to kiss her for real.”

“Hot guy?” he teased.

I ignored the comment. “Worse, I’m going to be the woman who got rejected by Beau Blackwell in front of the entire internet. The whole ice queen thing would grow wings and fly forever.”

“I wouldn’t reject you.”

“That’s not the point.”

The car slowed as we approached my neighborhood. The familiar gates of my community appeared ahead. Almost home. Almost away from this insanity. My safe space.

“For now we say nothing,” I said in complete disbelief to hear them from my own lips. “We don’t confirm anything. We don’t deny anything. We let this die down and go away on its own.”

Beau nodded. “That could work. People have short attention spans. Something else will come along and they’ll forget all about us.”

“Exactly.” I wanted to believe that. I *needed* to believe that.

The car pulled up to my house, the driver putting it in park. I reached for the door handle, desperate to escape the confined space and the man who had just turned my carefully ordered life into chaos.

“Darcy.”

I paused, not turning around.

“I really was trying to help. I saw you drowning and I threw you a life raft. Maybe it was the wrong life raft, but my intentions were good.”

I finally looked back at him. He looked less smug. Almost sincere.

“Good intentions don’t always lead to good outcomes,” I said. “Your life raft had a cinder block attached, but I appreciate that you were trying.”

It was the closest thing to a thank you I could manage.

I stepped out of the car and walked to my front door without looking back. I heard the car pull away as I let myself inside, the familiar quiet of my home wrapping around me like a blanket.

The heels came off first. I kicked them across the foyer, watching them skid across the hardwood floor. Then the earrings dropped carelessly onto the entry table. The necklace followed. I curled my toes, flexing them and giving them space to breathe.

I made my way upstairs, shedding the beautiful blue dress the moment I reached my bedroom. It pooled on the floor like a puddle. I left it there. I'd deal with it tomorrow. Or never. Never sounded appealing.

I pulled on my oldest, softest pajamas that always felt like being wrapped in a cloud. Money could buy happiness in the form of cashmere.

"See!" I said to no one. "I bought cashmere pajamas. I wanted them. I bought them."

I padded back downstairs to the kitchen. I needed a drink. Not champagne. I really did not love champagne. My alcohol choices were definitely a product of being raised by a single father.

I opened the bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label and poured two fingers. The whiskey burned going down, but it was a good burn. A grounding one. I carried the glass to my living room and settled on the couch, staring at nothing.

How much had my life changed in the span of a few hours?

This morning, I'd been Darcy Corwin, CEO-in-waiting, recovering from a PR disaster but with a clear path forward. Tonight, I was Darcy Corwin, alleged girlfriend of Beau Blackwell, caught in a web of lies that I hadn't even helped spin.

I was not an optimist by nature. I never had been. While other people saw silver linings, I saw storm clouds. While they hoped for the best, I planned for the worst.

And right now, I could see at least a dozen ways this could blow up in my face.

What if we got caught in the lie and it made everything worse? What if the fake relationship overshadowed everything I was trying to accomplish at Corwin Gems? What if people decided I was just one of those women trying to glom onto a Blackwell?

I took another sip of whiskey, letting the scenarios play out in my mind like a horror movie I couldn't turn off.

But then another thought crept in.

Beau was hot.

I hated admitting it. It was just a fact. Those blue eyes. That jaw. The way those broad shoulders filled out his tuxedo.

Those lips.

Damn, he was a good kisser.

By the time he'd pulled away, I'd almost forgotten the whole thing wasn't real. My heart had been racing, my skin flushed, my mind completely blank except for the tingle of my lips where his had been.

That was dangerous. The kind of thing that could complicate an already complicated situation.

His heart had been in the right place, even if his lips weren't.

I drained the rest of my whiskey and set the empty glass on the coffee table. I needed to sleep. Tomorrow, I'd figure out how to deal with the latest exploded grenade in my life.

The next morning, I sat at my desk staring at my laptop screen, trying to focus on quarterly projections that suddenly felt meaningless. The numbers blurred together. I couldn't stop replaying the kiss in my mind. It was like a song that got stuck in your head, except it was a ten-second montage.

My office door flew open without warning. I glanced up in time to see Dad storming in. His face a shade of red I hadn't seen since I was sixteen and came home two hours past curfew.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he demanded.

I straightened in my chair, instinctively going into defensive mode. "Good morning to you too."

"Don't." He pointed at me, eyes flashing. "I hired Beau Blackwell to fix your image. Not to—" He gestured wildly with his hands, apparently unable to find the words. "Not to make out with you at a charity event in front of half of Los Angeles."

"It just kind of happened."

The words sounded weak even to my own ears. I knew it the moment they left my mouth but he caught me off guard. Because I'd been daydreaming about the very thing he was pissed about.

Dad's eyes narrowed. "It just kind of happened? That's your explanation? You tripped and your mouth landed on his?"

"We were being cornered by influencers. They were asking about the ice-queen thing. Beau stepped in and stopped it."

“By sticking his tongue down your throat?”

“Dad!” My face heated. “There was no tongue, thank you very much.”

He leaned forward, planting his hands on my desk. “Explain it to me. Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you have terrible judgment. I’m starting to question whether you’re ready for this responsibility.”

The words stung, cutting deep. All the air left my lungs at once.

“You don’t mean that,” I said quietly.

“I’m not sure what I mean right now.” He shook his head, paced a few steps, and then turned back to me. “I trusted you to handle this professionally. I trusted Blackwell to help you, not to complicate things further.”

A knock sounded at the door. Before either of us could respond, it swung open and Beau’s head appeared, that infuriating grin already in place.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“Yes,” Dad snapped.

“Good,” Beau said cheerfully.

He walked into my office cool as a cucumber wearing another slim-fit designer suit that showed off his perfect body. I still hated how good he looked.

Dad rounded on him immediately. “I hired you to polish her image, not play tonsil hockey with her!”

I wanted to die. Actually cease to exist right there in my office chair.

Beau didn’t even flinch. “It’s just business, Mr. Corwin.”

“Business?” Dad’s voice rose. “Kissing my daughter is business?”

“The kiss was a tactical decision,” Beau said calmly. He pulled out his phone. “And it worked. Look at this press.”

He moved closer to Dad, showing him the screen. I couldn’t see what was on it from where I sat, but I watched Dad’s expression shift from furious to confused to something that might have been pleasant surprise.

“Ice queen to nice queen,” Beau read aloud. “She donated generously to charity, but the big news is seeing her on the arm of notorious bachelor, Beau Blackwell. It seems she might believe in love after all.”

“That’s an actual headline?” I asked.

“Yep. Well, he first part.” Beau swiped his finger across the screen, giving my dad a second to read before sliding again.

I intentionally hadn't looked. I wasn't prepared to see any additional memes about myself.

"She looks good, right?" Beau said.

My father pinned him with a withering look.

Beau laughed. "It's a huge improvement from the other pictures. Now, these are going to be the ones all over the internet when someone Googles her name."

"I don't think your face pushed against hers is the fix you think it is," Dad muttered.

"This is exactly what you needed," Beau continued. "The narrative has completely shifted. She's not the cold, unfeeling CEO anymore. She's a woman who gets swept up in romance at charity galas. She's human. She's relatable. She's warm."

Dad stared at the phone for a long moment. I held my breath, waiting.

"I still don't like it," he finally said, but the fire had gone out of his voice. He looked at Beau, then at me, then back to Beau. "Don't make me regret hiring you, Blackwell."

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir. You're witnessing just how good I am. That's why you came to me. I know how to do this."

"Still don't like it." Dad walked to the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. He looked back at me, resigned. "We'll talk later."

Then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

I let out a breath of relief. "Thank you."

Beau turned to face me, pocketing his phone. "For what?"

"For defending me. You showed up at exactly the right time." I stood, suddenly feeling the need to move. "He was losing his shit."

"You're welcome." He grinned at me, that easy smile that probably got him out of all kinds of trouble and won over every juror he went before. "So, you want to get a drink and talk about how we're going to handle this fake dating thing?"

I glanced at the clock on my wall. "It's not even noon."

"Tonight," he clarified. "Come over to my place."

I hesitated. Going to his house felt like crossing some kind of line. We were already tangled up in a mess of lies and fake romance. Adding his personal space to the equation seemed like a terrible idea.

But what choice did I have? We needed a plan. We needed to figure out how to navigate this disaster we'd created before it spiraled even further out

of control.

“Fine,” I said, pulling my phone. “Take my number and text me your address.”

“Will do.” He pushed off my desk, heading for the door. Then he paused, looking back at me with something that looked like genuine concern. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“See you tonight.”

I sank back into my chair and stared at my laptop screen. I’d just agreed to go to Beau Blackwell’s house tonight.

This was either the smartest decision I’d made all week or the absolute dumbest.

Based on my track record lately, I was betting on the latter.

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I straightened the throw pillows on my couch, then immediately felt stupid for doing it. She did not give a shit about my throw pillows or anything else. This wasn't a date. Darcy Corwin was coming over to discuss strategy for our fake relationship. That was it. Business. Professional.

So why had I spent twenty minutes deciding what to wear?

I'd landed on dark jeans and a polo. Casual but put together. Not trying too hard. Definitely not trying to impress anyone.

I rarely invited women back to my house. Casual meant not having them show up on your doorstep later. Stopping by to bring me a coffee or whatever. A two a.m. booty call. That had actually happened before. The best life lessons were learned the hard way.

Life was much simpler the way I lived now. I would like to think I'd grown up. Matured. Gotten wiser to the ways of the world. Inviting Darcy to my house was not about trying to impress her with my two-story, four-bedroom, five-bath house on the beach. It was just a house. My goal was to see if there is a real woman hidden under all that ice. Snacks and a comfortable couch had always worked as an easy icebreaker in the past. Why should Darcy be any different?

I'm a charming man, so I've been told. I managed to soften her a bit at the gala. Surely, without Spanx and heels, it would be easier to get her to chill the fuck out.

The doorbell rang and I nearly knocked over a lamp getting to the door. *Smooth, Blackwell. Real smooth.* I opened the door.

Darcy stood on my doorstep in black jeans and a blue silk blouse. Her hair was down again. Without the armor of her usual business attire, she looked almost human.

“You found it okay?” I asked, stepping aside to let her in.

“GPS is a wonderful invention.” She walked past me, her eyes scanning my living room with the same analytical precision she probably used on quarterly reports. “Nice place.”

“Thanks. Want the tour?”

She shrugged, which I took as a yes.

I led her through the main floor, pointing out the kitchen, the living room, the home office I rarely used because I had a balcony with an amazing view. Fresh air did wonders to clear the mind. The place wasn’t huge by Hollywood standards, but it was mine. Modern furniture, lots of windows, and amazing views.

“The real selling point is upstairs,” I said, gesturing toward the staircase.

She followed me up to the second floor with a second living room and more floor-to-ceiling windows that opened to a large balcony.

“This is impressive.”

“Right on the beach. Best decision I ever made. Get buried in a brief? I kick off my shoes and walk right out the door to put my toes in the sand. If I’m feeling extra stressed, I jump in.”

“You just randomly jump in the ocean?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

She stood there for a moment, just watching the waves. She seemed lost for just a few seconds. The ocean relaxed her. It relaxed everyone, which was why oceanfront property was the dream that only the rich could afford.

“Wine?” I asked. “I’ve got a nice selection. Red, white, rosé if you’re feeling fancy.”

She turned away from the view. “You have any beer?”

I blinked. “Beer?”

“Yeah. You know, hops, barley, comes in bottles or cans?”

“I know what beer is. I just didn’t peg you for a beer drinker.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Blackwell.”

“Touche.”

I headed back downstairs to the kitchen, Darcy trailing behind me. I opened the fridge and pulled out two bottles of a local craft IPA I’d picked up last week. I popped the caps and handed one to her.

She took a long pull, her eyes closing briefly in what looked like genuine appreciation. “Good choice.”

“I have excellent taste.”

“In beer, maybe. The jury’s still out on everything else.”

I grabbed the tray of appetizers I’d ordered earlier. Nothing fancy, just some bruschetta, a cheese board, and those little caprese skewers that caterers always seemed to include. Snacky stuff. The kind of food that said I’d put in effort without screaming I was trying too hard. A meal would have made it feel like a date.

I wasn’t trying too hard. It was just standard hospitality.

“Come on,” I said, jerking my head toward the stairs. “Let’s go enjoy that view while we figure out how not to destroy each other’s lives.”

We settled onto the balcony furniture, the ocean breeze carrying the salt-and-seaweed smell I loved. It could get fishy at times, but the briny smell was comforting. Darcy stretched her legs out, resting her feet on the footstool. She looked relaxed. The beer was already half gone. Most women I’d gone out with sipped beer while making the sour-lemon face.

“So,” she said, picking up a piece of bruschetta. “Fake dating.”

“Fake dating,” I confirmed. “What are you thinking?”

She chewed slowly, considering. “I don’t date much. Real or otherwise, so I have zero clue how this works.”

“I gathered.”

She scowled at me but there was no real heat. She reached for a chunk of goat cheese. “I’ve seen the speculation online. Everyone’s talking about us.”

“Everyone loves a good romance.”

“It’s not a romance. It’s a PR strategy.”

I grabbed a slice of prosciutto.

“The distraction is working,” she went on. “People are more interested in whether we’re actually together than in whether I’m capable of human emotion. It’ll be better for business. Better than being a monster incapable of love trying to push romance on her customers.”

“See? I told you it would work.”

“So what would this look like?” she asked. “Moving forward. How does one fake date?”

“It wouldn’t take much,” I said, leaning back in my chair. “A few public appearances. Dinner at a trendy restaurant where we know we’ll be photographed. Maybe a coffee run that happens to get caught by paparazzi. We hold hands, smile at each other, generally act like two people who enjoy each other’s company.”

“That last part might be challenging.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m kidding.” She took another sip of beer. “Mostly.”

I grinned. She had a sense of humor.

“The rest of the time, we never have to see each other,” I said. “Just when there’s a photo op or an event. Otherwise, we go about our normal lives. You do you.”

She nodded slowly, processing. “I would need a schedule in advance. I can’t just drop everything because you decide we need to be seen getting coffee.”

“That’s fine. We’ll coordinate calendars like the professionals we are. However, I think this is something we should do, not our assistants.”

She looked appalled.

“The fewer people that know about this little charade, the better,” I said. “I’m sure you can figure out how to use the calendar app. I don’t have any trials coming up on my schedule. I should have some time.”

She picked up another piece of cheese, turning it over in her fingers. “How long would we have to keep this up?”

“Until you’re CEO,” I said. “After that, you can let your work speak for itself. We just need to get you over that last hurdle. Once you’re officially in the chair, people will be too busy watching your actual performance to care about your love life.”

She was quiet for a moment, staring out at the darkening sky. The southern California sky did its thing. Beachcombers were enjoying the last of the sunlight.

“Fine,” she said finally.

I had to laugh. Women were typically more enthusiastic about dating me, real or otherwise. It would have been a blow to my ego if it was from anyone else. But I was confident it was her, not me.

“I do have the Corwin Gems masquerade ball coming up in a few weeks,” she said. “It’s an annual party for the elite. The kind of people who buy the most expensive jewelry.” She paused and wrinkled her nose like she caught a whiff of rotting fish. “It might be nice to have a date for that for a change.”

“Masquerade ball? Sounds fancy.”

“It is. And it’s exactly the kind of event where we could make a splash,” she said.

“In the meantime it probably wouldn’t hurt if you actually learned to loosen up a little.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I can loosen up.”

“Can you? Have you ever had fun? Like, actual fun?”

“Of course I’ve had fun. I was pretty wild in college.”

I snorted. “What, like you went to bed at midnight once?”

We both recognized what it was. A challenge. Without breaking eye contact, she tipped back her beer and drained the rest of it in one long pull. Then she set the empty bottle on the table with a loud clink.

“Got another one of these?”

I stared at her for a second, genuinely surprised. Then I laughed and pushed myself up from the chair. “Coming right up.”

I grabbed two more beers from the fridge and headed back upstairs. When I handed her the fresh bottle, she twisted off the cap herself and took a long sip.

“You were saying?” she asked, one eyebrow arched. “About me not knowing how to have fun?”

“I stand corrected. You can drink beer. That’s a start.”

“I can do more than drink beer.” She leaned back in her chair and kicked off the heels she’d worn. “I wasn’t always like this, you know. The whole ice queen thing. That’s a persona I built. Armor, like you said.”

“What were you like before?”

“Different.” She shrugged and took another sip.

She wasn’t wrong about the armor. I could see it even now. Yes, the beer and the casual clothes diminished it, but it was still there. Breaking down those walls wasn’t going to happen in one night. But maybe I could put a few cracks in them.

“Alright,” I said. “New rule for our fake relationship. When we’re together, you have to actually try to enjoy yourself. No business talk. No

strategizing. Just two people having a good time.”

“That seems counterproductive to the whole reason we’re doing this.”

“It’s not. People can tell when someone’s faking it. If you’re miserable every time we’re out together, that’s going to come through in the photos. But if you’re actually having fun?” I shrugged. “That’s the kind of thing that sells a story.”

She considered this, her brow furrowed. “Fine. I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.”

We sat eating the snack tray and drinking beer. It was not how I imagined the evening going.

“This is nice,” she said quietly. Almost like she was surprised by her own words.

“The view?”

“All of it.” She gestured with her beer. “The ocean. The quiet. Not having to be on all the time.”

“That’s what I like about this place. No one expects anything from me here. I can just exist.”

She turned to look at me, something curious in her expression. “Do you ever get tired of it? Being on all the time?”

“Sometimes. The courtroom stuff, that’s performance. It’s exhausting in a good way, like running a marathon. But the schmoozing, the networking, the constant need to be charming?” I shook my head. “That wears on you.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed. You make it look effortless.”

“Practice.” I took a sip of my beer. “Lots and lots of practice.”

“You grew up being the son of a Hollywood star.”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“I should Google you.”

“Why?” I asked with a laugh.

“I want to see your awkward years.”

“Who said I had awkward years?”

Another eyeroll. “Because you’re the one that has informed me repeatedly you’re human. And if you don’t have awkward years, I don’t want to fake date you.”

“I’m wounded. There are awkward years but I doubt you’ll find them on Google. Our parents were pretty good about shielding us from the media. Especially during the awkward years.”

“Smart,” she said. “I respect that.”

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I'd been sitting on Beau's balcony for hours. We ate the snacks and then he ordered burgers and more beer. He hadn't asked me to leave and I honestly didn't want to go. I'd come over expecting to slog through a meeting about whatever disaster we'd created. He wasn't the devil in Prada. Blackwell Couture, technically, but still, he wasn't bad.

He opened another beer and handed it to me, that stupid look on his face.

"I don't care how many beers I've had, I'm not doing it," I said and took another drink. Thank God I had a high tolerance, especially when it came to beer. That and I'd been munching nonstop since I walked through the door.

"Come on. It won't take more than three minutes. Five minutes tops, depending on what you're into."

I shook my head. "I'm not singing karaoke with you."

"It's just us in my living room. No one else around to see it. And the machine is already set up."

"Nope. No way. I don't care if it's in your basement."

"I live on the beach. If I had a basement, you'd be under the ocean."

"I'm an awful singer."

"Of course you are. If you were a good singer, you'd be opening for Taylor Swift. That's the whole point of karaoke."

"To sing poorly?"

“Everyone hates you if you sing well,” he said, like it was as obvious as the sky being blue. “You have to learn to be bad at stuff and have fun doing it anyway.”

“No.”

He sighed and I swore he pouted.

“Okay, what if we do a duet? Then I won’t just be watching you sing for me. We’ll both sing badly together.”

I took another long sip of my beer. I appreciated he had good taste. No piss beer. *Oh God*. Did I just think that? I really was my father.

The ocean breeze had picked up, carrying fresh air across the balcony. It was peaceful here. Too peaceful. That and the beer and good food and I was wishing I had my jammies.

“I’ve never been a singer,” I said. “Or a performer of any kind, really. No dance recitals. No school plays. Nothing like that. You would never catch me trying to get any spotlight. I didn’t do the girly stuff that drew attention. No makeup. Boring clothes. Nothing.”

Beau tilted his head, studying me with those annoyingly perceptive eyes. “No girly stuff at all?”

“Not really.” I picked at the label on my beer bottle, peeling it back in thin strips. “My mom died when I was young. My dad was suddenly a single parent with no idea what he was doing.”

I couldn’t believe I was telling him any of this. It had to be the beer. Maybe it was the darkness making it feel safe. Private.

“He did his best,” I continued. “But he was a businessman, not a mom. He didn’t know how to braid hair or paint nails or do any of that stuff. And I never asked him to learn. I could tell it made him uncomfortable, like every girly thing reminded him of what we’d lost. I didn’t have any siblings, so it was just the two of us.”

“That sounds rough,” Beau said quietly. No pity in his voice, which I appreciated.

“It was what it was. I adapted. I became a mini version of him instead of her. Sat in his office, learned about business, wore the most basic outfits to school because that’s what he bought me.” I laughed, but it came out hollow. “The other kids thought I was weird. I thought my khakis and polos were sophisticated. I looked like my dad.”

“You were a kid doing the best you could with what you had.”

I looked at him, surprised by the gentleness in his voice. “Yeah. I guess I was.”

We sat quietly watching the waves crashing against the shore below us. I hadn’t talked about my mom in years. Hadn’t let myself think about what I might have missed, growing up without a feminine role model. It was easier to just keep moving forward and pretending none of it mattered.

“You know what I hate most?” I said, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. “That stupid ice queen nickname.”

“I figured.”

“It’s not just that it’s mean, although it is. It’s that the same qualities that earn men praise are the ones that get me vilified.” I took another long drink. “Being calm under pressure and in control are good things. Being decisive. All are necessary traits to run a company like Corwin Gems. My father built his entire reputation on being no-nonsense and ruthless. They praised his dedication to his brand and his customers.”

“And you’re a carbon copy of him.”

“Exactly.” I threw my hands up. “I learned everything from him. I walk the same way, talk the same way, and run meetings the same way. But when I do it? Suddenly I’m cold. Unfeeling. An ice queen who doesn’t believe in love.”

Beau was quiet, letting me vent. I appreciated that too. Most people would have jumped in with platitudes or tried to fix it. He just listened.

“The worst part is, there’s no winning,” I continued, the frustration ramping up. “If I went out there and acted more traditionally feminine, more soft and giggly and whatever, people would say I’m not serious enough to run the company. Not experienced enough. Too emotional. Too much of a woman.” I spat the last word like it was poison. “But when I act like my father, I’m a heartless bitch who’s incapable of human connection.”

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

“Story of my life.” I snatched a chunk of chocolate that had appeared on the last kitchen run. “Men get to be complicated. They get to be driven and ambitious and still be seen as good people. Women have to be everything at once, and even then, someone’s going to find a reason to tear us down.”

Beau nodded slowly. “I can’t pretend to understand exactly what that’s like. But I do know something about being judged for things you can’t control.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

He leaned back in his chair, staring out at the dark ocean. "Growing up Blackwell wasn't exactly easy. Everyone knew who our parents were. Everyone had expectations. And there are a lot of us, all competing for attention. We were all trying to figure out who we were in the shadow of two people who'd already done everything."

"Sounds crowded."

"It was." He smiled, but I saw what he was trying to hide. "Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to be an only child. To have all that space to figure yourself out without constantly being compared to your siblings."

"The grass is always greener," I said.

"Isn't it?" He took a sip of his beer. "Don't get me wrong, I love my family. But there was always this pressure to find your lane. Callum went into business management. Micah became a director. Jeremy's the model. Cleo designs dresses. Everyone found their thing, and if you didn't find yours fast enough, you felt like you were falling behind."

"Is that why you became a lawyer? To stand out?"

"Partly." He shrugged. "My dad wanted me to work at Blackwell Studios. That would have been the obvious route. Easy path, guaranteed success. But I didn't want to be handed anything. I wanted to prove I could make it on my own."

"I can understand that."

"Plus, I'm good at arguing." He grinned, and this time it was genuine. "Might as well get paid for it."

I laughed, which felt strange. Good but foreign. When was the last time I'd laughed like this?

"What about your siblings?" I asked. "Did they all feel the same way? About walking their own paths?"

"Most of them. We're stubborn like that. None of us wanted to just ride our parents' coattails. Even Jeremy, who models for our cousins' label, built his own career first. He was already successful before he started working with Blackwell Couture."

"That's admirable."

"It's exhausting," he corrected. "But yeah, I guess it's admirable too."

I reached for another piece of cheese, realizing I'd been eating almost nonstop since I arrived. The alcohol had loosened something in me, made

me hungry in a way I usually suppressed. Hungry for food, conversation, and basic human connection with someone other than my father.

Beau was nice. Not at all what I'd expected from the cocky lawyer who'd humiliated my father in court.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Shoot."

"Why are you doing this? Helping me, I mean. And don't say because my father's paying you. I know there's more to it than that."

He didn't immediately answer. "Honestly? I like a challenge. And you're definitely a challenge."

"Gee, thanks."

"I mean it as a compliment." He turned to look at me, those blue eyes catching the moonlight. "You're smart, you're driven, you've worked your ass off to get where you are. And none of that should matter less because you had one bad moment on camera. I want to help you prove that."

"That's surprisingly sincere."

"I have my moments. Don't tell anyone."

"Your secret is safe."

He wasn't what I'd expected. Wasn't the shallow, self-absorbed pretty boy I'd assumed he was. There were layers here. Depth. The kind of person who actually listened when you talked and didn't just wait for their turn to speak.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "For listening. For not judging."

"That's what fake boyfriends are for."

I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling. "You're ridiculous."

"Part of my charm."

I finished my beer and set it down, feeling pleasantly fuzzy around the edges. The tension finally loosened its grip. I could breathe again. I could think about something other than damage control and proving myself to a world that seemed determined to see me fail.

"Okay," I said, the word coming out before I could stop it.

Beau looked at me, confused. "Okay what?"

"The karaoke thing." I stood up. "What songs do you have on that machine?"

His face lit up like I'd just told him Christmas came early. "Are you serious?"

"Don't make me change my mind."

He was on his feet in an instant, grabbing our empty bottles and heading for the stairs. "Come on before you sober up and remember you have dignity."

"I have plenty of dignity," I protested, following him down to the living room.

The karaoke machine was already set up, just like he'd said. A modest setup with two microphones and a screen that displayed song lyrics. He started scrolling through the options, calling out titles.

"We've got everything. Classic rock, pop, country if you're feeling brave, some Disney stuff if you're into that princess thing."

"No Disney."

"Fair enough. Oh, what about this?" He stopped scrolling, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. "How do you feel about eighties hairbands?"

"Hello, I am my father's daughter. Grew up on the stuff."

He started naming off songs.

"That one," I said. "Livin' on a Prayer. Bon Jovi. It's a classic."

I grabbed the microphone from his hand. This was insane. I was about to sing karaoke in front of a man I barely knew.

"If you record this, I will end you," I threatened.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

He pressed play. The opening guitar filled the room. I knew the song by heart but singing in my car was a lot different than actually singing along with Jon Bon Jovi.

The lyrics appeared on screen. I opened my mouth and started to sing.

It was bad. I was off-key from the first note, my voice cracking on the high parts, and I was slightly behind the music. I stopped caring about how I sounded. Stopped worrying about what Beau thought. I just sang like I was in the shower.

"Whooooa, we're halfway there! Whooooa, livin' on a prayer!"

Beau grabbed the other microphone and joined in, his voice not much better than mine. We belted out the chorus together, both of us laughing between lines, neither of us caring that we sounded like dying cats.

By the time the song ended, I was breathless and grinning like an idiot. My cheeks hurt from smiling. When was the last time my cheeks had hurt from smiling?

"That was terrible," I said.

“The worst,” he agreed. “Want to do another one?”

“I’m gonna need another beer,” I said. “You get that and I’m going to see if you’ve got any Poison in here.”

“Oh, it’s in there,” he said. “All the greats are in there.”

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I knew she was drunk when she started doing karaoke without me having to beg. By the third song, she was fully committed, belting out Warrant's "Cherry Pie" with the kind of enthusiasm that only came from a blood alcohol level well above the legal limit.

By the fifth song, she'd moved on to Guns N' Roses.

I watched from the couch, nursing my own beer, as Darcy Corwin headbanged to "Welcome to the Jungle." Her platinum hair whipped around her face. She played air guitar like she was auditioning for a spot in the actual band.

"You're so nice," she said when the song ended, dropping onto the couch beside me. Too close. Her shoulder pressed against mine. She leaned her head back, staring at the ceiling. "Like, really nice. Why are you so nice?"

"I'm not that nice."

"You are, though." She turned her head to look at me, her eyes slightly unfocused. "You bought me a fox. That was so sweet."

"A wooden fox," I corrected. "That's probably an important detail."

She waved her hand and then frowned. "Can you buy a real fox? I have a little bit of property."

"You're drunk."

"Maybe." She grinned. It transformed her whole face. She looked young and carefree and nothing like the woman who'd walked into that coffee

shop ready to verbally eviscerate me. The Ice Queen melted. “But you’re still nice.”

She tried to hug me then, her arms going around my neck in a clumsy embrace that was more collision than affection. I caught her before she climbed in my lap.

“Okay,” I said, gently disentangling myself from her grip. “I think it’s time for bed.”

“I’m not tired.”

“No, but you’re drunk.”

I stood up and offered her my hand. She took it, letting me pull her to her feet, then immediately swayed. I caught her elbow to steady her.

“Oops. I might have drank a little too much.”

“You drank your body weight in beer.”

“I did not drink my body weight.” She paused, considering. “Maybe half my body weight.”

I guided her toward the stairs, keeping one hand on her arm in case she decided to take a tumble. She was surprisingly cooperative, following my lead without protest.

“Where are we going?” she asked as we climbed the stairs.

“Guest room. You’re not driving anywhere tonight.”

“I wasn’t going to drive. I was going to call an Uber.”

“Nope. Not putting a drunk woman in an Uber and crossing my fingers that you’ll make it home and into bed.”

She didn’t argue, which told me just how far gone she was. The Darcy I knew would have fought me on principle alone.

The guest room was at the end of the hall, a simple space with a queen bed, clean sheets, and a view of the ocean that would be spectacular in the morning. And maybe a little too sunny. Thank goodness for blackout curtains. I flipped on the light and guided her inside.

“This is nice,” she said, looking around. “Very beachy.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, then immediately flopped backward, her arms spread wide. “This mattress is amazing.”

“Memory foam. Life changing.”

I shook my head, fighting back a smile. Drunk Darcy was something else. I grabbed a bottle of water from the mini fridge I kept stocked for guests and set it on the nightstand. Then I raided the bathroom for the bottle

of ibuprofen I kept in the medicine cabinet. I shook out two pills and held them out.

“Take these,” I said. “You’ll thank me in the morning.”

She propped herself up on her elbows, squinting at the pills. “What are they?”

“Ibuprofen. For the hangover you’re definitely going to have.”

“I don’t get hangovers.”

I laughed despite myself. “If you don’t, you are definitely not human.”

She took the pills and then sighed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m hungry.”

I bit back the smile. She’d been snacking all night, but she had put on one hell of a concert. She burned through all those carbs.

“Stay put. I’ll be right back.”

I ducked into the kitchen and grabbed a sleeve of crackers from the pantry. Carbs would help absorb some of the alcohol, or at least I hoped so. I set them on the nightstand next to the water and pills.

“Crackers?” She looked at them like I’d presented her with a gourmet meal. “You’re so thoughtful.”

“I’m a regular saint.”

She smiled and fumbled with the sleeve. I took it from her and tore it open, handing her a couple of crackers. She grinned up at me before taking a bite. She was beautiful when she smiled. Not just attractive but truly beautiful.

It was a shame she didn’t do it more often.

Not that I was about to tell her that. She’d probably punch me.

“Get some sleep,” I said, backing toward the door. “Bathroom’s through there if you need it.”

“Beau?”

I paused, hand on the doorframe. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.” Her voice was softer now, the manic energy fading as exhaustion crept in. “Tonight was fun.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I turned off the light and closed the door behind me, leaving her in the darkness. I stood in the hallway for a moment, listening. No sounds of distress. No thud of someone falling off the bed. Just silence.

Good.

She would pass out soon and hopefully wouldn't wake up with too bad of a hangover.

I headed back downstairs to clean up the disaster zone we'd created. Empty beer bottles littered the coffee table. The snack tray looked like it had been attacked by raccoons. The karaoke machine was still on, the screen displaying a list of songs we'd murdered throughout the evening.

I started gathering bottles, tossing them into the recycling bin in the kitchen. The cheese board went into the fridge—what was left of it, anyway. Darcy had demolished most of the goat cheese, which I found oddly endearing. A woman who appreciated good cheese and beer was a woman with taste.

As I wiped down the counter, my mind kept drifting back to her. The way she'd loosened up as the night went on. The stories she'd told about her childhood, her father, the impossible standards she held herself to. The way she'd thrown herself into karaoke with zero self-consciousness once she'd had enough liquid courage.

I wondered how much of that was the real her. Her sudden fondness for me was definitely the alcohol talking. But the rest of it was the real person. She was in there somewhere. If only she could be that relaxed around me when she was sober.

I finished cleaning and headed upstairs to my own room. I brushed my teeth, popped a couple ibuprofen myself before I changed into sweats, and climbed into bed. I typically preferred to sleep naked but I didn't want to risk her wandering around in the middle of the night and catching me in my birthday suit.

I passed out relatively quickly because the next thing I knew, the seagulls were screaming and rays of sun were stabbing through the blinds I hadn't closed completely.

I woke up with a mild headache and a little queasiness. Not my worst morning after. I dragged myself out of bed, pulled on a tee, and padded down the hall to the guest room to check on her. The door was still closed. I eased it open just enough to peek inside.

Darcy was still dead asleep, twisted up in the sheets like she'd been wrestling an invisible opponent all night. She'd stayed fully dressed, which was not a surprise. One leg hung off the edge of the bed. Her hair spread across the pillow. She looked nothing like the uptight executive.

She looked human.

I closed the door quietly and headed downstairs to start coffee. The machine gurgled to life, filling the kitchen with the smell of rich coffee. I liked the good stuff. It was strong enough to wake the dead. While it brewed, I raided the fridge for breakfast supplies.

Eggs, bacon, bread for toast. Simple but the kind of meal that soaked up the last of the alcohol the body couldn't possibly absorb.

I was plating the food when I heard footsteps on the stairs. Darcy appeared in the kitchen looking a little rough. Her hair was a disaster, her clothes wrinkled from sleeping in them. She squinted at the light even though the windows were tinted.

"Coffee," she croaked.

"Coming right up."

I poured her a cup and slid it across the counter. She wrapped both hands around it like it was a lifeline and took a long, desperate sip.

"I feel like I got hit by a truck," she said.

"That tracks."

She glared at me, but there was no real heat in it. Hard to be intimidating when you looked green and pale at the same time.

I set a plate of scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, and buttered toast in front of her. Her eyes widened slightly.

"You made breakfast?"

"I figured you'd need it. I know I did."

She stared at the food for a moment, then at me. Gratitude, maybe. Or surprise that I was capable of basic human decency.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For this. For last night. For taking care of me."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not." She picked up a piece of bacon and bit into it. "I never get that drunk. I don't know what happened."

"You relaxed. That's what happened." I sat down across from her with my own plate. "Every so often, people need to blow off steam. Nothing wrong with that."

She chewed slowly, considering. "I suppose."

"Plus, you're a hell of a singer. Better than the concert I went to last month."

Her head snapped up, eyes wide. "When did I sing?"

I grinned. Her face cycled through confusion, dawning horror, and something that might have been mortification.

"Maybe I just dreamed that," I said.

She stared at me, clearly trying to determine if I was messing with her. I gave nothing away.

"You're lying," she said finally.

"Am I?"

"You have to be." But there was uncertainty in her voice now. A flicker of doubt. "I don't sing."

"If you say so."

I hummed *Livin' on a Prayer*.

She froze, a forkful of fluffy eggs halfway to her mouth. I continued eating. I wasn't going to tell her. Not yet, anyway. Some things were better left as mysteries. I'd tease her a bit more.

"I should probably get going," she said eventually, pushing her empty plate away. "I've got work to catch up on."

She pulled out her phone and started ordering a ride.

"So," she said, not looking up from her phone. "When's our next public appearance?"

"The masquerade ball. Your company's event."

She nodded slowly. "Right."

"Plenty of time to recover from last night."

She shot me a look. "I'm already recovered."

"Sure you are." I smirked.

Her ride arrived ten minutes later. I walked her to the door, watching as she gathered her purse and slipped on those heels she'd kicked off the night before.

"Thank you again," she said, pausing in the doorway. "For everything."

"Anytime."

She hesitated, like she wanted to say something else. Then she walked out, her heels clicking against the pavement as she headed for the waiting car with her sunglasses on.

I stood in the doorway and watched her go, thinking about the woman I'd seen last night. The masquerade ball was going to be interesting.

I stood under the shower for what felt like an hour, letting the hot water pound against my skull like it could somehow wash away the memories of last night. The singing was hazy but everything else remained very vivid. The conversations. The laughter.

I turned off the water and wrapped myself in a towel, catching my reflection in the foggy mirror. I looked like death, but at least the nausea had subsided. The headache lessened.

I drank close to a gallon of water and grabbed a Gatorade for the drive to the office. By the time I walked through the doors of Corwin Gems, I felt almost human again.

Almost.

I settled into my desk chair and pulled up my emails, determined to focus on work. The marketing team had sent over mockups for the holiday campaign. There was a stack of contracts waiting for my signature.

All I could think about was Beau like some silly lovesick teen.

He made me breakfast like it was the most natural thing in the world. Memories of the night before had been flashing through my mind the last hour. He'd tucked me into bed after getting me crackers and making me take ibuprofen.

He hadn't tried anything. That was the part that kept circling back. I'd been drunk and vulnerable in a way I never allowed myself to be. He could have taken advantage. Instead, he'd been a perfect gentleman.

It was annoying, actually. Made it harder to dislike him.

I clicked through emails without reading them, my mind wandering back to the balcony. The ocean breeze. The easy conversation. I'd told him things I hadn't told anyone in years. I talked about my mother. I never talked about her. Ever.

I didn't know why I had. One minute we were talking about nothing, the ocean and beer and his awkward years, and then somehow she was just there.

I hated that. The way grief could ambush you when your guard was down. I'd spent years learning to keep her memory in a neat little box. Not because I didn't love her, but because I couldn't risk that grief popping up and taking me down. I had to be strong.

Beau hadn't pushed. Didn't ask follow-up questions or try to psychoanalyze me over a beer. He'd just listened and moved on like it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't dismissive. It was like he knew I couldn't talk about it. That was probably the most unsettling part. The way he could read me.

Despite being an attorney, which I firmly believed were all sharks, Beau seemed like a good guy. He was fun in a way I'd forgotten people could be. The kind of person who could find humor in anything and somehow made you want to laugh along with him. The guy had a way about him. I couldn't put my finger on it.

Sure, he was a little annoying with his relentless positivity and constant jokes. That optimistic outlook that seemed completely divorced from reality. But maybe I could use a little more of that energy in my life. Maybe he was right about needing to loosen up. Despite the hangover, I did have a good time. And we didn't even do anything. We just ate cheese and drank beer. And karaoke. But to be fair, that wasn't the real fun.

If I had to be paired up with someone for a fake relationship, Beau wasn't the worst choice. He was easy to talk to once you got past the initial urge to strangle him. That whole cocky thing wasn't off-putting. He knew how to handle himself in social situations. And he was undeniably attractive.

I forced myself to focus on work. I started reviewing numbers, making notes in the margins, and flagging items for follow-up. By noon, I'd made it through half the stack. By lunch, I'd responded to most of my urgent emails.

The headache had faded. The queasiness was gone. I felt almost normal again, which was a relief considering how wrecked I'd been when I woke up. I had actually considered calling in sick. Thank God for Beau's good coffee and better breakfast.

I was reviewing a contract from our diamond supplier when my office door opened. Dad walked in without knocking and dropped into one of the chairs across from my desk.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

There was no way he knew I got wasted. "I'm fine."

He nodded. "You look pale."

"I've been indoors for three years."

He chuckled. "Understood. Do you have plans tomorrow night?"

"No. Why?"

"A couple of the company's big investors are coming into town. You've met them at a few functions. Kelly and Foresman."

"I remember them."

"It's customary for the boss to take them out to dinner," Dad continued. "Kiss their asses a little, make them feel important. Since you're going to be the boss soon, I figured you might want to come with me. Get some practice."

"Yeah." I sat up straighter. "That sounds great. I'd love to."

This was exactly the kind of thing I needed to be doing. Building relationships with the people who mattered. Showing them I was ready to take the reins.

Dad nodded. "Make sure to bring Beau."

I froze. "What? No. Why?"

"Why not?"

"That's not one of our scheduled social occasions. We agreed to coordinate calendars. Plan things in advance. This is last minute."

"The only reason I agreed to this fake dating farce was to help solidify your reputation with people like these. So why waste the opportunity to earn points with them?"

"But—"

"This is the job, Darcy." He stood, straightening his jacket. "Being CEO is a lot of this kind of stuff. Dinners, schmoozing, making people feel good about their investment. If Beau is supposed to be your boyfriend, then he

should be there. It makes you look stable. Grounded. Like someone with a personal life that knows a little something about love.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he was already heading for the door.

I stared at my phone on the desk. I had to call Beau. I was supposed to ask him to drop everything and play boyfriend at a dinner with investors who would be scrutinizing my every move.

This wasn’t how this was supposed to work. We’d agreed to coordinate. Things needed to be planned in advance. It was the only way to maintain some semblance of control over this ridiculous situation.

But Dad was right. If we were going to sell this, we had to commit. And what better audience than the people who would be voting on my future with their wallets?

I picked up my phone, staring at Beau’s contact information. I took a deep breath and hit the call button before I could talk myself out of it.

“Darcy.” His voice was friendly. “Didn’t expect to hear from you so soon. Miss me already?”

Something fluttered in my chest at the sound of his voice. A warmth that rippled from ears to toes. It was ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. I’d just seen him this morning. There was no reason for my heart to do a little skip just because he sounded happy to hear from me.

And yet the feeling was there.

“How’s the hangover?” he asked. “Still feeling like you danced with Death himself?”

“I’m all good now, actually. The water and painkillers helped. Not to mention that delicious breakfast. You’re a surprisingly competent cook.”

“Don’t be too impressed. Breakfast foods are literally the only thing I know how to make. Eggs, bacon, toast. That’s my entire repertoire. Anything more complicated and we’d be ordering delivery.”

“Still. It was appreciated.”

“Glad I could help.” There was a smile in his voice. I could picture it perfectly. It came so naturally to him. “So what’s up? You calling to schedule our next karaoke session?”

“God, no. Never again.” I winced at the memory, still hazy around the edges but embarrassing, nonetheless. “I know we don’t have anything scheduled until the masquerade ball, but there’s an investor dinner tomorrow night. Your presence has been requested.”

“By you?”

“By my father.”

There was a beat of silence. “Wait. Your father wants me to go to an investor dinner with him? Because I have to be honest, Darcy, I can’t pretend to date both of you. I have to draw the line somewhere.”

I laughed. The sound startled me. Laughing while sober felt different. Foreign. Like using a muscle I’d forgotten I had. Usually it needed a little more lubrication in the form of a good whiskey.

“No,” I said, still smiling despite myself. “You’ll be my date. Help me show these investors there’s a beating heart in my ice-queen chest.”

“Ah, well in that case, I’m in. Just tell me when and where.”

“I’ll send you the details once I have them. We can talk logistics later.”

“Sounds good. Looking forward to it.”

We hung up, and I sat there for a moment, phone still in my hand. That warm feeling hadn’t faded. If anything, it had intensified. I shook it off. No room for warm and fuzzies. But my mind kept circling back to how easy that conversation had been. How natural.

Most of my life had been spent dealing with difficult men. The corporate world was full of them. Men who talked over you in meetings, who dismissed your ideas and then repeated them as their own.

But Beau wasn’t like that. He didn’t make everything a battle. He didn’t try to one-up me or prove he was smarter. He was just easy. Helpful. Out here trying to fix my life instead of making it harder.

I had to remind myself that Beau was being paid for this. My father was compensating him handsomely for his time and expertise. This wasn’t friendship. It wasn’t even real. It was a business arrangement, nothing more.

I couldn’t lose sight of that.

The warm feeling dimmed slightly, reality reasserting itself. Good. I needed to keep my head straight. Getting emotionally attached to my fake boyfriend would be the height of stupidity.

I adjusted my cufflinks in the full-length mirror in my walk-in closet. The Blackwell Couture suit had custom tailoring and fit me better than a glove. It was one of the perks of having fashion-industry cousins. The black fabric had a subtle sheen that caught the light just right.

If I was going to be Darcy's arm candy, I was going to be the best damn arm candy money could buy. I had changed out of my basic court suit and into the designer one after leaving the office early.

I was surprised she had called me for dinner. Darcy had been clear she wanted everything scheduled and preplanned. And not even eight hours after what I was definitely going to chalk up as one of the best nights of my life, she called. I had been planning on an early night, alone in my house as usual.

I didn't mind though. I was warming up to her. I hoped to get her to sing karaoke with me again, but sober. Not because I loved karaoke. Really didn't care for it, but I bought the machine as a joke. I wanted her to sing karaoke but because I loved seeing her step out of her self-imposed cage. It wasn't even about the job for me. I just wanted to help her find some joy in life. I had appointed myself her little ray of sunshine.

I grabbed my keys from the table in the entryway and walked into the garage. I had a BMW and a Porsche. Tonight it was the Beamer.

I handed my keys to the valet and headed toward the restaurant entrance. The place was an expensive restaurant that was perfect for wining

and dining clients and investors. Warm lighting, white tablecloths, a pianist playing just loud enough to be heard but not loud enough to interrupt wealthy people discussing business over wagyu beef.

My natural habitat, honestly. I'd grown up in places like this.

I pushed through the heavy glass doors and scanned the hostess area. It didn't take long to spot them. Lou Corwin stood near the podium in a navy suit, looking every bit the distinguished executive.

And next to him was Darcy.

Holy shit.

She wore a black dress with a wrap-style bodice that gave her an hourglass shape. It fell just below her knees. Her hair was up in a ponytail, showing off her slender neck. Diamond studs glittered in her ears, and a delicate necklace drew the eye to her collarbone.

I let my gaze travel slowly from her red-soled heels up to her face, not bothering to hide my appreciation. There was no faking required here. She looked absolutely stunning.

She caught me looking. Her cheeks flushed pink, and those icy blue eyes narrowed into a glare that should have slapped me into shape. I just shot her my cockiest grin, the one that usually got me either slapped or kissed depending on the woman.

She looked away, but I caught the slight twitch at the corner of her mouth. She wasn't as annoyed as she wanted me to think.

"Beau." Lou extended his hand as I approached. "Glad you could make it on short notice."

"Wouldn't miss it." I shook his hand firmly. "Thanks for the invitation."

"Darcy tells me you've been very helpful with her situation."

"Just doing my job, sir."

Darcy shot me a look that suggested she didn't appreciate being reduced to a job, but she kept her composure. Professional to the core, even when she probably wanted to step on my foot with those killer heels.

Lou turned back to the hostess, slipping her a hundred-dollar bill while he worked to get a better table.

"You look incredible," I said to her, keeping my voice low enough that only she could hear.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're mentally undressing me."

“I would never.” I pressed a hand to my chest in mock offense. “I’m a gentleman.”

“You’re a menace.”

Before I could respond, the restaurant doors opened again and two men walked in. Both were middle-aged and wore expensive suits. They both had the unmistakable air of men who were used to being important.

The investors had arrived.

Lou stepped forward to greet them, all smiles and firm handshakes. “Richard, Tom. Good to see you both.”

“Lou, always a pleasure.” The taller one, Richard I assumed, clapped him on the shoulder. “And Darcy. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Darcy stepped forward with a smile that almost looked genuine. “Mr. Kelly, Mr. Foresman. Thank you for making time to see us.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Tom said. “Not every day we get to meet the future of Corwin Gems.”

His eyes flicked to me, curiosity evident. Lou jumped in with the introduction.

“This is Beau Blackwell. Darcy’s boyfriend.”

The word still felt strange, even though I’d been the one to start this whole charade. But I smiled and shook hands with both men, playing the part.

“Blackwell,” Richard said, recognition dawning. “Any relation to the Hollywood Blackwells?”

“Guilty as charged. Max and Tiana are my parents.”

“Well, well.” He exchanged a look with Tom. “Quite the power couple you two make.”

Darcy’s hand found my arm, her grip just a little too tight. “We try,” she said sweetly.

The hostess led us to our table, a prime spot near the windows with a view of the city lights. We settled into our seats, Darcy beside me with the investors across from us and Lou at the head. Menus appeared, followed quickly by a sommelier who launched into an elaborate description of the wine selection.

Lou ordered something French and expensive. The investors nodded their approval. When the bottle arrived, the sommelier poured generous glasses for everyone.

I leaned toward Darcy. “I thought you didn’t like wine.”

She picked up her glass, swirling the deep red liquid. “I don’t like wearing heels either, but I don’t get a lot of choice for things like this.”

Fair enough. I watched her sniff once before she took a delicate sip. She was good at this. The performance. The mask. But I’d seen what was underneath now, and it was hard to unsee.

Lou steered things toward business, updating the investors on quarterly numbers and upcoming initiatives. Darcy engaged when called on, sharp and prepared as always, but I kept getting pulled back into our quiet sidebar. We’d start talking to the table and somehow end up talking to each other.

I stayed mostly quiet, playing the supportive boyfriend role. A hand on Darcy’s shoulder here, an admiring look there. It was a dance, and we were surprisingly good at it together.

It wasn’t even intentional. We’d just actually become something resembling friends somewhere between the karaoke machine and the bruschetta, and apparently that didn’t switch off for investor dinners.

After seeing the woman let loose, I decided my real mission tonight was to make sure she didn’t spend the whole meal miserable. I was her little ray of fun.

“So,” I said, leaning slightly toward Darcy as Lou launched into a detailed explanation of the new diamond sourcing initiative. “On a scale of one to ten, how badly do you wish you were wearing sweatpants right now?”

She kept her expression neutral, but I caught the slight quirk of her lips. “Eleven.”

“That bad?”

“I have cashmere pajamas calling my name. My feet are dying for my fluffy slippers.”

I glanced under the table at the red-soled heels. “They do look painful. But also extremely sexy, if that helps.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Pajamas, huh? I sleep in the nude.”

She choked on her wine. “Stop it.”

Lou paused in his explanation to address something Richard had asked about market projections. Once again, Lou asked Darcy another question. She pivoted and managed to give him the answer he was looking for.

When she finished, I leaned in again. “You know all that off the top of your head?”

“I live and breathe this stuff.”

“Weird.”

She picked up her fork and speared a scallop. “What about you? Do you memorize case law for fun?”

“God, no. That’s what paralegals are for.” I grinned. “I prefer to memorize more important things. Like the lyrics to every Bon Jovi song ever written.”

Her face took on a pink flush that made her look so pretty. She shot me a warning look. “We agreed never to speak of that.”

“Did we? I don’t remember agreeing to anything. I haven’t been able to stop singing that song about roses.”

“Stop, you know what the song was.”

I grinned and pretended to think about it.

She rolled her eyes, but there was no heat in it. A week ago, I would have said Darcy Corwin was the last person I’d want to spend an evening with. Now I was actively looking forward to her next comeback.

The main courses arrived, an elaborate parade of wagyu beef and lobster tails. I cut into my steak, savoring the first bite.

“This is incredible,” I said.

“It should be, for what they charge,” Darcy muttered under her breath.

“You don’t seem impressed.”

Darcy shrugged, pushing a piece of lobster around her plate. “After a while, it all starts to taste the same.”

Tom leaned forward, drawing our attention back to the table. “So, Beau, Lou tells us you’re quite the lawyer. Entertainment law, is that right?”

“Started there, yeah. But I’ve branched out over the years. Wherever my clients need me, that’s where I go.”

“Darcy, why don’t you tell them about the expansion plans for the Asian market?” Lou said. I caught the slight edge in his voice. A redirect. She’d been leaning toward me again, and he’d noticed.

Darcy pivoted smoothly. The investors nodded along, engaged. But I saw Lou watching her the way a coach watches a player who’s not quite in the game.

I understood this was her audition, but in my opinion, she’d proven herself. Let the girl eat a fucking meal.

The meal wound down with dessert and coffee, the conversation shifting to lighter topics with the business out of the way. We talked about

travel plans, holiday traditions, the latest California gossip. Darcy relaxed with the business portion of the evening concluded, her shoulders dropping from their rigid position.

"I have to say you two make quite the pair," Richard said. "The chemistry is obvious."

"Absolutely," Tom agreed. "I don't know what those internet people are thinking, calling you an ice queen. Anyone can see you're head over heels for each other."

Darcy's hand found mine under the table, squeezing gently like she was afraid I might blow the story. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"The online world is full of people who don't know what they're talking about," Lou added. "I'm glad you can see the real Darcy."

We stood to leave, the investors shaking hands with everyone and promising to be in touch about the next funding round. Lou walked them toward the valet, leaving Darcy and me standing near the entrance.

She turned to face me. The candlelight from the restaurant caught her features, softening them, making her look almost ethereal.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For tonight. You were perfect."

"Just doing my job."

"No." She shook her head. "This was more than that. You made it enjoyable. I didn't want to stab my fork into my eye."

"High praise. I'm glad no eyeballs were injured tonight."

She smiled and shook her head. "Are you always like this?"

"Charming? Dashing? Amazing?"

She groaned. "I keep forgetting you have an ego the size of Texas."

"If you said the size of Alaska, that'd be more accurate."

She was watching me and suddenly I wasn't laughing. That electric current that had been building all evening hummed between us now. It was impossible to ignore.

I should kiss her again. Just to sell the illusion. Maintain the charade in case anyone was watching.

That was the excuse I was using.

But before I could move, Darcy's hand shot out and grabbed the lapel of my jacket. She pulled me down toward her, and then her lips were on mine.

The kiss was different from the gala. That one had been surprise and strategy. This one was something else entirely. Soft and exploring, like she was asking a question she wasn't sure she wanted answered.

I kissed her back, my hands moving to her waist and pulling her closer. She tasted like expensive wine. I wanted to devour her. I deepened the kiss. My tongue sliding against hers.

Then, just as quickly as it started, it was over.

She pulled back, her cheeks flushed, her eyes wide like she couldn't quite believe what she'd just done. For a moment, we just stood there, inches apart, breathing the same air. Both of us breathing harder than was warranted for standing on a sidewalk.

"Goodnight, Beau," she whispered.

And then she was gone, walking toward the valet stand where her father was waiting.

I stood there, my lips still tingling from the kiss.

Well, shit.

This was supposed to be fake. A simple business deal. But there was nothing businesslike about that kiss. That woman had just rocked my world.

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My lips still tingled from the kiss. I could still taste Beau on them. My new favorite taste.

“So,” Dad said, letting the word hang. “That was quite the display back there.”

I kept my eyes out the window. “What do you mean?”

“The kiss, Darcy. On the sidewalk. In full view of anyone who might be watching. That was quite the spectacle.”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” I turned to face him, feigning innocence. “We’re supposed to be dating. People need to see us being affectionate.”

“Is that all it was? Just for show?”

“Of course.” The lie came too easily. “A cherry on top of a successful evening. The investors seemed convinced.”

Dad made a sound in the back of his throat. A noncommittal “humph” that told me he wasn’t entirely buying it.

I turned back to the window, watching the buildings slide past. I wasn’t about to admit the truth to my father. He did not need to know I wanted Beau to kiss me. I’d been waiting for it all evening, feeling that electric tension building between us with every whispered joke and lingering glance.

But he’d held back.

I understood why. After my reaction at the gala, when I’d practically bitten his head off for kissing me without permission. He probably didn’t

want to cross that line again. He was being respectful. Careful. All the things a decent man should be.

So I'd done it myself.

Beau kept telling me to do things for myself. To loosen up and have some fun. He told me to stop overthinking everything and just act on impulse. So when I'd felt that pull toward him, I acted. There was a magnetic force that seemed to draw us together whenever we were in the same room.

"You didn't do a lot of talking tonight," Dad said, interrupting my thoughts.

I blinked, refocusing on the conversation. "What?"

"With the investors. You answered when asked, but you didn't really engage. Didn't drive the conversation."

"I made a good impression with what I did say. The quarterly projections, the Asian market expansion. They got what they wanted."

"Did they?" Dad's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Because from where I was sitting, you seemed more interested in whispering with your boyfriend than connecting with the men who control a significant portion of our funding."

The word boyfriend hit differently after that kiss.

"I was building rapport with them," I said, hearing the defensiveness creep into my voice. "Small talk. Personal connections. Isn't that what you're always telling me to do? They can read our financial reports if they want the details. I don't need to bore them with that stuff."

He sighed with what sounded a lot like disappointment? Or maybe frustration? "Don't get distracted. If you want to be CEO, that needs to be your focus. The boyfriend is fake. Your career is very real."

"I know."

I turned back to the window, watching my reflection ghost across the glass. Would what I brought to the table ever be enough?

I'd spent my entire life preparing for this. Learning the business from the ground up. Proving myself at every turn. And still, it never seemed to be quite right.

The investors wanted more engagement. My father wanted more focus. The customers wanted warmth and romance from a woman selling symbols of eternal love. The social media trolls wanted blood, any slip-up they could exploit for clicks and laughs.

And me? What did I want?

But wanting things was dangerous. Wanting things meant risking disappointment. And I'd learned a long time ago that the safest path was the one with the fewest expectations.

Dad pulled into my driveway and stopped.

"I know I push hard," he said. "Maybe too hard sometimes. But it's only because I know what you're capable of. I've watched you grow into an incredible woman, Darcy. I just want to make sure nothing gets in the way of you reaching your full potential."

"I know, Dad."

"Get some rest. Big week ahead."

I climbed out of the car and walked to my front door, his headlights illuminating my path. I didn't look back as I let myself inside.

Will I ever be able to satisfy everyone? Investors. My father. Our customers. The influencers and trolls and gossip channels and average scrollers just looking for entertainment?

Myself?

I kicked off my heels and headed straight for my room.

No matter how hard I worked, how perfect I tried to be, there would always be someone who thought I wasn't enough.

The next morning, I woke up tangled in my sheets. I had slept like shit. Too much on my mind. I groaned and buried my face in my pillow.

I dragged myself out of bed and went through my morning routine on autopilot. Shower. Coffee. A protein bar that tasted like shit but was supposedly good for me. I settled onto my couch with my laptop, determined to focus on work.

But my brain had other plans.

The masquerade ball was in two weeks. Where we wined and dined our most elite clientele. People who dropped six figures on engagement rings without blinking. It was always a highlight of our fall calendar, and this year it would be my first major event as the incoming CEO.

And Beau would be there. As my date.

I'd picked out my dress months ago, back when the ball was just another item on my calendar. Something with a lot of silver and blue, elegant and sophisticated. It was a gorgeous dress.

But that felt like a lifetime ago now. The dress had been chosen by a different woman entirely.

I pulled up the photo I'd taken of it at the time. A floor-length gown with silver beading that cascaded down the fabric like frost on a window. The blue was pale, almost icy.

Ice.

I stared at the image, my stomach sinking.

The dress was beautiful. I wanted ice because it was a play on diamonds. But looking at it now, all I could see was the ice queen narrative that had been haunting me for weeks. Silver and blue. Cold colors. It practically begged people to make frozen heart jokes.

I told myself it wasn't about what Beau might think. It was about optics. I needed to make sure nothing about my appearance reinforced the image I was trying to escape. The masquerade ball would be photographed extensively. Social media would be crawling with pictures. If I showed up looking like Elsa's corporate cousin, I'd be handing the trolls ammunition on a silver platter.

I closed the laptop and leaned back against the couch cushions. I needed a new dress. The problem was, I was terrible at this. Fashion had never been my strong suit. I'd spent most of my life in business attire, letting stylists handle the rare occasions that required something more. I didn't have an eye for it. I didn't know what worked.

And to make matters worse, I didn't have a lot of friends to call for help with something like this.

That realization stung more than I wanted to admit. I had colleagues. Business associates. But actual friends? The kind you could call up on a Sunday morning to go dress shopping?

Nope.

Cleo had given me her number after our shopping trip. She told me to reach out anytime. She knew fashion. It was literally her job. Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed my phone and pulled up her contact to send her a text.

Hey Cleo, this is Darcy. I hope it's okay that I'm reaching out. I have a dress question and could use a professional opinion if you have a minute.

She was probably busy. She had her own business to run and her own life to live. Why would she want to spend her day helping a stranger pick out a dress?

My phone buzzed.

Of course it's okay. What's up?

I pulled up the photo of my original dress and typed out a message.

Me: *I have this dress for an event coming up, but I'm worried it might scream ice queen. Too much silver and blue. What do you think?*

I attached the photo and hit send.

The three dots appeared. I waited for her opinion. It mattered.

Cleo: *Yeah, I can see that. It's gorgeous, but the color palette is definitely on the cooler side. If you're trying to warm up your image, this might not be the best choice.*

I sighed. I'd known that but having it confirmed still felt like a blow.

Another message popped up.

If you want to find a new dress, I'm free today. I could show you some stores that should have what you need. Sometimes seeing things in person makes all the difference.

I stared at the message, surprised by the offer. She was willing to spend her day off helping me shop?

Are you sure? I typed. *I don't want to impose on your weekend.*

Cleo: *Please. Shopping is literally my favorite thing. You'd be doing me a favor. I've been looking for an excuse to check out some new boutiques anyway.*

I smiled. *Okay, if you're sure. Where should I meet you?*

She sent me an address in Beverly Hills along with a time. Two hours later, I was standing outside a boutique I'd never heard of, waiting for Cleo to arrive.

Cleo appeared around the corner, looking effortlessly put together in a way I'd never quite mastered.

"Darcy!" She pulled me into a quick hug before I could react. I managed not to go completely rigid this time. Progress. "I'm so glad you reached out. This is going to be fun."

"Thank you for doing this," I said. "I really appreciate it."

"Are you kidding? I live for this stuff." She linked her arm through mine and steered me toward the door. "Now, tell me about this event. What's the vibe? What message do you want to send?"

"It's the Corwin Gems masquerade ball. Elite clientele. Black tie, very formal. Lots of photographers."

"And you want to look..."

"Warm," I said. "Passionate. Alive. The opposite of everything people have been saying about me."

Cleo nodded thoughtfully. “So we’re thinking hot colors. Red, maybe. Orange or gold. Something that says fire instead of ice.”

“Exactly.”

“I know just the place to start.”

The first boutique didn’t have anything quite right. The dresses were beautiful, but nothing felt like me. Too frilly. Too revealing. Too something.

Cleo didn’t seem discouraged. She just guided me to the next store, chatting as we walked.

“So how long have you been running Corwin Gems?” she asked.

“I’ve been working there my whole life, basically. I won’t officially be running it until my father retires in the next couple of months.”

“That’s a long time to be preparing for something.”

“Tell me about it.” I laughed. “And I’m still not sure I’m ready.”

“Running a business is hard.”

“What about you?” I asked. “How did you end up designing wedding gowns?”

Her face lit up. “I’ve always loved fashion, but wedding dresses specifically? That came later. It started as a one-off in college and something just clicked. There’s something magical about helping a bride get her dream gown.”

“That does sound fulfilling.”

“It’s also a ton of work,” she admitted. “Brides can be... particular. But I love it. Even when it’s stressful, I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

We arrived at the second boutique, and Cleo immediately started pulling dresses from the racks. She had an eye for it, selecting options I never would have considered on my own. I wished I had that confidence.

“Try this one,” she said, handing me a crimson gown with a plunging neckline that would definitely require boob tape.

I held it up, skeptical. “This seems very...”

“Bold? That’s the point. You want people to see you and think fire, not ice. This dress screams passion.”

I took it into the fitting room, along with three others she’d selected. The crimson one was first.

When I stepped out to look in the three-way mirror, I barely recognized myself. The dress was tight. The neckline was daring but not inappropriate. The color was unique and bold and nothing like I would have ever dared to try on.

“Oh,” Cleo breathed. “Darcy, that’s stunning.”

I turned, watching myself in the mirror. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“I think it’s exactly enough. You look powerful. Confident. Like a woman who knows exactly what she wants and isn’t afraid to go after it.”

I stared at my reflection. She was right.

“This is the one,” I said quietly.

“Absolutely.”

We made the purchase. Cleo insisted on taking me to lunch afterward. We settled into a corner booth at a trendy café, ordering salads and sparkling water.

“Thank you again for today,” I said. “I never would have found that dress on my own.”

“Happy to help. Besides, I had fun. It’s nice to shop for someone who actually listens to advice.”

I laughed. “I’m guessing brides don’t always?”

“You have no idea.” She rolled her eyes. “Last week I had a bride insist on a mermaid silhouette even though she’s six months pregnant. Some battles you just can’t win.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

“It can be. But it’s not about what I want. They have an idea in their head and it’s my job to make it work.” She took a sip of her water. “So, the masquerade ball. When is it?”

“Two weeks. Saturday night.”

“That sounds amazing.”

I paused, an idea forming. “Would you want to come? My company is hosting it, so I can get you tickets. It’s the least I can do after you spent your whole day helping me.”

Cleo’s eyes widened. “Seriously? I would love that!”

“Consider it done. I’ll put you on the guest list.”

“In that case,” she grinned, “we need to find me a dress too.”

We headed to another designer boutique. Cleo knew what worked for her. She tried on half a dozen options before settling on a silver gown that complemented her coloring perfectly.

“We’re going to look amazing,” she declared as we left the store, shopping bags in hand.

I realized something had changed. I'd come out today looking for a dress, but I'd found something more valuable.

Maybe, just maybe, I'd found a friend.

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I stood on a small platform while an elderly tailor with nimble fingers adjusted the hem of my trousers, muttering to himself in a mix of English and Italian. I knew how this worked. I'd been fitted for suits several times over the last year. Never piss off the guy with straight pins near your junk.

I was lucky I didn't have any major deadlines pending. I would never have time for any of this. When a big trial was coming up, it was seven days a week, eighteen-hour days. Which reminded me I needed to hire another paralegal. I had a constant revolving door of clients that should be getting my attention. In the back of my mind, I knew I could be spending more time with them and less time with my new, blonde-haired distraction.

"Arms up, please," Giovanni said. I complied while he measured across my shoulders for what felt like the hundredth time.

Jeremy stood on the platform next to mine, admiring himself in the mirror with zero subtlety. My younger brother had never met a reflective surface he didn't love.

"This is going to be incredible," Jeremy said, turning to check out his profile. "I've heard about the Corwin Gems masquerade ball for years. Super exclusive. A-list only. And now I'm finally going to see what all the fuss is about."

"You're welcome," I said dryly.

"Seriously, though. Thank you for getting me in."

“It wasn’t me,” I said. “Thank Cleo.”

He grinned. “I’m her plus-one. I never imagined I’d be back to needing my older sister to be my wingman.”

“Was it eighth grade she had to be your date to the dance?”

“Don’t remind me.” He grinned at his reflection. “Think of all the mysterious masked women I’m going to meet. The intrigue. The romance. The potential for incredibly bad decisions.”

“Please don’t cause an international incident.”

“No promises.” He wagged his eyebrows. “That’s the whole point of a masquerade, right? Nobody knows who you are. You can be anyone. Do anything.”

Giovanni’s assistant approached Jeremy with a pincushion. My brother reluctantly stopped admiring himself long enough to let the man work.

“What about you?” Jeremy asked, glancing at me in the mirror. “Ready for your big night with the ice queen?”

“Don’t call her that.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Touchy. I was just kidding.”

“I know. But she hates that nickname, and honestly, she doesn’t deserve it. She’s not icy.”

Jeremy watched me in the mirror. I knew that look. It usually preceded questions I didn’t want to answer.

“You like her,” he said. Not a question.

“She’s nicer than she first seemed.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I sighed, keeping my arms raised while Giovanni continued his work. “It doesn’t matter if I like her. This is a job. I don’t sleep with clients.”

“Technically, she’s not your client. Her father is.”

“Drop it, Jeremy.”

“I’m just saying—”

“And I’m just saying drop it.” I met his eyes in the mirror, making sure he understood I was serious. “I don’t want to think about Darcy that way. It would just complicate things.”

“Things seem pretty complicated already.”

He was right. Darcy had gotten under my skin in ways I hadn’t expected. I was still thinking about that damn kiss outside the restaurant. She was prickly and guarded and way too serious about everything, but underneath all that armor was someone genuinely interesting.

But that was exactly why I needed to keep my distance. This was business. A temporary arrangement designed to fix her public image. Getting emotionally involved would be stupid.

"It's a shame," Jeremy said when I didn't respond. "She seems cool. Different from the usual Hollywood types you date."

"I don't date Hollywood types."

"Love 'em and leave 'em Beau."

I barked out a humorless laugh. "Said the pot to the kettle."

He wasn't entirely wrong, though. My romantic history was a series of short-term entanglements that never went anywhere. Partly because I was too focused on my career. Partly because I'd never met anyone who made me want to try for something more.

Until maybe now.

I pushed that thought away before it could take root.

Giovanni stepped back, examining his work with a critical eye. "Very good, very good. The fit is perfect. You will look magnificent."

"Thank you, Giovanni."

The elderly tailor gestured to his assistant, who disappeared into the back room. A moment later, he returned carrying two large boxes.

"And now," Giovanni said with a flourish. "The masks."

He set the boxes on a nearby table and opened the first one, revealing Jeremy's mask. It was elaborate and dramatic, with curved horns rising from the temples like some kind of mythical goat creature. The base was black with gold accents, designed to cover the upper half of the face while leaving the jaw exposed.

"Holy shit," Jeremy breathed, picking it up carefully. "This is incredible."

"The horns were a special request," Giovanni looked pleased with himself. "Very unique. Very memorable. Goats represent desire. Lust. Seduction."

We both looked at the tailor. I couldn't tell if he was serious. Goats and lust were not two things I would ever associate.

"Is a goat the right move?" Jeremy held the mask up to his face, checking the effect in the mirror. "What do goats say? Neigh? Baa?"

And then he proceeded to practice goat sounds. My brother was ridiculous, but at least he was entertaining.

Giovanni opened the second box. My eyes nearly popped out of my head.

“Holy shit,” I murmured.

The mask was a fox.

Deep russet red with white accents around the eyes and muzzle. The craftsmanship was exquisite, every detail perfect from the pointed ears to the tiniest details that made it look almost alive. I’d chosen it with her in mind. I knew she’d like it.

She liked foxes. At least I assumed as much after the way she’d practically drooled over that wooden fox.

Foxes meant something to her. I didn’t know what, exactly. Maybe she related to them. Clever creatures, they were animals that thrived by being smarter than everything around them. Whatever the reason, I’d wanted my mask to be something that would make her smile.

“A fox,” Jeremy said, glancing at me with raised eyebrows. “Interesting choice.”

“It felt right.”

“Uh-huh.” That knowing look was back.

“Shut up, you horny goat.”

He laughed but mercifully let it drop.

We finished up at the tailor’s, scheduling a final fitting for later in the week. Jeremy headed off to some lunch meeting with his agent, Lucy, leaving me alone with my thoughts as I drove home.

The fox mask sat on the passenger seat, still in its box. I kept glancing at it, thinking about Darcy’s reaction when she saw it. Would she make the connection? Would she realize I’d chosen it for her?

Did I want her to?

I pulled into my garage and headed inside. I was working from home to save myself some time. Turned out when you didn’t spend two hours sitting in the car for a commute, you could get a lot more work done.

Inside, I changed into comfortable clothes and settled at my desk with every intention of getting some actual work done. I had a contract that needed reviewing. A pending settlement to look over. And apparently the next big neighborhood war involved shrubs that shielded my client from the prying eyes of her neighbor. Said neighbor dumped some kind of plant killer on the shrubs. I was looking forward to dragging the asshole neighbor through the mud.

I opened my laptop and pulled up the first file.

Twenty minutes later, I realized I'd read the same paragraph four times without absorbing a single word. My mind kept drifting to Darcy.

She'd told me about going dress shopping with Cleo. Something about the original dress being too icy and on-brand for the nickname she was trying to escape. Cleo had helped her find something new. Something that would show a different side of her.

I was curious what she'd chosen. More than curious. I was genuinely excited to see her in it.

That was a problem. After the last dress, I couldn't imagine what she would wear.

I forced myself to focus on the contract, making notes in the margins and flagging sections that needed revision. Work was my comfort zone. The place where everything made sense. I knew the rules and how to win.

Darcy Corwin didn't fit into any of my usual categories. She wasn't a client, not really. She wasn't a friend, though we were getting closer to that every day. She definitely wasn't a romantic interest because I'd promised myself I wouldn't go there.

But she was something alright.

A distraction, maybe. A good one. I closed the laptop and walked out onto my balcony, letting the ocean breeze wash over me. Maybe she wasn't the only one who needed to change.

Darcy was the opposite of simple. She was complicated and challenging and infuriating in the best possible way. She didn't let me get away with my usual charm offensive. That should have scared me. Instead, it made me want to know her better.

The masquerade ball was going to be interesting. A night of masks and mystery, where everyone pretended to be someone else. The irony wasn't lost on me. Darcy and I had been wearing masks since the moment we met.

Maybe it was time to start taking some of them off.

Or maybe I was getting way too philosophical about a fake relationship with a woman who was paying me to pretend to be her boyfriend.

The night of the masquerade ball came up fast. I'd been busting ass at work. No time to do anything except eat, sleep, and work. I hadn't seen Beau since the kiss. I decided that was for the best. Things had gotten complicated in a hurry. A little break helped get my head straight again.

Lie. I lay in bed every night wondering what he was doing. Sometimes, we'd text nonsense stuff. But I left him alone. I had no desire to annoy him with a steady stream of 'What are you doing?' nonsense. I was a grown woman and he was a busy professional. We worked. That was what we both did.

I stepped out of the shower, rubbed on lotion, and dressed in the new red lace panties. The dress was red. May as well stick with the whole fire theme. Not that anyone would see them, but I'd know.

The red dress hugged my body like it had been painted on, the fabric catching the light with every breath I took. The plunging neckline was daring without being overly scandalous. I had proper tape and push-up cups. The dress was going nowhere. There was zero chance I would have a nip slip, but just in case, I covered those bad boys as well. I turned left, then right, watching the way the dress moved. It flared slightly at the hips before cascading to the floor. I felt like I was wrapped in liquid fire.

Cleo had been right. This dress didn't whisper—it roared.

I turned slowly, watching the way the beaded details along the bodice caught the light from my vanity. Tiny crystals scattered across the fabric like embers, glowing against the deep red. The back dipped low, exposing the curve of my spine. More tape there as well.

My hair was down, styled in beachy waves that tumbled over my shoulders. The stylist I'd hired had worked magic, adding volume and movement that made me look softer. The makeup was dramatic but elegant. I went with a dark smoky eye, and a bold red lip that matched the dress. I had just enough highlighter to make my cheekbones catch the light.

And then there was the mask. I had splurged. Big time.

I lifted the mask from its velvet-lined box. Gold filigree curled across the delicate frame. Crimson feathers swept upward from one side, layered in shades of deep red and copper with pointed tips resembling flames. Tiny garnets glittered along the edges, catching the light like embers.

It was beautiful. And a little wicked.

I raised it to my face and secured the thin ribbon behind my head, then looked at my reflection. The woman staring back at me barely resembled the one who'd spent the afternoon arguing with herself over whether the dress was too much.

The mask framed my eyes in gold, emphasizing the smoky shadow I'd brushed across my lids. The garnet at the bridge of my nose glowed like a drop of blood. I tilted my head. The phoenix mask wasn't delicate. It demanded to be seen. I reached up and adjusted one of the feathers, watching it spring back into place.

"Let's see what kind of trouble you get me into."

Tonight wasn't just about looking good. It was about my transformation. I would show the world that the ice queen they'd created was nothing but a myth. I was fire, not frost.

My phone buzzed. A text from Beau.

Pulling up now.

My heart did a little flip. It was just nerves about the event. Nothing more.

I grabbed my glittering gold clutch, just big enough to hold my phone, lipstick, and not much else. I opened the front door to see a sleek black limousine waiting in my driveway.

Beau was standing next to the open back door. He wore a perfectly tailored black tuxedo that, as usual, made him look downright sinful. But it

was the mask that stopped me in my tracks.

A fox.

It was exquisite. From the pointed ears to the subtle texture that made the fur look almost real. He'd chosen a fox. It was probably just a coincidence. Foxes were popular. He was cocky and would of course see himself clever as a fox.

It didn't mean anything.

Beau's eyes traveled slowly from my heels to my face. His lips parted slightly, and for a moment, he just stared.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

I smiled, suddenly warm. "You clean up pretty well yourself, Blackwell."

He shook his head slowly, still staring. "Darcy, you look... I don't even have words. Incredible doesn't cover it."

"Careful, counselor. A lawyer without words is very dangerous."

He laughed, and the sound sent a shiver down my spine. It wrapped around me like a physical thing. I told myself it was just the corset of my dress making it hard to breathe. The boning was tight, after all. Very restrictive.

No. That was a lie, and I knew it.

It was all Beau. The way he looked at me. It was getting harder to deny the effect he had on me.

"A fox," I said, gesturing to his mask as I walked toward the limo. "Interesting choice."

"You like it?"

"It's very you."

His lips quirked. "How so?"

"Foxes are sneaky. Clever. Subtle." I tilted my head, pretending to consider. "Actually, wait. That's nothing like you at all. You're about as subtle as a sledgehammer."

He laughed again, that same warm sound that made butterflies take flight in my belly. "I prefer to think of myself as charmingly direct."

"You would."

I slid into the back of the limo, careful not to wrinkle my dress. The interior was all black leather and soft lighting, with a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket and two glasses waiting on a small table.

Beau climbed in beside me, and the driver pulled away from my house.

“Champagne?” he asked, reaching for the bottle.

“Please.”

“I thought about stopping for a six pack but didn’t think you’d want to show up for your big night with beer breath.”

I smiled. “Good thinking.”

He poured two glasses and handed one to me. I felt that spark again. That electric current that seemed to arc between us whenever we touched.

I took a sip, letting the bubbles fizz against my tongue. The champagne was excellent, dry and crisp with just a hint of sweetness.

“Are you nervous?” Beau asked.

I considered the question. A week ago, the answer would have been an emphatic yes. The thought of walking into a room full of elite clients and investors, all of them watching and judging, would have had my stomach in knots.

But tonight felt different.

“No,” I said, surprising myself with how much I meant it. “The mask weirdly helps. It’s like permission to be someone else for a night. Someone braver.”

“You don’t need a mask to be brave, Darcy.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

My pulse accelerated when our limo fell in line with many others outside one of the luxury hotels in the city. It wasn’t fear. It was anticipation.

The limo pulled up to the entrance. Through the tinted windows, I could see photographers lining the red carpet, their cameras already flashing as guests made their way inside.

“Ready?” Beau asked.

I met his eyes through our masks. “Ready.”

The door opened, and Beau stepped out first, turning to offer me his hand. I took it, letting him help me from the car, and the moment my heels hit the red carpet, the cameras exploded.

Flashes everywhere, so bright they were almost blinding. Voices calling out, asking us to look this way, to smile, to turn. The noise was overwhelming, a wall of sound and light that threatened to swallow me whole.

But Beau was there.

His hand found the small of my back, his fingers touching my skin. He guided me forward with gentle pressure with his body against mine.

“Just breathe,” he murmured, his lips close to my ear. “You’ve got this.”

I did breathe. The panic that usually clawed at my throat stayed quiet. His big, imposing presence was like a soft blankie. All cozy and protective.

We posed for pictures, his arm around my waist, my hand resting on his chest. The photographers called out instructions. We turned and smiled, playing our parts. It felt natural.

When we reached the entrance, a man in formal attire stepped forward with a microphone.

“Announcing Miss Darcy Corwin, incoming CEO of Corwin Gems, and Mr. Beau Blackwell.”

A spotlight swung toward us, bathing us in bright light. The crowd inside turned to look, masked faces tilting in our direction.

I waved, my free hand clutching Beau’s arm tighter than it probably should have. But he didn’t flinch. He just smiled and covered my hand with his, a silent reassurance that he was there. I wasn’t alone.

I couldn’t remember a time I’d felt this powerful. This in control. I never imagined I could feel like this with a man at my side. I’d always thought I had to be alone. Independent. Carving out my own destiny without anyone’s help.

But Beau made me feel whole.

My thoughts were interrupted as we were gently ushered from the entrance deeper into the ballroom. The space took my breath away.

The ballroom had been transformed into something out of a dark fairy tale. Deep burgundy drapes cascaded from the ceiling, pooling on the floor in rivers of velvet. Candelabras lined the walls with LED candles casting light and shadows. The chandeliers overhead had been dimmed to a soft amber glow and scattered throughout the room were arrangements of black roses and deep purple orchids.

The tables were draped in black with centerpieces of twisted branches adorned with crystals that caught the candlelight. It was gothic and romantic. There were no pumpkins or typical Halloween decorations. The vibe was brooding and alluring. Everyone loved the idea of walking on the dark side. We put together a night of fantasy that alluded to breaking rules without actually doing it.

A string quartet in the corner played haunting and beautiful music. Guests in elaborate masks mingled throughout the space. The seductive environment seemed to have everyone a little looser than normal.

"This is incredible," Beau said, looking around with genuine appreciation.

"Yeah?"

"Did you have anything to do with this?"

"I helped plan it," I admitted. "The event coordinator did most of the work, but I approved the designs."

"You did good, Corwin. This is exactly the right vibe."

We made our way to the bar, Beau's hand never leaving my back. I ordered a glass of red wine because it was the right thing to drink in a room like this. Beau got a whiskey neat.

"Darcy."

I turned to find my father approaching, looking distinguished in his own tuxedo. His mask was a lion, all golden mane and fierce features. Somehow it suited him perfectly.

"Dad." I smiled, genuinely happy to see him. "What do you think?"

He looked around the room, taking in the decorations, the guests, the overall atmosphere. Then he nodded, a rare expression of approval crossing his face.

"The party looks good this year," he said. "You did a good job."

Five simple words, but they meant the world.

"Thank you," I said softly.

He squeezed my shoulder briefly, then turned to Beau. "Blackwell, glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss it, sir."

Dad nodded once more, then excused himself to greet some investors who had just arrived. I watched him go, feeling lighter than I had in months.

"Come on," Beau said, taking my hand. "Let's find our table."

We wound through the crowd, nodding at masked faces and returning greetings from people I vaguely recognized. Our table was near the front, positioned with a perfect view of the small stage where the evening's entertainment would perform.

We settled into our seats, and Beau immediately started scanning the room, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Okay,” he said, leaning close so only I could hear. “The guy in the peacock mask by the ice sculpture. Who do you think that is?”

I followed his gaze to a man in an elaborate blue-and-green mask, complete with actual peacock feathers sprouting from the top. He was gesturing dramatically while talking to a woman in a cat mask.

“That’s Cory Winston,” I said. “Tech billionaire. He always goes over the top at these things.”

“No way. I was going to guess some kind of performance artist.”

“He wishes he was that interesting.”

Beau laughed. We spent the next twenty minutes playing the guessing game, trying to identify people based on their masks while guessing why they chose the masks.

I had been to the ball every year. And I had never enjoyed myself like I was with Beau.

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The ballroom hummed with energy. The haunting violin set the tone. It was hypnotic. Erotic. Or maybe it was her. She was stunning. Every time she turned her head, the candlelight caught the crystals on her dress. I was a man and therefore I felt it was completely normal that I noticed her chest. Not just her chest. Her whole vibe was fire.

I was in trouble. Deep, undeniable trouble.

“Beau!”

I turned to see Cleo weaving through the crowd, her silver gown catching the light as she moved. It was very disco ball. Jeremy trailed behind her, his ridiculous goat mask somehow working on him. Only my brother could pull off horns and still look like he belonged on a magazine cover.

“There you are,” Cleo said, sliding into the empty chair next to Darcy. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you two.”

“We’ve been right here,” I said. “Doing very important people-watching.”

Jeremy dropped into the seat beside me, immediately flagging down a passing server for another drink.

“This party is insane,” he said, eyes scanning the room with predatory interest. “Have you seen the woman in the rabbit mask? Over by the champagne tower?”

I followed his gaze. A tall brunette in a white gown stood near the elaborate champagne display, her mask was white lace and pearl-tipped ears. She was beautiful in that obvious way that usually attracted Jeremy like a moth to flame.

"I see her," I said.

"I'm going to talk to her later." Jeremy accepted his whiskey from the server with a nod of thanks. "She's been making eye contact all night."

"Maybe she's just looking in your general direction."

"Beau, please." He gestured to himself with exaggerated confidence. "No one just looks in my general direction."

Across the table, Cleo and Darcy had fallen into easy conversation. I caught fragments of their discussion. Cleo said something about the decorations and it feeling like she was in a fever dream.

Agreed.

"You really outdid yourself," Cleo said. "The black roses are such a nice touch. Gothic without being cheesy."

"That was my one hard rule," Darcy replied. "No fake cobwebs. No plastic spiders. I wanted elegant darkness, not a haunted house."

"You nailed it."

I watched Darcy smile at the compliment. She looked comfortable with Cleo. They'd only known each other a few weeks, but something had clicked between them. Friendship, maybe. Or at least the beginning of one. I liked that for her. For both of them, really.

"So," Jeremy said, drawing my attention back to him. "How's the fake dating thing going?"

"Keep your voice down," I muttered.

"Relax. No one can hear us over the music." He took a sip of his whiskey, watching me over the rim of the glass. "But seriously. You two look cozy. Very convincing."

"That's the point."

"Uh-huh." He set down his glass, that knowing look in his eyes again. "You know, I'm leaving for England next week."

The subject change was so abrupt it took me a second to catch up. "England?"

"Photo shoot for some luxury watch brand. Then Greece for a resort campaign. Then back to Australia for another two months." He rattled off

the locations like they were stops on a subway line. “Super busy through the new year.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

“Sounds amazing.” He grinned, leaning back in his chair. “No ties. No responsibilities. Just me, beautiful locations, and even more beautiful women.”

“You make it sound so romantic.”

“It *is* romantic.” He spread his hands wide. “I’ve found the fountain of youth, Beau. Beautiful women, chartered jets, plenty of beaches. What more could a man want?”

I snorted. “Reality comes for every man eventually, Jeremy. Even you.”

“Not when you look like this.” He gestured to his face with complete sincerity. “I’ve got at least another decade of running from commitment before I have to worry about settling down.”

“Famous last words.”

“Nah.” He shook his head, still grinning. “I’ve got it all figured out. The key is to never stay in one place long enough to get attached.”

“Maybe attachment isn’t the worst thing,” I said quietly.

Jeremy raised an eyebrow but didn’t push. Smart man.

The string quartet shifted into something slower. I knew the piece. Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. It was a little different but I knew it. The melody curled through the room like smoke, wrapping around the guests and drawing couples toward the dance floor. It was like a spell weaving around all of us. I watched masked pairs move together, bodies swaying in the candlelight.

I turned to Darcy. She was still talking to Cleo, something about a designer they both admired, but her eyes kept drifting to the dance floor. I caught the longing in her expression.

“Dance with me,” I said.

She turned, surprise flickering behind her phoenix mask. “What?”

“Dance with me.” I stood and offered my hand. “That’s what people do at balls, isn’t it?”

Cleo gave Darcy an encouraging smile. “Go. I’ll hold down the table. Someone has to guard the wine.”

“I’ll keep you company,” Jeremy said. “Tell you all about my new gym routine.”

Cleo groaned. “Joy.”

Darcy hesitated for just a moment, then placed her hand in mine. The contact sent electricity racing up my arm. I led her through the crowd toward the dance floor, weaving between tables and guests until we found an open space near the center.

The cello dragged a dark, dangerous note that had me pulling her closer. My hand found the small of her back, fingers pressing against the bare skin exposed by her dress. She shivered slightly at the contact.

"Cold?" I murmured.

"No." Her voice was breathy. "Definitely not cold."

We began to move, finding the rhythm together. She was a better dancer than I expected, following my lead with grace and fluidity.

"You're full of surprises, Corwin," I said.

"I took ballroom lessons as a teenager." She tilted her head, those blue eyes catching the light through her mask. "My father thought it would be useful for events like this."

"Remind me to thank him."

She laughed softly. That sound made it hard to breathe.

We danced in silence for a moment, our bodies moving closer with each turn. Her hand on my shoulder tightened slightly. My thumb traced small circles against her spine. The air between us grew thick. Hell, the entire dance floor was caught up in a haze of lust.

"People are watching," she whispered.

"Let them watch."

I pulled her closer still, until our bodies were nearly flush. I could feel the heat of her through the thin fabric of her dress. Her perfume was earthy and floral. I knew the scent. Black Orchid. And it fucking worked on her. It was intoxicating in the most unexpected way. I didn't care for florals, but on her, it was perfect. Her breath caught as my hand slid lower on her back.

"Beau."

"Just dancing," I said, though we both knew it was more than that.

The music swelled. I spun her gently, watching the way her dress flared around her ankles. When I pulled her back, she came willingly, her body pressing against mine. Her hand moved from my shoulder to the back of my neck, fingers threading through my hair.

"You're playing with fire," she murmured.

"Maybe I like getting burned."

Her eyes grew heavy-lidded. I could see her pulse fluttering at the base of her throat, quick and unsteady. The same rhythm my own heart was beating.

I leaned in closer, my lips brushing against her ear. "You're beautiful tonight. Have I mentioned that?"

"Once or twice."

"Let me mention it again." I pulled back just enough to meet her eyes. "You're the most stunning woman in this room. In any room."

Her cheeks flushed, a lighter shade of her dress. "You don't have to keep flattering me. We're already convincing enough."

"This isn't flattery. It's truth."

The music shifted into something even slower, more intimate. The violinist dragged the bow across the strings in a mournful sound that gripped your very soul. Around us, other couples swayed in their own private worlds, but I barely noticed them. My entire focus had narrowed to the woman in my arms.

Darcy's hand moved from my neck to my jaw, her thumb tracing along my cheekbone. The touch was light, exploratory, like she was memorizing the shape of my face.

"The mask suits you," she said softly. "The fox."

"Yeah?"

"Clever. Quick. Always thinking three steps ahead." Her fingers traced the edge of the mask where it met my skin. "But also loyal. Protective of what's theirs."

"Is that how you see me?"

"It's how you've been with me."

I let my forehead rest against hers, our masks touching. Her eyes fluttered closed.

It would be so easy to kiss her right now. I wanted to taste those red-painted lips. That was part of the plan, after all. Public displays of affection to sell our relationship to the watching world.

But for some reason, I didn't want to share this moment with onlookers. Didn't want the cameras or the gossip or the knowing looks from strangers. This felt private. Sacred, almost. Something that belonged only to us. I had no desire to perform for anyone.

I pulled back slightly, and her eyes opened, confusion flickering behind her mask.

“Not here,” I said quietly.

“What?”

“Not here.” I took her hand, lacing our fingers together. “Come with me.”

I led her off the dance floor, weaving through the crowd toward the exit. My heart was pounding, blood rushing in my ears. I could feel her hand trembling slightly in mine, could sense her anticipation matching my own.

We burst through the ballroom doors into the cooler air of the lobby. The contrast was jarring after the warmth and noise inside, but I didn’t slow down. I pulled out my phone and sent a quick text to the limo driver.

“Where are we going?” Darcy asked.

“My place.”

She didn’t argue. Just squeezed my hand tighter.

The limo pulled up within minutes. I helped her inside. The door barely closed before she was on me, her hands fisting in my jacket, pulling me toward her. Our masks bumped together. She let out a breathless laugh before she reached up to remove my mask.

“Off,” she said.

“Not yet.” I caught her wrists gently. “Wait until we’re home.”

She swallowed. “Okay.”

The drive felt endless and instant all at once. We sat close together, her head on my shoulder, my hand on her thigh. Neither of us spoke. Words felt unnecessary.

When the limo finally pulled into my driveway, I helped her out of the car. The ocean breeze caught her hair, sending it dancing around her shoulders.

She looked at me, those blue eyes bright behind her phoenix mask.

“Now what?” she whispered.

I took her hand and led her toward the front door.

“Now,” I said, “we take off the masks.”

I followed him inside. I knew what this was. We both did. He didn't ask and I didn't bother trying to play coy.

The moment the door shut behind us, Beau turned to me, his eyes dark behind that fox mask. I reached up, my fingers trembling slightly, and untied the ribbon at the back of his head. The mask slipped away, revealing that gorgeous face I'd missed all night. The heat in his gaze made my stomach twist with want.

He did the same for me, his hands gentle as he freed my phoenix mask and set it aside. The second it was gone, his mouth was on mine.

The kiss was nothing like the ones before. This one burned. His lips parted mine with a hunger that matched the fire I'd been carrying all night. His tongue slid against mine, pushing deep into my mouth. I clutched at his jacket, pulling him closer, and pushed my tongue against his. He tasted like whiskey and danger. Heat pooled low in my belly and spread through my veins like liquid flame.

Beau's hands slid down my arms and then to my waist. Then lower. He gripped my hips through the silk of my dress, pulling my lower body against his. His hard body pushing against mine. He backed me against the nearest wall, the cool surface at my spine contrasting with the fever of his body smashed into mine. I gasped into his mouth as one hand traced up my side. His fingers brushed the bare skin at the low dip of my back, sending shivers racing over my skin. My own hands were busy too, shoving his

jacket off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. I wanted more. More skin, more heat, more of him.

He groaned, the sound vibrating through me. I deepened the kiss, my teeth grazing across his lower lip. His tongue stroked mine in slow, deliberate movements that made my toes curl in my heels. I arched into him, feeling his hard, muscular chest. My nipples pebbled to the point I was certain the sticky covers would be pushed right off. One of his hands tangled in my hair, tilting my head to give him better access. His other slid down to cup my ass, pulling me against the hard length of him. A jolt of pure need shot straight between my legs. I moaned into his mouth.

He stepped away from the wall, pulling me with him. I knew where we were headed. We stumbled toward the stairs, lips never parting. His hands continued to move over my body. I kicked off my heels to keep from stumbling.

He led me into his room and spun me around, pushing me against another wall.

“God damn, this dress has teased me all night,” he groaned.

He pushed my hair over my shoulder and kissed the back of my neck.

“I’ve wanted my lips right here,” he murmured, kissing the top of my spine. His mouth moved lower. “And here.”

His fingers worked at the zipper at my side, easing it down inch by inch as his tongue and lips kissed the expanse of exposed skin at my back. The cool air hit my heated skin. He tugged and pulled until the fabric was pooled at my ankles.

My breasts were pushed against the wall, the tape still clinging. His large hand cupped my bare ass in the red lace thong.

“Damn, woman,” he hissed. “This ass is fire. I want to devour you.”

I slowly turned to face him, my back against the wall. He grinned when his eyes saw the stick-on cups and nipple covers.

“It’s like my very own gift. I get to unwrap you.”

“Then do it,” I said.

I tugged at his shirt, buttons popping free, my palms gliding over the taut muscle. He was all smooth skin and strength. I couldn’t stop touching him, tracing the lines of his abdomen, feeling the way his muscles jumped under my fingertips.

He looked at my breasts again. “How the hell do I get that off? I need you bare.”

I smirked. "Got any body oil?"

"No."

"Then slowly. Please."

His fingers traced the edge of the first adhesive cover with maddening patience. "Slow is good," he murmured against the shell of my ear. "Slow means I get to watch every inch of you come undone. You've been holding everything so tight, Darcy. Let it go. Just feel."

I shivered as he peeled the first cover away, the cool air kissing my nipple before his warm palm replaced it. My back arched without permission. "Beau."

"I've got you." His mouth followed the path his hand had taken, tongue circling, then sucking gently until I gasped. "That's it. Let yourself feel how good it is."

I reached for the remaining cover, impatient, but he caught my wrist and guided it above my head. "My turn. You spent all night looking like fire and now I want to taste every spark. Breathe for me."

The second cover came off slower. He watched my face the whole time, eyes dark with heat and something gentler. When both breasts were bare, he cupped them in his hands, thumbs brushing my nipples until they tightened into peaks. "Beautiful. God, you're beautiful when you stop trying to control everything."

I wanted to argue but the words dissolved when his mouth closed over one nipple. He sucked hard enough to make my knees buckle. His arm came around my waist, holding me up while his tongue flicked and circled. Every pull sent sparks straight between my legs.

"Feel that?" he whispered against my skin.

His free hand slid down my stomach, fingers slipping beneath the lace of my thong. He stroked once, light and teasing. My hips jerked forward on instinct. A low laugh rumbled in his chest. "There she is. My girl who's always in charge finally letting someone else drive."

I wanted to protest the "my girl" but his fingers pressed deeper, sliding through slick heat. The protest turned into a moan. He worked me with slow, deliberate circles, reading every twitch and gasp and acting on it. "That's perfect. Don't hold back. Let me hear you."

My head fell back against the wall. Every time I tried to reach for him he caught my hands and placed them back against the wall. "Hands stay here. Let me take care of you."

The thong came off with one efficient tug. He knelt, lifting one of my legs over his shoulder. His mouth replaced his fingers. The first long, slow lick stole the air from my lungs. He groaned like he was starving, the vibration traveling straight through me. "You taste so fucking good. Let go, Darcy. I've got you."

He licked and sucked with one hand braced on my hip, the other sliding up to tease my nipple again. I couldn't stop the sounds escaping me. They were raw, needy, nothing like the controlled woman I'd been all night. Every time I tried to pull back or slow down, he urged me on with words and touches until the pleasure built into something sharp and inevitable.

When I finally lost all control, it was with his name on my lips and my fingers tangled in his hair despite his earlier instructions. He kissed the inside of my thigh and rose, lips shining, eyes blazing.

"Condom," he said, voice rough. "Top drawer."

I fumbled the drawer open while he stripped off the rest of his clothes. The sight of him all hard, flushed, and breathing heavily made my mouth go dry. I handed him the foil packet with shaking fingers.

He rolled the condom on while his eyes locked on mine. He reached for me and slowly backed me toward the massive bed. He lifted me, depositing me on the mattress before he climbed over the top of me.

He supported his weight on his arms, his hands bracketing my face. "I don't want reserved, Darcy," he said. "I want the woman that sang heavy metal and banged her head."

I swallowed. I wasn't sure that version of me was accessible without a healthy amount of alcohol. But the way he was looking at me gave me courage. I could be that woman. For him.

"Why?" I asked softly.

He looked surprised. "Why? Why do I want you uninhibited?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He kissed me, his tongue thrusting into my mouth once again.

He pulled back. "Because you losing control is the hottest thing I've ever seen."

He nudged inside me. The stretch burned deliciously. I clutched his shoulders, my nails digging in. He buried his face against my neck, breathing hard. "Fuck, you feel incredible. So tight. So perfect. Move with me, baby. Don't think. Just feel."

We found a rhythm that was more need than grace. Every thrust dragged a broken sound from my throat. He whispered the whole time. Offering praise, encouragement, and filthy promises about what he wanted to do next. I met him stroke for stroke, letting the last of my carefully maintained control slip away.

The second orgasm hit harder than the first. I cried out, clenching around him and letting him know exactly how much I liked what he was doing. He followed with a guttural groan, hips stuttering as he buried himself deep. For several long seconds, we stayed locked together, breathing the same air, sweat-slick skin pressed close.

He dropped to his side, his heavy leg still across my thigh.

“You okay?” he asked, lips against my hair.

I nodded, too wrung out for words. He kissed my temple. “Good. Because I’m not nearly finished showing you how good it feels to stop holding everything in.”

I laughed softly. “You make me sound uptight. I don’t know where you’d ever get that idea.”

He chuckled and pulled away. I watched him walk naked into the bathroom. That toned ass, long legs, and broad back were so much better than I could have imagined. He walked back out of the bathroom, still naked and giving me a full-frontal view.

“You’re very bashful,” I said.

He winked. “Nothing to be bashful about.”

His eyes raked over my body. That was when I remembered I was stretched out naked on his bed. The overhead lights weren’t on, but there was enough for him to see me.

And I couldn’t bring myself to try and hide.

He bent down and kissed me. “Don’t move. I’m going to get some water.”

I closed my eyes, letting the reality of the moment wash over me. I just had sex with my fake boyfriend. And I liked it. A lot. For the first time in forever, I wasn’t thinking about work or the next strategic move. I was in the moment, feeling everything.

Beau returned, carrying two bottles of water. I propped myself up and took one of the bottles.

“You have a lot of windows in your house,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And you just stroll around here naked?”

He shrugged. I shook my head. I couldn't imagine being so carefree. I took a long drink, the cool water sliding down my throat. Beau sat beside me on the edge of the bed, his knee brushing mine as he sipped from his own bottle.

He set his bottle on the nightstand and turned toward me, that familiar grin softening into something warmer. “You okay?”

“Better than okay,” I admitted, surprising myself with how true it felt.

His hand found mine, fingers lacing together as he leaned in. The kiss started slowly, a gentle exploration that quickly erupted into desperation once again. I felt the last of my reservations slip away. With him, I didn't have to be Darcy, CEO-in-waiting.

I could be the woman that set Beau Blackwell's world on fire.

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I woke up reaching for her before my eyes were even open. For a split second, panic flickered through my chest. She'd left. Of course she'd left. That was the Darcy thing to do. She liked to run. Shit got real and that woman ran.

Last night had been amazing and I knew she had a good time. I knew she wanted every minute of what happened between us. It was up to me to reel her back in. Settle her anxiety and assure her we had done nothing wrong.

I beamed. Hell, from my point of view, we had done everything very right.

Then I heard it. The clatter of a pan. The smell of something cooking. I threw on a pair of sweats and padded downstairs, following the smell of bacon and coffee like a bloodhound on a trail. What I found in my kitchen stopped me dead in my tracks.

Darcy stood at the stove, her back to me, wearing one of my white dress shirts. It hung to mid-thigh, leaving miles of bare leg on display. Her hair that was always pulled back like a librarian tumbled down her back. She hadn't bothered to brush it. Hadn't bothered to put herself back together.

She was wrecked. Completely, gloriously undone. And she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

She must have sensed me because she glanced over her shoulder, a spatula in one hand. Those blue eyes were still heavy with sleep, her face

bare of makeup. A small smile tugged at her lips.

“Morning,” she said. “Hope you don’t mind. I borrowed your shirt. I didn’t want to risk bacon grease on places grease should never be and I wasn’t about to put that dress on for breakfast.”

“Mind?” I said, leaning against the island, drinking in the sight of her. “I’m pretty sure you can have anything you want right now. I’ll sign over the house. My bank account if you bend over.”

She laughed and turned back to the stove. “Eggs are almost done. I found some bread for toast. Your fridge is surprisingly well-stocked for a bachelor.”

“I like to eat and I’m not always patient. Can’t wait for delivery.”

I crossed the kitchen, coming up behind her. My hands found her hips. I pressed a kiss to the curve of her neck, breathing in the scent of her mixed with my cologne from the shirt.

“This is a nice way to wake up,” I murmured against her skin.

She leaned back into me slightly. “I figured I owed you after last time. You made me breakfast. It’s only fair.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Maybe I wanted to.”

Darcy Corwin doing something simply because she wanted to. Not because it was strategic or expected or part of some grand plan. Just because.

I forced myself to step back before I did something stupid like bend her over the kitchen counter. As tempting as it was, she needed food. We both did after the night we’d had.

“Coffee?” I asked, moving toward the pot she’d already brewed.

“Please. Black.”

I poured two cups and set hers on the counter beside the stove. She slid the eggs onto plates, added the bacon, and grabbed the toast from the toaster. We moved around each other like we’d done this a hundred times before.

We settled at the kitchen island, our knees brushing under the counter as we ate. It was perfect. The perfect morning I never expected or knew I wanted.

“This is good,” I said, gesturing with my fork. “The eggs. You can cook.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’m not completely helpless in a kitchen.”

“Could’ve fooled me. I figured you had a personal chef.”

She rolled her eyes. “I live alone. I had to learn to feed myself at some point.”

I watched her over the rim of my coffee cup, thinking about how different this felt from every other morning-after I’d experienced. Usually, there was an awkwardness. A rush to get dressed and get out. Polite conversation masking the mutual understanding that this was temporary.

This didn’t feel temporary.

I kept telling her to let people in. I had the audacity to lecture her about hiding behind those walls she’d built. But sitting here, watching her eat breakfast in my kitchen, I realized I’d been guilty of the same damn thing.

Sure, I was close to my family. The Blackwells were a tight-knit bunch, for better or worse. But everyone else? They were clients. Colleagues. Casual hookups that never went anywhere because I never let them.

I’d convinced myself I was different from Darcy. I was better at connecting with people. I laughed. I went out. I surrounded myself with people. But the truth was, I’d been keeping everyone at arm’s length too. Just in a different way.

Things with Darcy were different. Maybe I’d been missing out all these years. Or maybe I’d just been waiting for someone like her to come along. It was too soon to think she was the one. *Way* too soon. We’d known each other a few weeks. This was supposed to be fake. A business arrangement.

But for the first time in my life, I found myself thinking about what I actually wanted. Not just the next case or the next deal. The big picture stuff. The future.

I could see Darcy there. In my house, in my bed, at my table. Us building something together. I had no idea if that was something she wanted. Asking her right now, the morning after our first time together, would send her running for the hills faster than I could say “commitment.”

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, catching me staring. “You look like you’re trying to do calculus.”

“Nothing.” I smiled. “Just appreciating the view.”

She glanced down at herself. “I look like a mess.”

“Hottest mess I’ve ever seen.”

She ducked her head, focusing on her eggs. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Part of my charm.”

We finished breakfast, and I insisted on leaving the mess.

“I’m hungry,” I said. I reached out, undoing the button on my shirt hanging off her. “Starving.”

I undid the next, giving me a glorious view of cleavage. She shuddered, telling me she was as excited for a little after-breakfast treat as I was.

I grabbed at her waist, hiking her up. Her legs automatically wrapped around my waist. I carried her up the stairs with her mouth hot on my neck. We barely made it through the door before I had her on the bed, peeling my shirt off her body, revealing all that gorgeous skin I’d spent the night memorizing.

This time was slower. More intentional. I’d taken the edge off last night, which meant I wasn’t nearly as desperate for release. I took my time exploring every inch of her, learning what made her gasp and moan and dig her nails into my back. She was responsive in a way that drove me crazy, arching into my touch, whispering my name like a prayer.

When we finally came together, it felt like something clicking into place. Like finding a piece I hadn’t known was missing.

Afterward, neither of us seemed all that eager to move.

“I should probably go home at some point,” she said, though she made no move to get up.

Neither of us moved.

Finally, she sighed and pushed herself up, looking down at me with a softness in her eyes I hadn’t seen before. “Thank you. For last night. For this morning. For...” She trailed off, searching for words.

“For being incredibly handsome and charming?”

She laughed and swatted my chest. “For a good time. I had fun.”

“I know.”

She laughed again. “You’re naughty.”

“I know.”

She rolled her eyes and started the process of covering up all that beautiful skin.

“I’ll drive you home,” I said reluctantly.

When I pulled into her driveway, she leaned over and kissed me. Soft. Sweet.

“I’ll text you,” she said.

“I’ll be waiting.”

She smiled and slipped out of the car. I waited until she was inside before pulling away.

When I got home, I showered, changed, and stood in my kitchen staring at the dishes she'd left in the sink. Evidence that she'd been here. That last night had actually happened.

I left them there. It felt weird to have extra dishes in the sink. Signs of another person.

I'd been neglecting my clients all week and decided to spend the day catching up. I headed into the office, appreciating the silence. No ringing phone. No clackety-clack on the keyboard. Just peace.

I dropped into my chair and powered up my laptop, determined to be productive. The pile of work I'd been neglecting wasn't going to handle itself. For the first hour, I managed to focus. I drafted a response to opposing counsel on a settlement, reviewed the deposition transcripts from another case, and made notes on three potential new clients who'd reached out through my website.

Then my mind started to wander.

Darcy in my kitchen. The way she'd looked over her shoulder, spatula in hand, in nothing but my shirt. The sound of her gasps and moans. The feel of her body against mine, warm and willing and so goddamn perfect it made my chest ache.

I shook my head and forced my attention back to the screen. The words blurred together. I read the same paragraph several times without absorbing a single word.

This was pathetic.

I pushed back from my desk and grabbed my phone, telling myself I was just checking messages. But my thumb navigated to the browser instead, pulling up the usual gossip sites and social media feeds. I long ago turned off my notifications.

I typed her name into the search bar.

The results loaded, and I scrolled through them with growing satisfaction. The masquerade ball had generated plenty of coverage, and almost all of it was positive. Photos of us on the red carpet, her phoenix mask catching the light with my arm around her waist. Headlines that focused on her dress, her poise, and the obvious chemistry with her handsome date.

No ice-queen comments. No speculation about her emotional capacity. Just glowing reviews of the event she'd helped plan and compliments on how stunning she'd looked.

One entertainment blog had even run a piece about the melted ice queen. Referred to her as a smoke show and sultry. Compliments that I knew she wanted and needed. The article gushed about our body language and the way we'd looked at each other. I laughed when I read that a source claimed we were very much in love.

If they only knew.

I scrolled further, finding more of the same. Social media was buzzing with photos from the ball, and Darcy appeared in dozens of them. Dancing with me. Laughing with guests. Looking every inch the confident, capable woman she was.

The narrative had shifted. The ice queen had thawed, and the world was eating it up. Hell, she was a sex symbol.

I should have felt satisfied. This was the whole point of our arrangement. Fix her image, get her the CEO position, collect my fee. Mission accomplished. We both go on our merry ways.

But the satisfaction felt hollow. Because now I wasn't sure I wanted this to end.

I set down my phone and stared at the ceiling, trying to sort through the tangle of thoughts in my head. Last night had changed things. This morning had changed things even more.

That wasn't fake. That wasn't performance. That was real.

But did she see it that way? Obviously, sex wasn't part of any contract. That had happened organically. It wasn't planned or contrived. If that had been the case, we would have made more of a spectacle of ourselves.

I grabbed my phone again.

Me: *Forgot to ask last night. When's our next public appearance?*

I hit send and immediately felt like an idiot. Our next public appearance. Like I was her assistant scheduling calendar items. Like last night had been an appointment that ran long.

I watched the screen, waiting for those three dots to appear. They didn't.

Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. I tried to go back to work, but my eyes kept drifting to my phone, checking for notifications that never came.

Maybe she was busy. She had her own work to catch up on, her own life to manage. Just because we'd spent the night together didn't mean she was sitting around waiting for my texts.

Or maybe she was having second thoughts.

The possibility sat heavy in my gut. Darcy was nothing if not strategic. She analyzed everything, weighed every decision against potential outcomes. What if she'd gotten home and decided that sleeping with her fake boyfriend was a complication she didn't need?

What if she was already building those walls back up?

I forced myself to set the phone face-down on my desk. Staring at it wasn't going to make her respond faster. And obsessing over a woman who may or may not be interested in anything beyond our business arrangement was exactly the kind of distraction I didn't need.

I closed up the office and drove back home. I needed to run. I needed fresh air. I changed into my running shorts and tennis shoes and jogged down to the beach. The little voice in the back of my head told me to be careful.

Don't get caught up with a woman who only needed me for a few short months to achieve her goals. And then she'd toss me to the side.

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I stared at my phone like it was a bomb that might detonate at any moment.

When's our next public appearance?

That one little, basically innocent message had sent my brain spiraling into overdrive for the past hour. At first, my heart had stuttered and warmth spread through my veins. He was thinking about me. He'd texted first. After the night we'd shared and the morning in his kitchen, he'd actually reached out.

Did I expect a one-night stand? Maybe. Did I want that? No. Yes.

I didn't know.

It took me about the third reread before I saw the words. Like really saw. They sank in.

Not "When can I see you again?" Not "Last night was amazing." Not even a simple "I miss you already."

It was the business arrangement. The thing my father was paying him to do.

The rational part of my brain knew I was probably overthinking this. Beau wasn't exactly known for his subtlety. If he'd wanted to say something romantic, he would have just said it. The man had no trouble talking dirty and letting me know exactly what he wanted.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? He hadn't texted anything cute or sexy. It was all very lawyerly.

Yes, we'd had great sex. Mind-blowing sex, if I was being honest with myself. The kind of sex that made me forget my own name and think about tying myself to his bed. But did that mean anything to him beyond a pleasant bonus to our arrangement?

Did I *want* it to mean something?

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. This was exactly the kind of emotional spiral I'd spent my entire adult life avoiding. Feelings were messy. Unpredictable. They came from emotion and not facts. Facts were solid.

And yet here I was, sitting on my couch in the middle of a Sunday afternoon, unable to respond to a simple text because I couldn't figure out what I actually wanted. I was reading way too much into it.

The restless energy building in my chest demanded an outlet. I couldn't just sit here stewing in my own uncertainty. I needed to do something. Anything other than the crash-out I felt coming at me like a runaway freight train.

My eyes landed on a dust bunny peeking out from under my side table. I had a housekeeper that came in once a week but she was in and out in two hours. I wasn't a slob. I didn't need a lot. But I tried to remember the last time I did a deep clean. Like a really deep clean. Instead of going out on Saturday nights, I'd put on my old sweats, my favorite 80s rock playlist, and get to work.

I had been working too much and my beautiful home looked neglected. Not dirty but not spotless. I would clean.

I changed into yoga pants and an old t-shirt, tied my hair back, and put on my playlist. I attacked my house with the kind of ferocity usually reserved for operating rooms. My bathroom came first. I scrubbed the tile until it gleamed, organizing the cabinet under the sink, replacing the hand towels with fresh ones. I restocked the little basket I kept next to the tub.

Gah, when was the last time I allowed myself a long bubble bath with a good book, a glass of wine, and candles.

Note to self, make that happen soon.

I carried my little caddy of cleaning supplies into the kitchen. I emptied every cabinet, wiped down every shelf, and reorganized my spices, tossing out the old ones. I cleaned the inside of the refrigerator, cringing at the dates on some of the condiments. The living room got vacuumed. I dusted

surfaces I hadn't touched in months. I fluffed pillows and straightened picture frames and reorganized my bookshelf.

By the time I made it to my bedroom, sweat had soaked through my shirt. I stripped the bed and put on fresh sheets. Another splurge. There was something to be said for high-thread count. I stood back and studied my bedroom. The candles I was addicted to covered my dresser and nightstand. Everyone looked damn good in candlelight.

If a certain cocky lawyer decided to come visit, I didn't want him to see my mess. I wanted him to see romance. Softness.

"Oh no," I murmured, dropping my head.

Was that what this was about? Was I cleaning my house because I hoped Beau would show up?

God, I was pathetic.

I should just reply. Something casual.

But I didn't. I decided to take that bath and go to bed early. The coming week would be busy. I needed to be rested.

Monday morning I woke up ready to tackle the world. The long bath after a very busy night had been exactly what I needed. By the time I walked through the doors of Corwin Gems, I had put on the professional persona I wore every day to work. Gone was the fiery woman that had allowed Beau Blackwell to curl her toes.

The ice queen was reporting for duty.

The morning passed in a blur of emails and meetings. I reviewed the preliminary reports from the masquerade ball. The attendance numbers were impressive. The press coverage and social media engagement were good. Better than good, actually. The event had been a resounding success by every measurable metric.

Maya from marketing stopped me in the hallway outside my office.

"Ms. Corwin, I'm sorry to bother you, but I just had to say that dress at the masquerade ball?" She pressed a hand to her chest. "I saw the photos online and I literally showed everyone in the department. You looked incredible."

I blinked. Compliments about my appearance were not something I'd ever quite figured out how to receive gracefully. "Thank you."

"The color. The mask. It was so different from what you usually wear to these things." She seemed to realize she'd just implied my usual choices

were boring and her eyes went wide. “Not that you don’t always look amazing. I just meant—”

“I know what you meant.” I smiled. “Different was the point.”

She exhaled. “Well, it worked. Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Good,” I said. “That’s very good.”

I walked back into my office feeling something I didn’t get nearly enough of.

Seen.

At two o’clock, my assistant reminded me about the board meeting. Right. The quarterly review. The one where they’d assess my progress and determine whether I was still on track to become CEO. If they stuck to the results, there was nothing that would give them pause.

But I knew the finicky fuckers and my little press conference flub would still be on their minds.

I gathered my materials and headed to the conference room. The board members were already assembled when I arrived. Six faces around the table polished to the point of being a mirror. My father sat at the head. He nodded as I took my seat, his expression giving nothing away.

“Let’s begin,” he said.

The first twenty minutes covered the usual topics. Sales figures, market analysis, upcoming product launches, and all the stuff I knew was important, but it wasn’t what the meeting was really about. We all knew it. I answered questions and provided updates without missing a beat. This was my comfort zone. Numbers and strategy and concrete plans. Things I could control.

Then the conversation shifted to the thing I knew was coming.

“The masquerade ball was quite successful,” one of the members said, shuffling through some papers. “Social media engagement was up forty percent compared to last year.”

“The coverage has been overwhelmingly positive,” Tom added. “I’ve seen several articles praising the event planning and the romantic if not slightly dark atmosphere. My wife loved it.”

My father leaned back in his chair. “Speaking of romance, the publicity around Darcy’s relationship has been excellent. Confidence in her leadership is at an all-time high.”

My stomach clenched but I pretended to be bored. It wasn’t a big deal. “I’m glad the strategy is working.”

“Working is an understatement,” another said. “Sales are surging. We’ve seen an increase in engagement ring purchases over the past month alone. Customers are responding to the narrative.”

The narrative. The story of the ice queen finding love. The fake relationship that had somehow become not-so-fake somewhere between karaoke and breakfast in bed. Was it fake? A one-off?

“The board has reviewed your performance extensively,” my father continued. “We’re pleased with the direction things are heading. Very pleased.”

Tom nodded. “You’re almost at the finish line, Darcy. Keep up the steady progress and the CEO position will be officially yours.”

“Just don’t do anything to rock the boat,” another added with a chuckle. “Stay the course. Keep up the good work with that boyfriend of yours.”

Like fall for my fake boyfriend? The thought flashed through my mind before I could stop it.

“Of course,” I said smoothly. “I have no intention of doing anything that would jeopardize our progress.”

The meeting wrapped up with handshakes and congratulations. My father lingered after the others filed out.

“The board is impressed with you,” he said. “Don’t give them a reason to change their minds.”

“I won’t.”

“You two seemed to be playing it pretty well,” he said casually.

“That’s what you wanted me to do, right?”

He nodded. “I do. Just don’t overdo it.”

Like spend the night naked in his bed?

“I’ve got it handled,” I said. “I have to go. I’ve got a call in ten.”

He nodded and let me leave without another word.

Everything I’d worked for was within reach. The CEO position. The validation. The proof that I was worthy of my father’s legacy. All I had to do was maintain the status quo for a little longer. Keep playing the part.

The problem was, I wasn’t sure I could pretend anymore.

Something had changed. I liked him. Not just his charm or his humor or his spectacular body. I liked the man underneath all that goofy personality.

How was I supposed to know what was real and what was performance? That was the question I continued to come back to. It scared me. I didn’t

want to be humiliated or hurt. Getting emotionally attached to a man who was essentially a hired contractor would only end in heartbreak.

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By four o'clock Monday evening, I'd checked my phone too many times to count and still there was nothing from Darcy.

What the hell?

I knew I was being ridiculous. The rational part of my brain understood that people had lives, responsibilities, jobs that demanded their attention. She was the incoming CEO of a major jewelry company. She probably had meetings stacked on top of meetings. There were a million decisions to make and fires to put out.

But the irrational part of my brain couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something was off. I was pathetic. I was a grown man. A successful attorney. I did not get anxious over unanswered text messages from a woman.

Except apparently I did. When it came to her.

I typed out another message before I could talk myself out of it.

Me: *Hey. Just checking in. Hope everything's okay.*

Casual and not at all desperate.

I hit send and watched the screen, waiting for those three dots to appear. They didn't. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen.

"Dammit," I muttered.

I pushed back from my desk and grabbed my keys. Fuck it. If she wasn't going to respond to my texts, I would just have to show up in person. It was harder to ignore someone standing on your doorstep.

I stopped at a burger place on the way, ordering enough food for two. Cheeseburgers, curly fries, and cheese sticks because why not? I was starving and hadn't eaten since breakfast. Showing up with dinner made me look thoughtful instead of desperate. Plus, it would be harder for her to turn me away if I came bearing gifts. She wasn't the kind of woman to reject a good burger. I'd seen her love of cheese.

Strategic thinking. That was all this was.

I drummed my fingers against the steering wheel, running through possible scenarios in my head. Maybe she'd lost her phone. Maybe she'd been in back-to-back meetings all day. Maybe she was just bad at texting.

Or maybe she already regretted everything that had happened between us. I pushed that thought away as I pulled into her driveway. Her car was there, which was a good sign. At least she was home.

I grabbed the bag of food and walked up to her front door, taking a breath before I knocked. The sound echoed through the evening air, followed by silence. What if she was out? She could have gotten an Uber somewhere. I rang the bell again.

The door swung open.

"Oh my god, are you alright?" The words tumbled out before I could stop them. "Did you fall down a well?"

Darcy stood in the doorway looking like she'd been through some kind of natural disaster. Her hair was a tangled mess. It appeared to have been up at one point, but there were strands sticking to her face. Dirt was smeared across her forehead and cheek, with more of it on her arms. She wore old yoga pants and a faded t-shirt with giant red lips.

She blinked at me, confusion on her dirt-streaked face. "What are you talking about? I'm fine."

"You're covered in dirt."

She glanced down at herself like she'd forgotten what she looked like. "Oh. I was in my garden."

"Your garden."

"Yes, Beau. My garden." She crossed her arms, a hint of that familiar ice creeping into her tone. "Some of us have hobbies that don't involve staring at our phones. I'm all the elements. Fire. Ice. Earth."

I waited.

She arched a brow. "What?"

"That's three. What's the fourth?"

“Water.”

“Are you a mermaid?” I couldn’t help the teasing. It was who I was.

She sighed. “Really? That’s why you’re here.”

I held up the bag of food like a peace offering. “I brought dinner.”

Her eyes dropped to the bag. The smell of beef wafted between us. I could have sworn I saw her nose twitch.

“Is that a bacon cheeseburger?” she asked.

“I didn’t know what you liked, so I went with the classic.”

She hesitated for another moment, then stepped aside. “Come in. But we’re eating outside. I need to finish up before it gets dark.”

I followed her through the house. Clean and modern with touches of warmth that surprised me. Fresh flowers on the entry table. Candles scattered throughout. A bookshelf stuffed with paperbacks that looked actually read. There were at least twenty throw pillows on the couch along with a throw blanket over a chair. The woman had layers.

She led me through a set of French doors into the backyard. I stopped dead in my tracks.

I’d expected maybe a few potted plants. A small herb garden at most. What I found was something else entirely.

The space was filled with color. Raised flower beds lined the perimeter, bursting with blooms I couldn’t begin to name. Reds and purples and yellows all fighting for attention. It wasn’t just the flowers. Her garden was an actual garden. I smelled tomatoes and some kind of melon. The air back here was different from the front of the house. It was thicker but in a good way. It smelled alive. I caught the sharp capsaicin scent of peppers.

I stared at the neat rows of tomatoes and peppers and what looked like squash stretching across one of the beds. Bright red tomatoes hung from the plants. I couldn’t tell if they were zucchini or cucumbers hanging from a trellis. There was a greenhouse at the back, its glass panels catching the last of the evening light.

“Holy shit,” I said.

Darcy glanced back at me, a small smile tugging at her lips despite the dirt on her face. “You like it?”

“This is incredible.” I walked further into the yard, taking it all in. “You do all this yourself?”

“Every bit of it.” She moved toward a wicker table and chairs set up on a stone patio, with more potted flowers at the corners. She gestured for me

to follow. “It started as stress relief a few years ago. Now it’s kind of an obsession.”

I set the food on the table and watched her settle into one of the chairs. The ice queen was nowhere in sight. This was someone else entirely. Earthy. Grounded. Who the hell decided she was an ice queen? Clearly people that had never seen her in her true element. I couldn’t wait to see her do the water element.

Darcy in a bikini diving into the ocean was definitely on the fantasy menu.

“I never would have guessed,” I admitted, taking the seat across from her.

“That I garden?”

“That you do anything that involves getting your hands dirty.” I started unpacking the food, setting a burger and fries in front of her. “You always seem so put together. Polished.”

“That’s the work version of me.” She reached for a fry, popping it in her mouth. “This is the real version.”

I watched her unwrap her burger. She didn’t seem to notice or care that she was dirty. The contrast with the woman I’d seen at the masquerade ball, dripping in red silk and crystals, was almost jarring.

I liked this version better.

I noticed solar lighting along the path and wondered what it would look like at night. Above us, more lights crisscrossed overhead. A bee made a slow loop around a yellow flower in a pot. A breeze came up, stirring the wind chime she had hanging from the edge of the covered patio. It was the quietest I’d felt in weeks. She had created a little paradise in her backyard.

“This is so wild,” I said. “I’m speechless. Impressed.”

“Thank you. It’s a labor of love. I think I spend more time out here than I do in the house.”

“Did you take classes to learn all of this?” I asked.

She laughed. “Nope. YouTube. And I guess natural instincts.”

“You’ve got a green thumb.”

“I don’t think I was born with it. This all took a lot of trial and error.”

My gaze went to the greenhouse. I was curious but our meal would get cold and no one wanted cold, greasy fries.

“After we eat, can you show me the greenhouse?”

Her face lit up. “Sure. I’ll show you my berries.”

“I’ve seen your berries, but I’d be happy to check them out again.”

She choked on her fry. “My God. You have the wildest comebacks.”

I winked and took a bite of my burger. We both started working through our meal. She looked like she had worked up an appetite.

“You never texted me back,” I finally said, keeping my tone light. Casual. Like it hadn’t been eating at me all day.

She wiped a bit of ketchup from the corner of her mouth. “I know.”

“Everything okay?”

Her gaze drifted to the garden.

“I’m juggling a lot right now,” she said finally. “Work is intense. The board meeting today was stressful. There’s so much riding on the next few weeks.”

“I get that.”

“And I’m worried.” She looked back at me. “I’m worried I’m going to mess things up.”

“Mess what up?”

“Everything.” She let out a breath, her shoulders dropping. “The CEO position. My father’s expectations. This whole publicity strategy we’ve built.”

I waited, sensing there was more.

“A relationship with you would complicate things,” she continued.

I kept my expression blank. I wouldn’t show how much those words stung.

“I’m not pushing anything,” I said. “If you don’t want this to be more than what we agreed to, I can respect that. We can keep it strictly business.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For understanding.”

I nodded, swallowing the disappointment that threatened to rise in my throat. This wasn’t about me. This was about her and whatever she was working through. Pushing her would only make things worse.

“Did your meeting go well?” I asked.

“It did. Basically, I just have to keep doing what I’m doing.”

“Have you seen the stuff online?”

I watched her cheeks pinken. “I did.”

“It’s good. And you look amazing in the photos. I think you’ve got about twenty more guys hoping to be your real boyfriend.”

She snorted. “Yeah, it’s the boobs. They don’t care what’s in my pretty little head. Dealt with them before.”

“You are more than your boobs. Although those are some very nice boobs.”

She snickered and took another bite of her burger. I finished my burger and stole one of her fries. Rather, I attempted to. She slapped the back of my hand.

“Eat your own,” she said.

“Yours tastes better.”

“Yes, they do.”

We finished eating and I didn’t want to leave. I kicked myself for not thinking to pick up dessert.

“I should probably get back to my gardening before it gets dark,” she said, standing from the table. “I’ve got a few more beds to weed. Those damn weeds grow ten times faster than anything else.”

Right. That was my cue. She was dismissing me. Politely but unmistakably.

I pushed back from the table and started gathering the wrappers, shoving them back into the bag. “Yeah, of course. I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Would you like to give me a hand?”

I froze, looking up at her.

“You want me to help you garden?”

“Only if you want to.” She shrugged, but I caught the hint of uncertainty in her posture. “I just thought... I don’t know. It might be nice to have company.”

A slow smile spread across my face. “I’ve never gardened a day in my life.”

“Then I’ll teach you.”

I glanced down at my manicured hands as she pulled on gloves.

“Got a pair for me?” I asked.

She looked at my hands and then shook her head. “None that will fit you.”

I sighed. “Guess I’m rawdogging it.”

I watched him kneel beside the flower bed. His expensive slacks would likely be ruined. I'd feel bad if I didn't think he could afford to replace them. He'd rolled up his sleeves, exposing tanned forearms that I definitely wasn't staring at. His hands rested on his thighs and he stared at the plants like they might bite him.

"So I just grab it?" he asked, eyeing a weed.

"Grip it at the base and pull straight up. You want to get the roots. Otherwise, they'll just grow back."

He wrapped his fingers around the stem and yanked. The weed snapped in half, leaving the roots firmly planted in the dirt.

"That's not what we want to happen."

"I can see that." He exhaled. "Shit."

I bit back a laugh and demonstrated on the weed next to his. "Like this. Slow and steady. Feel for the resistance, then work it loose."

He tried again, this time managing to extract the whole thing, roots and all. The look of triumph on his face was almost adorable.

"This is weird," I admitted, sitting back on my heels. "I always do this alone."

"Really?" He shot me that cocky grin that should have been annoying but somehow wasn't. "I figured you let all the guys rummage around in your back garden."

I shot him a look, but a smile cracked through despite my best efforts. I shook my head. "You're the first."

He smiled. I waited for the dirty comeback. "Well then, I'm honored."

He seemed genuine. We worked in silence for a few minutes. He pulled a few more weeds, getting the hang of it quickly. The sound of a siren in the distance interrupted the illusion we were in some secret garden on the massive estate I dreamed of owning and living on one day. I wanted to be an old lady with a big floppy hat growing more tomatoes than I could ever eat.

I breathed in deeply, letting the familiar scents settle something restless inside me. Beau looked over at me, a question in his eyes. I looked like a loon, sniffing dirt. It was a smell you loved or simply didn't notice. If I could have an earthy, soil candle I'd burn it all day in my office. That would certainly help quiet the noise. A few more plants. Maybe one of those desktop fountains and it would be perfect.

"Gardening is how I center myself," I said, not quite sure why I was sharing this. "It's how I work off stress. The smell of the plants, the soil. It's like I feel reconnected to something real. Something more tangible than numbers on a spreadsheet."

Beau paused his weeding, looking over at me. "I get that. I usually run. I love a beach run, bare feet in the sand. Or a drink."

I smiled. "Both valid options."

He went back to work, pulling at another weed.

"I don't remember my mother much," I said quietly. The words came out before I could stop them, floating into the evening air. "But I remember her in the garden. We had one at our old house. She'd spend hours with her hands in the dirt."

Beau had gone still. He didn't ask questions or push me to say anything else.

"That's what made me want to make this my happy place. It was the first thing I did when I bought the house. The greenhouse was a hot mess. I had it restored and had new soil brought in." I gestured at the beds surrounding us. "Before I even unpacked the kitchen boxes, I was out here planning where everything would go."

"That makes sense," he said. "Connecting to something that mattered."

"Plus, there's no one out here judging me." I pulled a stubborn dandelion from between two mums. "No worrying about being too feminine

or too masculine or whatever arbitrary standard I'm supposed to be meeting that day."

"Just you and the dirt."

"Exactly."

He reached for another plant. I watched him grip it at the base and reached out to put my hand on his forearm.

"That's a petunia."

He froze. "It's who?"

"That's not a weed. That's a petunia. I planted it there on purpose. Flowers. Pretty flowers. We want those."

He released it like it was on fire, holding his hands up in surrender. "They all look the same to me."

"They really don't." I pointed to the scraggly, tall thing next to it. "That's a weed. See how the leaves are different? Rougher edges. And it's growing faster than everything around it."

He squinted at both plants, clearly not seeing any difference whatsoever. "If you say so."

"I do say so. Trust the expert."

He moved to the next section. I had to stop him twice more from pulling out actual plants. The third time, he nearly uprooted one of the daffodil bulbs that had worked its way to the top.

"Okay, new rule," I said. "Point before you pull. I'll tell you yes or no."

"This is harder than it looks. How do you know what you want to keep?"

"I watched my mom and like I said, YouTube."

We kept moving. He'd point, I'd nod or shake my head, and slowly the bed started looking less like a jungle. He wasn't a natural. Not by any stretch. His plant identification skills were nonexistent. But he kept at it, dirt accumulating under his nails and streaked across his face from where he'd swatted at the insects taking advantage of the setting sun.

I found myself stealing glances at him more than I should have. The flex of his forearms as he worked. His back stretching under his shirt. The occasional muttered curse when a particularly stubborn weed refused to cooperate.

This wasn't how I'd expected to spend my evening. Wasn't how I'd expected to feel after basically telling him I needed to keep things

professional. But here he was, on his knees in my garden, getting dirty for no reason other than I'd asked.

"So," he said, breaking the comfortable silence. "I've been thinking."

"Dangerous pastime."

He ignored the jab. "We need to make another public appearance soon. Keep the momentum going."

I sighed, sitting back on my heels. "Oh great. Another party?"

"Actually, I was thinking something less structured. But much more public."

"Where?"

He grinned, that spark of mischief lighting up his eyes. "The beach."

I wrinkled my nose before I could stop myself. "I'm not really a beach person."

"You live in LA and you don't like the beach?" He stared at me like I'd just admitted to hating puppies. "How is that possible?"

"Sand gets everywhere. The water's cold. There are too many people."

"Those are features, not bugs." He shook his head in disbelief. "Trust me. Come out with me and you'll love it. It's one of my favorite places in the world. You saw the view from my house."

"I might have lied when I said I was also fond of the water element."

"Dammit, you're not a mermaid? There goes that fantasy. I guess I should return that sea-shell bikini top I got you."

I shook my head. "I don't mind my pool, but ugh, the ocean."

"The ocean is incredible."

"Looking at the ocean is different from being in it."

"Not that different." He pulled another weed, actually getting the roots this time. "Here's the thing. People will take pictures of us. Post them online. A day at the beach, laughing and splashing around. It's the opposite of ice queen behavior."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he kept going.

"Think about it. Every photo so far has been at some fancy event. Galas. Dinner. That's great, but it's still your world. Still the corporate, polished version of you." He met my eyes. "The beach is casual. Relaxed. It shows a different side. A real side."

"I don't know."

"Which means technically, going to the beach would be you working." He grinned. "You'd basically be getting paid to build sandcastles."

I stared at him. "That's manipulative."

"I prefer strategic. I'm a lawyer. I know how to sell a story. Have you forgotten Cleetus?"

"Who the hell is Cleetus?"

"One of the llamas. By the time I was done with him, you'd think he was the Dalai Llama."

I groaned. "That was terrible."

He wasn't wrong. The masquerade ball had been a success, but it was still firmly in the realm of what people expected from Darcy Corwin. Elegant. Controlled. Beautiful in a way that felt untouchable. The beach would be different. Messy. Human.

And terrifying.

"I hate wearing swimsuits in public," I said weakly.

"But you have one."

"Of course."

"Wear one of those dress things over it," he said.

I pulled a few more weeds, buying time to think. The air had cooled, carrying the sweet scent of the jasmine I'd planted by the patio.

Going to the beach with Beau felt like stepping off a cliff. Not because of the publicity angle. That part actually made sense. It was the intimacy of it. The vulnerability. Showing up in a swimsuit, letting people see me without the armor of designer dresses and perfect makeup.

But wasn't that the whole point? Wasn't I supposed to be trying to prove I wasn't the cold, untouchable woman the media had made me out to be?

"Fine," I heard myself say. "One beach day."

We finished up the last of the weeding. My knees ached from kneeling, and my back would definitely be sore tomorrow. But there was something satisfying about the freshly cleared beds.

"Not bad for a first-timer," I said, surveying his work.

"I have an excellent teacher."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"It got me invited into your garden. I'd say it's working pretty well."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't quite suppress the warmth spreading through my chest. This was dangerous. All of it.

I'd told him I needed to keep things professional. I knew without a doubt a relationship would complicate everything. And I'd meant it. The

board meeting today had reminded me exactly how much was at stake. One wrong move and everything I'd worked for could disappear.

"Do I get to see your berries now?"

I chuckled. "Yes. I might even let you sample them."

His grin was huge. "Now we're talking."

I realized what I said a second too late. He was like a teenage boy being promised to check out a dirty magazine.

"Come on."

I led him along the stone path that I had put in myself. The sun was on its way down and the lights I had placed around the garden were slowly coming to life.

I opened the door and gestured for him to go inside. I turned on the lights and there they were. My strawberries hanging from the elaborate systems I helped the contractor set up.

"What the hell?" Beau asked.

"It's a different way of growing them," I said. "And I grow them in here so I have fresh strawberries all year round."

He reached out, his fingers touching one of the ripe strawberries? "Can I?"

"Sure."

He plucked it and popped it in his mouth. He nodded as he chewed. "So sweet. So much better than the ones at the grocery store."

"I know."

"Damn, this is so awesome. You can just come out to your backyard and pick breakfast."

"That's the goal," I said.

He looked at the tomatoes and peppers that I had growing in large containers in preparation for the weather to turn.

"I should let you get cleaned up," he said, brushing soil from his knees. "Early day tomorrow?"

"Always."

I walked him back through the house to the front door, hyperaware of every inch of space between us.

"Thanks for dinner," I said. "And for the help. Even if you did almost murder my petunias."

"They survived. That's what matters." He paused at the door, turning to face me. "I'll text you about the beach. We can figure out a day that works."

“Sounds good.”

He didn’t move. Neither did I.

His eyes dropped to my lips for just a second before meeting mine again.

“Goodnight, Darcy.”

“Goodnight, Beau.”

He stepped out and I watched him walk to his car. He turned at the driver’s door and waved. I waved back, then closed the door before I could do something stupid like invite him to stay.

Professional. I needed to keep this professional.

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I woke early on Saturday morning, which was not usually my favorite thing to do, but I was looking forward to the day. I jumped out of bed and peered out the blinds. Clear blue sky. Hallelujah.

I walked downstairs and stepped outside. It wasn't cold, but a little cool for swimming. That was fine. Today wasn't about surfing and getting in the water at all. I stood there for several seconds like I could communicate with Mother Nature.

"Please give us a good day," I said.

There was a very soft breeze but nothing dramatic. It wouldn't blow away the umbrella or toss sand in our faces. It was going to be a lovely day.

I started the coffee and went through my mental checklist, dragging everything I needed out to the patio to drag down to the beach.

Umbrella, beach chairs, towels. I pulled the ice chest from the garage and dumped a bag of ice into it. Then I arranged a twelve-pack of craft beer along with a few cans of soda and bottles of water. Couldn't have a beach day without ice-cold beer. I added a selection of snacks to the cooler, then headed back inside to shower and change.

By the time the doorbell rang at nine, I was ready. Board shorts, a loose tank top, and a ridiculous level of anticipation I hadn't felt in years. I opened the door to find Darcy standing on my porch looking like she'd rather be anywhere else.

She wore a flowy white cover-up that fell to mid-thigh, her hair pulled back in a messy bun. Oversized sunglasses perched on her nose, with a beach bag she clutched to her.

“You look terrified,” I said.

“I’m not terrified.” She pushed past me into the house. “I’m just prepared for disappointment.”

“That’s the spirit.” I closed the door behind her. “Come on. Breakfast first.”

I led her to the kitchen where I’d set up a spread on the island. Fresh-squeezed orange juice, bagels with cream cheese, and a bowl of fruit I’d picked up from the farmer’s market yesterday. Nothing fancy but solid beach-day fuel.

She pushed her sunglasses up onto her head and reached for a glass of juice. “Looks amazing.”

“I doubt the fruit will be as tasty as yours, but I did my best.”

We ate standing at the counter, keeping it casual. She spread cream cheese on half a bagel. I watched her take a bite. A little dollop of cheese clung to her lip.

Fuck me. I wanted to lick it off. Her tongue darted out and took care of it.

She popped a strawberry into her mouth, her eyes drifting toward the windows and the ocean beyond. I caught the slight furrow of her brow, the tension in her shoulders.

“It’s just a beach,” I said gently. “It’s not going to bite you.”

“I know that.” She took another sip of juice.

We finished the breakfast and I put away our leftovers.

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders like she was heading into battle, and nodded. “Let’s do this.”

We walked out my back door and down the wooden steps that led directly to the sand. A few other beachgoers dotted the shoreline, but this stretch was relatively private. One of the perks of the neighborhood.

I found a good spot about halfway between the water and the dunes, close enough to hear the waves but far enough that we wouldn’t get soaked if the tide came in. I drove the umbrella into the sand, then unfolded the chairs and positioned them in the shade.

“Your throne awaits,” I said, gesturing grandly.

Darcy lowered herself into the chair like she was sitting on a bed of nails. Her posture was rigid, her hands gripping the armrests.

I settled into the chair beside her and cracked open the cooler, pulling out two beers. "Too early?"

"Probably." She took one anyway.

I twisted off the cap and took a long pull, letting the cold liquid slide down my throat. The waves rolled in and out, their rhythm steady and hypnotic. Seagulls called overhead.

This was my happy place. There was something about the ocean that put everything in perspective. Made all the bullshit seem smaller. I leaned back, closing my eyes and just letting the peace wash over me. I'd love to be a beach bum.

I glanced over at Darcy. She was still sitting ramrod straight, her beer untouched in her hand. Her dark sunglasses in place.

"Darcy."

"What?"

"You're supposed to be relaxing. You look like you're waiting for an ambush."

"I'm just not used to doing nothing. Sitting around feels unproductive."

"That's literally the point. The absence of productivity is the goal."

She looked at me like I'd suggested she set fire to her quarterly reports. "That sounds like torture."

"Give it a chance. Worst case, you hate it and we go back inside my house. Best case, you discover a whole new way to relax that doesn't involve pulling weeds."

She sighed and took a sip of her beer. Five minutes passed. Then ten. I watched her from the corner of my eye, noting the way she shifted in her chair. Adjusted her cover-up. Fidgeted with the bottle in her hands. Kicked at the sand near her feet.

"Is this it?" she finally asked. "We just sit here?"

"That's the general idea, yes."

"Doing nothing."

"Doing nothing," I confirmed. "How long has it been since you've been to the beach?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Since I was a kid, I guess. My dad took me a few times when I was little. Before he got too busy with work."

"So decades."

“I’m not that old.”

“You’re beach inexperienced. That’s what I’m hearing.” I turned to face her fully. “Here’s the thing. You can’t force relaxation. You have to let it happen. Stop thinking about what you should be doing and just... be.”

“Just be,” she repeated flatly.

“Watch the waves. See how they break on the shore? There’s a rhythm to it. In and out. Over and over.”

She stared at the water.

“Don’t analyze it,” I said. “Just watch. Listen to the sound. Feel the breeze on your skin. Let your brain turn off for five minutes.”

She tried. I could see her trying. Her shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch. Her grip on the beer loosened slightly.

Then she shifted in her chair again. Adjusted her sunglasses. Picked at a thread on her cover-up.

“This is impossible,” she muttered.

“You lasted about ninety seconds.”

“I don’t know how you do this.” She gestured at the ocean and the beach in general. “My brain won’t stop. It’s like there’s a hamster on a wheel up there and it refuses to take a break.”

“We need something to give that furry little beast a break.”

She groaned. “If you suggest meditation, I’m leaving. I don’t meditate.”

I laughed and pushed myself up from my chair. “How about we go for a swim before you have an anxiety attack?”

Her eyes widened slightly. “The water looks cold.”

“It’s not that bad. Come on. Physical activity might help burn off some of that nervous energy.”

She hesitated, glancing between me and the waves. Then she stood, reaching for her beach bag. “Fine. But you need to put sunblock on me first. I burn like a lobster.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

She pulled out a bottle of SPF 50 and handed it to me, then turned her back. I watched her reach for the hem of her cover-up and pull it over her head.

My brain exploded.

She wore a deep blue bikini that was technically modest but it did nothing to squash my memories of what things looked like under that blue

fabric. I knew the color would make her blue eyes pop. It also made her skin look like porcelain.

“Beau?”

I blinked, realizing I’d been standing there with the sunblock bottle in my hand, completely frozen.

“Right. Yeah. Sunblock.”

I squeezed a generous amount into my palm and rubbed my hands together to warm it like a professional masseuse. Then I stepped closer, starting at her shoulders.

Her skin was soft and smooth under my fingers. I worked the lotion across her shoulder blades, down her spine, taking my time. She made a small sound in the back of her throat when I hit a particularly tense spot near her neck.

“You’re tight here,” I said, pressing my thumbs into the muscle.

“I’m tight everywhere.”

“Don’t I know it.”

I heard her gasp. We both knew exactly what I was talking about.

I moved lower, spreading the sunblock across her lower back, my fingers dipping just beneath the waistband of her bikini bottoms. She shivered despite the warm sun.

“Cold?” I asked innocently.

“No.”

I knelt down, applying lotion to the backs of her thighs, her calves, taking my time with every inch. She made another sound, something between a sigh and a moan. I felt my shorts tighten in response.

“You keep making those noises and we’re going to have a problem,” I said, my voice rough.

“What kind of problem?”

I stood, turning her to face me so I could do her front. “The kind that involves me dragging you back to my bedroom instead of going for a swim.”

Her cheeks flushed pink, but she rolled her eyes. “Focus, Blackwell.”

“I’m very focused.” I spread lotion across her collarbone, down her arms, trying not to stare at the swell of her breasts in that blue bikini. Failing miserably. “Extremely focused.”

I worked the sunblock across her stomach, feeling her muscles tense under my touch. Then up to her chest, my fingers skimming the edge of her

bikini top. Our eyes met.

The air between us crackled.

I stopped breathing. Her lips were slightly parted, and all I could think about was kissing her. Tasting the salt on her skin. Pulling her against me and—

She laughed and darted away, running toward the water. “Catch me if you can!”

I stood there for a second, stunned, watching her sprint across the sand. Her hair had come loose from its bun, streaming behind her. She was laughing, the sound carrying back to me on the breeze.

“Oh, you’re going to regret that,” I called after her.

I pulled off my tank top and took off running, my feet pounding against the packed sand near the water’s edge. She had a head start, but I was faster. I caught up to her just as she hit the surf, the cold water splashing up around our ankles.

She shrieked and tried to dodge, but I grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off her feet. She kicked and squirmed, laughing so hard she could barely breathe.

“Put me down!”

“You started this!”

I carried her deeper into the water, the waves hitting our thighs now. She was still laughing, her hands gripping my arms, her body pressed against mine.

“Beau, I swear to God—”

I dunked us both.

We came up sputtering, the cold water shocking the breath from our lungs. She gasped and shoved at my chest, but she was grinning.

“You’re insane,” she said.

“You love it.”

“This isn’t so bad,” she admitted.

“Told you.”

And then a wave snuck up on us and buried us under the water. When I surfaced, she had just popped up, sputtering and pushing her hair out of her face. The look of shock on her face would have been hilarious. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t read her expression.

Was she pissed? Would she storm out of the water and forever curse the ocean? Was my mermaid fantasy officially dead?

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I surfaced, gasping, salt water streaming down my face. My hair was plastered to my cheeks. I could feel my eyelashes stuck together. Sand was definitely in my buttcrack. The wave had knocked the wind out of me.

But I was laughing.

When was the last time I'd laughed like this? Really laughed without worrying about how I looked or what people thought?

Beau was watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Relief, maybe. Like he'd been bracing for me to storm out of the water and never speak to him again.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm great." And I meant it.

Another wave rolled toward us, gentler this time. I let it lift me off my feet. The sensation was strange and wonderful. A moment of weightlessness. Surrendering control to something bigger than myself had never felt so freeing.

Beau moved closer. The water pushed against his lower body. The sun caught the droplets on his shoulders. His hair was slicked back from his face. Water streamed down his chest in rivulets that traced every ridge of muscle.

God, he was nice to look at.

Coming out here was worth it just to see him like that. Shirtless and glistening was a very flattering look for him. I'd seen him naked, obviously. I'd touched every inch of that body. But there was something about seeing him here in his element that did something to me.

My brain kept trying to remind me of all the reasons this was complicated. Getting involved with Beau right now would muddy everything. Mix business with pleasure in ways that could blow up spectacularly. But when I looked at him with that easy smile on his face, it all seemed really simple.

He was a sexy man who wanted me. And I was pushing him away because this was supposed to be fake and temporary.

Was that really how I wanted to live my life?

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, swimming closer.

"Nothing."

"Liar." He grinned. "You've got that look. The one where I can practically see the gears turning."

A wave swelled beneath us. I let it carry me toward him. Our bodies bumped together underwater, legs tangling for just a moment before the current pulled us apart.

"Catch me," I said, and dove under the surface.

I kicked hard, propelling myself through the water, feeling the salt sting my eyes. I surfaced a few yards away, shaking the hair from my face, and found him right behind me.

"Too slow," I taunted.

"I let you get away."

"Sure you did."

He lunged for me. I shrieked, twisting away just in time. The chase was on.

We splashed through the shallows like kids, kicking up spray, laughing until my sides hurt. Every time he got close, I'd dart away. Every time I thought I'd lost him, his hand would close around my ankle or my wrist, pulling me back.

At some point, he caught me. His strong arm wrapped around my waist from behind, lifting me clear of the water. I kicked and squirmed, but he held on, his chest pressed against my back, his breath warm against my ear.

"Gotcha."

"Cheater."

“Winner.”

He spun me around to face him, and suddenly we weren't playing anymore. His hands were on my hips, my palms flat against his chest. I could feel his heart pounding under my fingers, matching the rapid rhythm of my own.

A wave pushed us together. I felt every inch of him against me. The six pack abs. Defined pecs. The solid strength of his thighs. The unmistakable evidence that he was just as affected by this as I was.

His eyes dropped to my mouth.

I knew I should pull away. This was exactly what I'd told him I couldn't do. I'd asked him to respect the boundaries, to keep things professional, and here I was pressing myself against him like I couldn't get close enough.

But I couldn't make myself move. Water dripped from his hair onto my shoulder. I could feel his breath on my face.

“Darcy.” His voice was rough. “Tell me to stop.”

I should. The smart thing would be to put distance between us.

Instead, I rose up on my toes and kissed him.

His arms tightened around me, pulling me closer. I wrapped my legs around his waist to keep from being swept away by the current. Or maybe I just wanted to feel him against me.

His tongue swept into my mouth. I moaned against his lips. My fingers slid into his hair, gripping the wet strands, pulling him deeper into the kiss. He groaned, the sound vibrating through both of us.

We were in public. On a beach. Anyone could see us.

I didn't care. They'd see a couple doing what couples did.

His hands slid down to my ass and squeezed. I ground against him instinctively. The friction sent sparks shooting through my core. I needed more. Needed to feel his skin against mine, needed him inside me. Screw doing the smart thing. I wanted to be reckless.

“Beau.” I pulled back just enough to speak, my voice breathless and desperate. “Take me inside.”

His eyes were dark, pupils blown wide. “You sure?”

“Please.”

That was all it took.

He carried me out of the water, my legs still wrapped around his waist, my arms around his neck. I buried my face against his shoulder, tasting salt on his skin, feeling his muscles flex with every step.

I heard voices somewhere in the distance. Other beachgoers doing their own thing. I couldn't bring myself to care. Let them look. Let them take pictures. Let the whole world see.

Right now, there was only him.

"What about the stuff?" I asked when he walked by.

"Fuck it. Someone steals my chairs, I'll buy new ones."

I couldn't find a good enough reason to argue.

He put me down at the base of the stairs, but neither of us paused. I grabbed his hand and we ran, wet feet slapping against the wood, laughter and heavy breathing mixing as we burst through the back door. Sand trailed behind us. My bikini top was askew, one strap slipping off my shoulder. I didn't bother fixing it. We hit the stairs to the second floor at a near sprint, his palm hot on the small of my back, urging me faster. My thighs burned from the climb.

The bedroom door slammed shut behind us. Beau's mouth crashed into mine before I could speak, teeth nipping, tongue pushing deep like he needed to taste every inch. I moaned into the kiss, fingers digging into his shoulders. My nails scraped over his wet skin. We were frantic. My bikini top was ripped away, his board shorts shoved down. His cock sprang free, thick and flushed. I wrapped my hand around it, stroking once, twice, feeling it twitch against my palm.

"Fuck, Darcy," he growled, backing me toward the bed. "I've been hard since you kissed me in the water."

I fell onto the mattress. He followed, crawling over me. His hands hooked under my thighs, yanking my hips to the edge. He dropped to his knees without a word, shoving my bikini bottoms aside and burying his face between my legs. The first lick was so unexpected I screamed. His tongue dragged over me, pushing hard against my clit. I cried out, back arching, fingers twisting in his damp hair.

He licked me like he was starving, sucking my clit between his lips, then thrusting his tongue inside me. One thick finger pushed in alongside it, curling hard against that spot that made my vision blur.

"So fucking wet," he muttered against my skin, the vibration making me jerk. "And you taste so good. I want to feast on you before I fuck you."

I couldn't form words. My hips rocked against his face, chasing every stroke. He added a second finger and pumped them fast. His tongue flicked relentlessly over my swollen clit. Pressure built fast and sharp. I came with

a broken shout, thighs clamping around his head, pulsing around his fingers while he licked me through it. The sounds I made shocked even me. I couldn't bring myself to care if the entire world heard my pleasure.

He didn't give me time to recover. He stood, grabbed a condom from the nightstand, tore it open with his teeth, and rolled it down his cock quickly.

I struggled to catch my breath. My body twitched with violent aftershocks. Then he was on top of me, yanking my bottoms completely off and spreading my legs wide. He lined up and thrust in deep in one hard stroke, bottoming out so fast it knocked the air from my lungs.

"Beau! Oh god!" I opened my legs wide and took him as deep as possible. He didn't hold back. He fucked me like he couldn't stop. His hips snapped. The power of his thrusts had the bed creaking under us. Every time he plunged inside, he dragged over that perfect spot inside me. The wet slap of skin was loud in the room.

"Couldn't wait," he panted against my neck, teeth grazing. "Needed to be inside you. So tight. So fucking hot."

I clawed at his back, meeting every thrust. I arched my back, taking him even deeper as his hips pistoned against mine. Every thrust sent sparks racing through me, building that sweet pressure all over again. I didn't know what he was doing to my body. It was like a switch had been flipped.

My nails raked down his spine, marking him as mine. "Harder," I gasped, the word torn from my throat.

He obliged, slamming into me with a force that made the headboard slam against the wall. My breasts bounced with each impact.

The sight of him watching them, eyes glazed with lust, only wound me tighter. I wrapped my legs around his waist, heels digging into the small of his back. The angle changed, hitting that perfect spot over and over until I was sobbing his name, incoherent and desperate.

He dropped his forehead to mine, breathing ragged. "That's it, baby. Come for me again. Let me feel you." One hand slid between us, thumb circling my clit with ruthless precision. I didn't think it was possible. I was too sensitive and he knew right where to touch me. The orgasm crashed over me like the waves outside, violent and powerful. I clenched around him, pulsing so hard I felt him shudder in response.

He followed with a hoarse shout, hips jerking as he buried himself balls deep. We stayed locked together, trembling and twitching while the

aftershocks rolled through us.

He finally eased out, got up, and disposed of the condom. I couldn't move. He came back into the room and collapsed on the bed beside me. He pulled me into his arms, tucking my head under his chin.

"I don't think I've ever had that happen before," I murmured.

"Orgasm?"

I giggled. "No. Yes. I mean, that many times."

He pressed a kiss to my temple. "You deserve to let go more often."

"I'm not sure I'll survive."

He chuckled. "I'll give you mouth to mouth. Mouth to—"

"Stop! You are so randy."

"What the hell is randy?"

"Oh, you've heard that."

"Randy? Isn't that British?"

"I need a drink," I said.

"Think our beer is gone?" he asked.

I sighed. "I don't know."

Neither of us moved. My body felt wrung out. Sated. I had to admit, I was finally relaxed.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink that reflected off the water and turned everything a gorgeous gold.

We'd finally made it back outside, our beach chairs miraculously untouched. The cooler was still there too, though the ice had mostly melted. The beer was still cold at least.

I cracked open two bottles and handed one to Darcy. She took it and settled back into her chair with a sigh that sounded nothing like the tense woman who'd arrived this morning.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, trying not to be obvious about it. She was different now. Looser. Her hair hung in salt-tangled waves around her shoulders. She hadn't bothered to put her cover-up back on. Just sat there in that blue bikini, legs stretched out, toes buried in the sand.

She was actually sitting still. Not fidgeting. Not checking her phone. Not mentally running through her to-do list. She watched the waves, the wind whipping through her hair.

She was gorgeous. Same woman but she looked different. Rawer. Realer. The kind of beautiful that made my chest ache when I looked at her too long.

"So," I said, breaking the comfortable silence. "What's the verdict?"

She turned her head, one eyebrow raised. "Verdict on what?"

“The beach day. Have I swayed your opinion? Are you still not a beach person, or have I converted you?”

She considered the question, her gaze drifting back to the water. The waves rolled in and gulls shrieked overhead as the tide went out, leaving behind fresh morsels.

“It’s growing on me,” she admitted. A small smile tugged at her lips. “But I’m sure the company helps.”

“Agreed.” I took a sip of my beer. “The company definitely helps.”

We sat in silence for another moment, watching the sun sink lower. The beach had mostly emptied out as the afternoon faded, leaving just a few stragglers walking along the waterline.

I set my beer down and turned to face her. This conversation had been building in my head all day. I figured now was as good a time as any to say it.

“Look,” I started, choosing my words carefully. “I know you like to plan everything out. Categorize things into their properly labeled places. Put everything in neat little boxes.”

She frowned. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s adorable. That’s what it means.” I held up a hand before she could argue. “But my point is, whatever is happening between you and me, we don’t have to rush anything. We don’t have to define it or put a label on it or figure out exactly what box it belongs in.”

Her expression softened and something vulnerable flickered behind her eyes. I saw the confusion. It wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want to stress her out.

“We can just be this,” I continued. “No labels. No complications. Just two people who enjoy each other’s company and see where it goes. I’ll be your apprentice gardener and I’ll show you how to chill the fuck out.”

She didn’t say anything and I worried I’d gone too far. Said too much. Dammit. I should have kept my mouth shut.

“I have to admit something,” she finally said. “I haven’t dated much. Real or fake. I don’t really know how to do it. The kind where you actually get to know someone and spend time together without an agenda.”

“No?”

“No.” She shook her head, a self-deprecating smile on her lips. “I’ve always been too focused on work. I’ve always been worried about how a

relationship might complicate things or distract me from my goals. The few times I tried, it never felt worth the effort.”

“And now?”

She turned to look at me, those blue eyes catching the golden light of the sunset. “Now I’m not sure how to navigate this. I don’t have a playbook for it. There’s no strategic plan to guide me.”

“That sounds terrifying for you.”

“It is.” She laughed softly. “But today with you has been great. Better than I expected.”

“High praise from someone who acted like she was being subjected to a day of torture.”

“I know, I know. I did expect torture. That’s what I’m saying. I was pleasantly surprised. I liked it. I want more.” She reached over and put her hand on my arm. “If you can be flexible with me, maybe this can work. Give me time to figure out how to do this without my brain exploding from the lack of structure.”

I grinned, unable to resist. “I showed you earlier how flexible I can be. But I’m happy to demonstrate again if you need a refresher.”

She laughed and leaned into me. Her head came to rest against my shoulder, her hair tickling my neck. I reached for her chair legs and pulled her closer to me.

This was it. This quiet moment, watching the sun set over the ocean with her tucked against my side. This was what I’d been missing without even knowing it.

I was falling for her. Hard and fast and completely. The realization should have scared me. I should be running for the safety of my carefully maintained emotional distance. But sitting here with her, all I felt was certainty.

She was worth the risk.

“So, my family is having a big dinner in a few days. Jeremy’s leaving again for a while, so everyone’s getting together to send him off properly.”

She lifted her head to look at me. “Yeah?”

“You can totally say no. I know my family can be a lot. There are a lot of us, and we’re loud, and my mom will definitely interrogate you about your intentions with her innocent little boy.”

She snorted.

“But if you’d like to come with me, I would love to have you there. You’ve already met everyone. Minus a few children.”

She stared at me. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. Was she going to say no? Make up some excuse about work? Maybe she’d tell me meeting the family was too much, too fast. She said sleeping with me complicated things. Meeting the parents was next level complication.

Hell, I was talking myself out of it.

“Yes,” she said.

I blinked. “Yes?”

“Yes, I’ll come to dinner.” She smiled at me. “I’d like that.”

Relief flooded through me. I had gotten myself worked up over nothing.

“Good,” I said. “Great. That’s, yeah. Great.”

“Eloquent as always, counselor.”

“Oh, come on, I’m off the clock.”

She laughed again and settled back against my shoulder. We watched the last sliver of sun disappear. The sky transitioning from gold to purple to deep blue. Stars started to appear. The temperature dropped and it was quickly becoming chillier.

Eventually, she stirred, stretching like a cat waking from a nap. “I should probably head home. I’ve spent more time on the beach today than I have in the last ten years. I need four walls. AC. Real panties. Cotton.”

I laughed at that.

“You could stay.” The words came out before I could stop them. “If you wanted. I don’t have panties, but I’ve got the rest.”

She turned to look at me. I saw the temptation in her eyes. The same pull I felt. We had an amazing afternoon. I would be thrilled to extend that through the night.

“If I spend the night,” she said slowly, “I won’t be able to walk tomorrow.”

I grinned. “You got that right.”

She swatted my chest, but she was smiling. “I have meetings in the morning. Important ones. I need to be able to sit in a chair without wincing.”

“But just imagine how fun it’ll be getting sore.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said. “You’re not the one that’ll be walking like she’s been riding horses all week.”

“You know you’re stroking my ego now, right?”

“Just stating facts. I really do have to go.”

I stood and offered her my hand, pulling her to her feet. “Let me walk you to your car.”

We gathered up the beach stuff together, folding chairs and shaking sand out of towels. The cooler was lighter now, most of the drinks consumed or melted into lukewarm puddles. I carried everything up to the house while she grabbed her bag and cover-up.

At the front door, she paused, turning to face me. I wanted to drag her up to my room.

“Thank you,” she said. “For today. For pushing me out of my comfort zone.”

“Anytime.”

She rose up on her toes and kissed me, soft and sweet and full of promise. When she pulled back, I noticed she looked different. I wondered if she felt it. When she got home and looked in the mirror, would she see it?

“I’ll see you at the dinner.”

“I’ll text you the details.”

She nodded, then turned and walked to her car. I watched her go with a stupid grin plastered across my face. She waved before she got in and I waved back.

The taillights disappeared down the driveway. I went inside and took a minute, standing in the foyer and thinking about what I wanted to do.

Sand was everywhere, trailing from the back door through the kitchen and up the stairs. I’d need to vacuum at some point. Later. Tomorrow. Whenever I could bring myself to care about something as mundane as cleaning.

I tidied up the kitchen. Put the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher. I put the leftover snacks away. Wiped down the counters. Threw the sandy towels in the wash. The whole time, my mind kept drifting back to her. The way she’d laughed in the water. The sounds she’d made in my bed.

But the best part of the day was the last hour. Her and me just sitting and watching the sunset. Her body relaxed and leaning against mine. Sex was good, but that cozy situation on the beach was perfect.

I was in deep. Deeper than I’d ever been with anyone.

My phone buzzed on the counter. I grabbed it, expecting a text from Darcy. Maybe something cute about getting home safe, or a thank you for the day. I’d settle for a simple goodnight.

Instead, I found seventeen missed calls.

I stared at the screen, scrolling through the notifications. Clients. All of them clients. Messages and voicemails piling up from people I'd been neglecting for days. Weeks, maybe, if I was being honest with myself.

There was a text from one of my bigger entertainment clients, asking if I was still alive. I'd been slacking. Badly.

For all my talk about this relationship not complicating things, I'd been completely distracted since Darcy came into my life. I liked my job. Loved it. But I was mostly a one-man show. I had an assistant and a paralegal. If I had a big case, I hired extra help. But I hadn't done that. I pushed meetings back. Spending my days thinking about her instead of focusing on the work that paid my bills.

I should have felt guilty. I'd busted ass to get the practice I have now. I was young and knew I needed to prove myself. That meant I spent a lot of time working. At least, I used to.

I put my career first, to maintain the professional reputation I'd spent years building. I'd deal with the work stuff tomorrow. Return the calls, answer the emails, and get back on track with my clients. I was good at my job. I could catch up. I always did.

But tonight, I just wanted to hold on to this feeling a little longer. I wanted to shower and then lie in bed thinking about seeing her again. I was certain that what was happening between us was worth every distraction. I'd deal with every complication. Accept every risk.

She was worth it.

I pulled out my phone and typed out a quick text.

Me: *Get home safe?*

Darcy: *Just walked in. Thanks again for today. I had fun.*

Me: *Me too. Sleep well.*

Darcy: *You too. Goodnight, Beau.*

I smiled at the screen like an idiot, then headed upstairs. I burst into laughter when I saw the mess we'd left. I stripped the sheets, still damp and covered in sand.

Damn, it had been a good day.

The day of Jeremy's send-off dinner, I stood in front of my closet and decided I had nothing to wear. Yes, my closet was bigger than some apartments. And every rack and shelf were filled.

But I had nothing. Ever since I met Beau, I had looked at my closet differently. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of clothes and I had nothing to wear to a basic dinner.

I shoved aside a navy dress that screamed corporate boardroom. This wasn't a board meeting. It was a family dinner. Beau's family dinner.

I held up a flowy floral sundress and immediately put it back. I'd look like I was trying too hard to seem casual. Did I wear jeans? No. Definitely too casual.

They were Hollywood royalty. Were they all going to show up dressed for the red carpet? I thought about Cleo. The family I met at the gala.

Finally, I grabbed a simple black dress from the back of my closet. It was elegant but understated. Not too dressy, not too casual. The kind of thing that could work for almost any occasion. Safe. Boring, maybe, but safe.

I pulled it on and stared at my reflection. Okay. This would work. This had to work because I was officially out of time.

Then came the hair crisis. Up? Down? Half up? I twisted it into my usual tight braid, then immediately undid it. The braid felt like I should be putting on actual armor and heading into a battle.

But down felt too casual. Too messy.

I tried a low bun. Too severe. A high ponytail. Too cheerleader.

I was being fucking ridiculous. It was hair for a family dinner. It was not a formal event.

I glanced at the clock and my stomach dropped. I was going to be late.

Screw it.

I left my hair down, ran my fingers through it a few times to smooth out the worst of the tangles, and grabbed my purse.

Minimal jewelry. Just the diamond studs my father had given me for my twenty-first birthday. A light coat of lipstick. Done.

I followed the directions my GPS spit out. By the time I pulled up to the address Beau had sent me, I had talked myself out of going twice, but I powered through.

And now I faced a mega mansion.

“Holy shit,” I murmured.

The house was enormous. Not surprising, given who owned it, but still intimidating. It sprawled across the property with manicured grounds. A massive driveway and an actual fountain.

I parked at the end of a long row of cars and sat there for a moment, trying to remember how to breathe.

This was fine. I’d met these people before. I’d had conversations with them. They’d been friendly. Welcoming, even. But that was at events with people watching. Formal settings where everyone was on their best behavior and there were clear social scripts to follow. This was different. I was walking into their territory without a playbook.

I scanned the cars and spotted Beau’s. I probably should have let him pick me up.

I pulled out my phone and texted him.

Me: *I’m here. Parked outside.*

Beau: *Coming out to get you. Don’t run away.*

Despite everything, I smiled at that. I climbed out of my car, adjusted the dress, and then there he was. He wore dark jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His face lit up when he saw me.

“You came,” he said, pulling me into his arms.

“I said I would.”

“I know.” He gave me a quick kiss that left me slightly breathless. “But I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d chickened out.”

“I don’t chicken out.”

I had almost called the whole thing off, but then I didn’t, so the chickening out didn’t count.

He stepped back and looked me up and down. “You look hot.”

“Thank you.”

“You ready for this? There’s a lot of people in there.”

“Define a lot.”

“Everyone. Plus kids. I honestly don’t know how many kids. My family reproduces like rabbits. Every holiday or birthday, another one pops up.”

“I’m not sure that’s how that works.”

He took my hand and led me toward the front door. The closer we got, the louder the noise became. Laughter. Voices talking over each other. Music playing somewhere in the background. It sounded like a party was already in full swing.

The door opened before we even reached it.

Tiana stood in the entryway, her face breaking into a warm smile the moment she saw me. “Darcy! You made it!”

Before I could respond, she’d pulled me into a hug. I stood there awkwardly for a moment, unsure what to do with my arms, before finally relaxing into it.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, pulling back to look at me. “Beau’s been talking about you nonstop.”

“Mom,” Beau groaned.

“What? It’s true.” She waved him off and linked her arm through mine. “Come on. Let me get you a drink. You look like you could use one.”

She whisked me away before I could protest, leaving Beau standing in the entryway with an amused expression on his face.

The kitchen was massive and somehow still felt crowded. People were everywhere. Leaning against counters, gathered around the enormous island, moving in and out through multiple doorways. A giant charcuterie board dominated the center of the island, surrounded by plates and napkins and wine glasses in various stages of emptiness.

“Red or white?” Tiana asked, already reaching for a bottle.

“Red, please.”

She poured a generous glass and pressed it into my hands. “Now. Tell me everything about yourself.”

I shrugged. "I don't think there's much to tell. I'm still waiting to have a story."

"Oh, I bet that's not true," she said. "I bet you've got a great story."

Before I could figure out how to answer, a small body crashed into my legs. I looked down to find a tiny girl with wild curls and a sticky face staring up at me with enormous eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Katie!" A woman I recognized as Kensey swooped in, scooping the toddler up with practiced ease. "Sorry about that. She has no concept of personal space."

"It's fine," I said, though my heart was still racing from the surprise attack.

Another small human appeared, this one slightly older with dark hair and a mischievous grin. He tugged on Tiana's sleeve. "Grandma, can I have more cheese?"

"You've had three pieces already, Grant."

"But I'm still hungry."

"Then eat some fruit or you won't poop for a week."

He made a face like she'd suggested he eat poison, then darted off toward the living room where I could hear more voices and laughter. I stood there, clutching my wine glass, feeling completely out of my depth.

This was nothing like the dinner parties my father threw when I was growing up. Those had been formal affairs with strict seating charts and approved conversation topics. Children were expected to be seen and not heard. I'd spent most of those evenings sitting silently at the table. I'd been taught to only speak when spoken to. I remembered counting the minutes until I could escape to my room.

Here, the children ran freely through the chaos. People talked over each other and laughed way too loud to be polite. There wasn't staff serving people. Everyone helped themselves to food without waiting for permission. It was messy and loud and completely overwhelming.

It was also kind of wonderful.

Victoria appeared at my elbow, a smile on her face. "Surviving so far?"

"Barely."

She laughed. "It gets easier. The first time Callum brought me to a family dinner, I hid in the bathroom for twenty minutes."

"That's actually very comforting."

“The trick is to find a corner and let the chaos wash over you. Try to learn three names and then the next time you’ll learn three more. Eventually you stop noticing the noise and just kind of get absorbed in it.” She grabbed a piece of prosciutto from the charcuterie board and popped it in her mouth. “Also, eat. Tiana’s feelings get hurt if you don’t try everything. These are not the Hollywood types that don’t believe in eating. They *eat*.”

I smiled. “That’s my kind of people.”

I reached for a piece of cheese, reminding myself about what Tiana said to the kid. I would definitely be mixing in some fruit.

People continued to flow in and out of the kitchen. Drew appeared briefly to grab a beer, ruffling my hair like we were old friends before disappearing again. Cleo waved from across the island, deep in conversation with someone I didn’t recognize. Max stopped by to say hello, his handshake firm and his smile genuine.

“Glad you could make it,” he said. “Beau seems happy.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just nodded.

Eventually, someone announced that dinner was ready. The chaos shifted from the kitchen to the dining room. The table was massive, easily seating the entire family with room to spare. I found myself sandwiched between Cleo and Victoria, with Kensey across from me. Beau was further down the table, caught up in conversation with Jeremy about something that had them both laughing.

“So,” Cleo said, leaning in conspiratorially. “What’s really going on with you two?”

I nearly choked on my wine. “What do you mean?”

“Come on. I saw you at the masquerade ball. That was not fake dating energy.”

Victoria nodded in agreement. “I saw some videos from that night. You two looked like you were about to devour each other on the dance floor.”

I shrugged. “We were just dancing.”

“Sure.” Cleo grinned. “I’m just interested in whether my brother is finally falling for someone.”

I refused to blush. Nope. Blushing implied I was guilty. “We like each other. I think. I mean, I know I like him. And he seems to like me. But it’s complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Kensey asked, joining the conversation.

I set down my fork, trying to find the right words. “I just have so much going on right now. Work is insane. The CEO transition is coming up. There are a million things demanding my attention, and I’m worried I can’t give him what he deserves.”

The women exchanged glances.

“What he deserves is someone who makes him happy,” Victoria said. “Which, from what I can tell, you do.”

“But I barely have time for myself. How am I supposed to have time for a relationship?”

Cleo shrugged. “You make time for the things that matter. That’s what everyone does.”

“Easy to say.”

“Hard to do,” she agreed. “But worth it. Trust me, I’ve watched my brothers try to balance work and relationships for years. The ones who figure it out are the ones who stop treating love like something that fits into a calendar slot.”

I thought about all the times I’d tried to schedule my life down to the minute. And honestly, it had been exhausting.

“I don’t know how to *not* plan everything,” I admitted quietly.

Kensley reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “That’s okay. Beau’s pretty good at going with the flow. Maybe he can teach you.”

I looked down the table at him. He caught my eye and smiled. Then he looked at my mouth. He was thinking about a kiss. He raised his glass slightly in my direction in a silent toast.

Maybe they were right. I was overthinking this. The answer wasn’t to figure out how to fit a relationship into my life, but to let my life become a little less structured.

That sounded terrifying, though.

I shook my head. “Now isn’t a great time, but maybe in a couple of months.”

Juno smirked. “It’s never a convenient time to fall in love.”

“Love will wreck all your plans, but in a good way,” Kensley said.

“I sure wasn’t ready for it,” Grace said. “Not even a little.”

“No one ever is,” Victoria said.

“Well, I’m fucking ready,” Cleo muttered.

They all laughed.

“Poor Cleo,” Kensey said. “You’ll find someone soon. Or he’ll find you.”

“The Blackwell kids are dropping like flies,” Victoria said. “You won’t be far behind them.”

And then they all looked at me like it was just a matter of time before I was family too. I didn’t know how I felt about that.

No, that was wrong. I knew exactly how I felt and it scared the hell out of me.

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I stood in the parlor, a glass of whiskey in my hand, pretending to listen to whatever Callum was saying about some big clients the wedding company had just gotten. Drew was nodding along, adding his own commentary.

I wasn't hearing a word of it.

My eyes kept drifting to the other side of the room where Darcy sat cross-legged on the floor. She was bouncing Katie on her leg. My niece giggled uncontrollably, her wild curls flying everywhere as Darcy made exaggerated faces at her. Each bounce earned a fresh peal of laughter. Darcy's face was transformed by the biggest smile I'd ever seen on her.

There was no trace of the ice queen. No hint of the controlled, calculating businesswoman who analyzed everything and kept the world at arm's length. She looked soft. Open. Happy in a way that had something funny happening inside my chest.

Grant had wandered over too, showing her something on his tablet. She leaned in to look. She asked him questions and listened to his answers. She treated him like his opinions actually mattered.

I remembered being that age and how important it made me feel when adults talked to me. Not the stupid placating stuff but real words.

She was a natural with kids. Who knew?

"Earth to Beau." Drew's voice cut through my thoughts. "You still with us?"

I blinked, turning back to my brothers. “Yeah. Sorry. What were you saying?”

Callum followed my gaze to where Darcy was now letting Katie play with her hair. A knowing smirk spread across his face.

“Damn, bro,” he said. “Just give her a ring already.”

I nearly choked on my whiskey. “What?”

“You heard me.” He gestured with his glass toward Darcy. “You’re looking at her like she hung the moon. It’s almost embarrassing.”

“Relax. We’ve barely gotten together.” I shook my head, trying to play it off. “Most of the time I’ve known her, our relationship has been fake. This is all still new. Days new.”

Drew raised an eyebrow. “And? When has that ever stopped a Blackwell?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you learned nothing from watching us?” Callum asked. “When we fall, we fall fast. That’s just how it works in this family.”

“When it’s right, you just know it,” Drew added. “Trust me. I fought it with Kensey for a while, and all that did was waste time I could’ve spent being happy.”

“Yep. Agreed.” Micah watched Grace and it felt like looking in the mirror.

I stared at them both, then looked back at Darcy. Katie had climbed into her lap now. Darcy read something from a picture book that one of the kids had brought over. Her voice was animated, changing for different characters. Katie was completely enraptured.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Callum and Drew both chuckled, clinking their glasses together.

“Welcome to the club,” Callum said. “It’s a good thing, settling down with the right one. Life gets better. Trust me.”

“Way better,” Drew agreed. “You think you’re happy now? Wait until you have someone to come home to every night. Someone who knows all your bullshit and loves you anyway.”

“And who will give you babies,” Callum said. “That’s when shit gets real.”

“You two just want everyone to settle down like you have,” Jeremy said, joining our circle with a fresh beer. He’d been making the rounds,

saying goodbye to various family members before his departure tomorrow. "Settling down. Coming home to someone. Boring as hell."

"You'll understand someday," Callum said.

"Hard pass." Jeremy took a long pull from his beer. "I'm going to have sex on every continent before I even think about settling down. I'm just missing Antarctica at this point."

Drew snorted. "And how exactly do you plan to accomplish that? Find a willing penguin?"

"Scientist," Jeremy corrected. "There are research stations down there. Scientists get lonely. I'll find one."

"You're insane," I said, but I was barely listening anymore.

My attention had drifted back to Darcy. She'd set the book aside and was now playing some kind of clapping game with Katie. Every time Katie got it right, Darcy cheered like she'd just won an Olympic medal.

And then, without any warning, my brain did something it had never done before. I started picturing what our kids would look like.

Would they have her blue eyes or my brown ones? Her platinum hair or something darker? Would they be serious and analytical like her, or easygoing like me? Maybe some combination of both. Little humans who could disarm you with a smile one minute and destroy you with logic the next.

Look out world. If they went into business law, there would be no one brave enough to go up against them.

I'd never thought about kids before. Not really. They'd always been some vague future concept, something that happened to other people. My brothers had them, and I loved being an uncle, but I'd never pictured myself as a father.

Until now.

The thought should have sent me running for the hills. I wasn't a settle-down guy. Jeremy and I had that in common. Although my other brothers had been players before they met the women I now called my sisters-in-law.

Maybe my brothers were right. When you know, you know.

Darcy looked up from the clapping game, her eyes finding mine across the room. She smiled, and fuck me, they were so right.

I was gone for her. Completely and utterly gone.

"You okay there?" Jeremy asked, following my gaze. "You look like you just got hit by a truck."

“I’m fine,” I said, but my voice was strained.

Callum clapped me on the shoulder. “He’s more than fine. He’s crazy about a woman.”

“Tragic,” Jeremy said, shaking his head. “Another one bites the dust.”

The evening wound down. Kids were gathered up and carried to cars, half-asleep but still complaining. Darcy helped mom divvy up the leftovers. We were all billionaires but Mom insisted on sending us home with leftovers like we couldn’t just order takeout. She refused to waste food.

After saying goodbye to everyone, I drifted into the kitchen. Darcy was now helping my mom load the dishwasher. They were laughing about something. The sight took my breath away.

“Ready to head out?” I asked.

Darcy straightened, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Yeah, I should probably get going.”

Mom pulled her into another hug. “Come back anytime, sweetheart. You’re always welcome here.”

“Thank you, Tiana. For everything.”

I walked her out to her car. The driveway had cleared out, with just our cars remaining. Crickets chirped and the fountain splashed softly in the background.

“So,” I said, stopping beside her car. “Verdict?”

She turned to face me with a soft smile playing on her lips. “I like your family.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She laughed quietly. “Although it’s still a little surreal having Tiana Blackwell and Grace Stone at a casual family dinner. I kept wanting to ask for autographs. Your mom did dishes. I never in a million years imagined Tiana Blackwell doing dishes.”

I grinned. “I grew up around it, so it’s normal to me. Tiana is just Mom. Grace is just my sister-in-law. She argues with Micah about whose turn it is to take out the trash.”

“That’s kind of amazing, actually.” She leaned against her car, looking up at me. “The way you all just treat each other like regular people. No pretense. No performance.”

“We are regular people. We’re family. That’s what family should do.”

There was something in her eyes. I wondered what she was thinking about. She looked a little sad.

I stepped closer, cupping her face in my hands. "Thank you for coming tonight," I said. "It meant a lot to me."

"Thank you for inviting me."

I leaned in and kissed her. She melted against me, her hands sliding up my arms, to my shoulders, and then she wrapped her body around me. It was so easy to get carried away when it came to her.

If I wasn't in my parents' driveway, I'd strip her and have sex with her on the hood of her car.

"I'll see you at the ring launch," she said, her voice slightly unsteady. "Couple of days."

Right. The Fall in Love collection. The official release of her company's new line of engagement rings. It was a big deal for Corwin Gems. She'd mentioned it was being held at their flagship store in LA.

"I can't wait," I said. I meant that far more than she knew.

She smiled, rising up on her toes to press one more quick kiss to my lips. "Goodnight, Beau."

"Goodnight, Darcy."

I watched her climb into her car and pull away. Maybe I'd go to her place. Surprise her. Invite myself to stay the night.

The front door opened behind me.

"She's a good one," Mom said, coming to stand beside me. "I can see why you like her."

"It's more than like, Mom."

She smiled, that knowing mother smile that said she'd already figured that out hours ago. "I know, sweetheart. I can see it all over your face."

"Is it that obvious?"

"To anyone paying attention." She linked her arm through mine. "She looks at you the same way, you know."

My heart stuttered. "You think so?"

"I know so. A mother notices these things." She patted my arm. "Don't let her get away, Beau. Good ones are hard to find."

"I don't plan to."

She squeezed my arm and headed back inside, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I pulled my keys from my pocket and walked to my car.

Maybe it was too soon to be thinking about rings and forever. We'd barely figured out what we were to each other. There were still

complications and obstacles and a hundred reasons why this might not work out.

We hadn't even put a label on whatever it was we were doing.

I drove home with the windows down, letting the cool night air wash over me. By the time I got home, I had allowed myself at least three fantasies about her and me. I felt like we'd barely scraped the surface of what we could have together.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge and headed up to the balcony. The sound of the ocean waves soothed me. I sat with that for a while.

Darcy had been clear about her priorities. I respected them. One good evening with my family didn't erase that conversation. We had a single beach day. That did not make a relationship. I had big feelings now, but that didn't mean they would last forever. It didn't mean she had the same big feelings.

My phone lit up.

Darcy: *Got home safe. Thank you again for tonight. Your family is wonderful.*

Me: *They liked you too. Thank you for coming. Hope you'll be my plus-one again soon.*

Darcy: *Got any more movie stars in the family tree? I'll bring my autograph book.*

Me: *Sorry. Fresh out. Go to sleep. Text me tomorrow.*

I set the phone down and stared at the dark water.

Did I want to make this real? Yeah. Without question. But the harder thing was whether *she* did. I wasn't going to push her toward something she wasn't ready for just because I'd figured out my own feelings ahead of schedule.

When it's right, you just know.

I just needed her to know it too.

The morning of the launch, I woke up before my alarm. My eyes snapped open at four-thirty, and sleep became impossible after that. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, running through my speech in my head, visualizing every moment of the day ahead.

By six, I'd given up on rest entirely and was standing in my closet, second-guessing every outfit choice I'd made the night before. I wasn't sure I liked this new wardrobe crisis. Before that press conference from hell, I was very confident in whatever I chose to wear. My closet kicked ass.

It was only lately I realized it kicked too much ass. I needed to tone it down. Note to self, call Cleo for a shopping spree. I'd turn my spare bedroom into another closet because I needed new stuff. Sexy, soft, and sultry. That was what I needed.

I finally settled on black Armani silk pants, a white silk blouse, and a pale pink blazer. I never wore pink. I had bought it on a whim and it had been sitting in my closet for a year. Professional and feminine. Confident but also approachable. Everything the new collection represented.

By the time I arrived at the flagship store, my nerves had reached a fever pitch. The space had been transformed overnight. Display cases gleamed under carefully positioned lights. Specialty lighting showcased pieces from the Fall in Love collection. The centerpiece was a rotating display of the signature engagement ring, which honestly, damn. It was a

brilliant-cut diamond surrounded by smaller stones in a setting that managed to look both timeless and modern.

My design. My vision. My neck on the line.

People were everywhere. The PR team coordinated with photographers. The marketing director reviewed the social media strategy with her assistant. Store managers from our other locations had flown in for the event. Caterers set up champagne stations. A string quartet tuned their instruments in the corner.

And everyone kept asking me questions.

“Ms. Corwin, should the media check-in table be by the entrance or further inside?”

“Ms. Corwin, the florist wants to know if you want the arrangements moved closer to the main display.”

“Ms. Corwin, there’s a conflict with two influencers who apparently have some kind of feud. Should we seat them on opposite sides of the room?”

I answered each question as best I could, trying to project the calm confidence expected of someone about to become CEO. Inside, my stomach churned and the sheen of perspiration hidden by my designer outfit was no joke.

The preorder numbers had been good. Better than good, actually. We’d exceeded projections by fifteen percent, which had made the board very happy. But preorders were one thing. Today’s launch would show us the real picture. Would people actually buy the rings? Would the collection resonate with customers beyond the initial buzz?

If it succeeded, the CEO position was mine. Dad had practically said as much at our last meeting. One more win, and I’d finally have everything I’d worked for.

If it failed? I couldn’t think about that.

I found a quiet corner near the back office and pulled out my speech. The index cards were going to disintegrate from how many times I’d handled them. I’d written the speech myself, revised it dozens of times, and practiced it until I could recite it in my sleep.

But I needed to go through it again. Just one more time. Maybe two. I couldn’t have another teleprompter fail. Pretty sure I was still traumatized from that incident. In the grand scheme of things, it hadn’t been a total disaster.

It had brought me Beau. But I wasn't trying to repeat that mistake.

"Ms. Corwin?"

I looked up to find one of the event coordinators hovering nearby, tablet in hand.

"The photographer wants to do some candid shots of you looking at the displays. Is now a good time?"

No. Now was not a good time. Now was the time I needed to review my speech so I didn't humiliate myself in front of hundreds of people and countless cameras.

"Give me ten minutes," I said, trying to keep my voice pleasant.

"Of course."

She walked away, and I turned back to my cards. Where was I? Right. Modern romance.

"Darcy!"

I looked up again. Maya from marketing was hurrying toward me, her heels clicking against the floor that had been polished to the point it looked like glass.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we have a situation with the gift bags. The custom tissue paper didn't arrive, and the backup option is the wrong shade of blue. Do you want us to use it anyway or go without tissue paper entirely?"

I stared at her for a moment, trying to process why tissue paper required my personal attention.

"Use the backup," I said. "No one's going to notice the shade of blue."

"Are you sure? It's more of a teal than the navy we ordered—"

"It's fine, Maya. Just use it."

She nodded and hurried off. I turned back to my speech.

"Each piece in this collection tells a story. A story of love that's patient and kind, passionate and enduring."

"Ms. Corwin, the string quartet wants to know if they should start with classical or contemporary pieces during the cocktail hour."

I closed my eyes and counted to three. "Classical. We discussed this last week."

"Right, yes, I just wanted to confirm." The assistant scurried away. I gripped my index cards tighter and tried to find my place again.

The minutes ticked by. Every time I managed to string together more than two sentences, someone else appeared with another question. The

caterer needed approval on the appetizer arrangement. A journalist wanted to know if she could get an exclusive quote before the official remarks. One of the display cases had a hairline crack in the glass no one could see but it was important enough to disturb me.

I handled each interruption as professionally as I could, but I felt myself fraying at the edges. My responses got shorter. My smiles got tighter. The pleasant tone I was trying to maintain started slipping. I was one interruption away from losing my shit.

I was reading through the third paragraph for the fifteenth time when I sensed someone approaching. I didn't look up.

"Whatever it is, can it wait five minutes? I really need to get through this."

"Hey." Beau's voice.

I looked up to find him standing there in a perfectly tailored blue suit, looking unfairly handsome and completely at ease. He held two cups of coffee, one of which he extended toward me.

"Thought you might need this," he said.

For a split second, I felt some of the tension drain from my shoulders. He was here. He brought me coffee.

But then someone called my name from across the room.

"Thank you," I said, taking the coffee but immediately setting it aside. "I just really need to get through this speech one more time."

"You've got this," he said with that smile that always got me. "I've seen you in action. You're going to be amazing."

"I know, I just—" I glanced down at my cards, trying to find where I'd left off. "I need to make sure I have it memorized. I can't rely on a teleprompter again. Not after last time."

"Darcy." He stepped closer, reaching for my hand. "Look at me for a second."

I didn't look at him. I couldn't. If I looked at him, I'd lose my place again, and I'd have to start over. There wasn't time to start over because the event was starting in less than an hour and I still wasn't confident I could deliver this speech without stumbling.

"Beau, I appreciate you being here, I really do, but I can't do this right now."

"Just take a breath," he said gently. "You're wound tighter than I've ever seen you. The speech is going to be fine."

“You don’t understand.” My voice came out sharp enough to cut glass. “This isn’t just a speech. This is everything. If I mess this up, stumble or freeze or forget my words, it won’t matter how good the preorder numbers were. The board will see it. The media will see it. Everyone will be reminded of that disaster at the press conference, and all the work we’ve done to fix my image will be for nothing.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know you,” he said.

“Can I please just have a second alone?” That was loud. Frustration and fear bled through despite my best efforts to stay composed. “Please. I need to focus. I can’t do the flirty thing right now.”

Beau went still. I saw hurt flash through his eyes but it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared. He took a step back.

“Of course,” he said quietly. “We’ll talk after. You’ve got this, Darcy. Picture the beach. Hear the waves. There are bigger things in life.”

He turned and walked away, crossing the room to where my father was standing near one of the display cases. They chatted like nothing had happened. Like I hadn’t just snapped at him for trying to be supportive.

I watched him for a moment, guilt churning in my stomach alongside the nerves. I was an asshole. He’d shown up early with coffee. He’d tried to calm me down. He’d said all the right things, and I’d bitten his head off because I was too stressed to accept help gracefully.

World-class jerk.

This was exactly what I’d been worried about. Exactly why I’d told him a relationship would complicate things. I couldn’t be a good partner right now. I couldn’t give him what he deserved when all my energy was focused on not destroying my career.

But even as I thought it, another part of me recognized that pushing him away wasn’t the answer either. He was trying to be there for me. That was a good thing. That was what partners did. I just didn’t know how to let him.

I forced my attention back to the speech, but the words blurred together. My brain kept circling back to the look on his face when I’d told him to leave me alone. God, I was terrible at this.

The event coordinator finally took pity on me, or maybe she just ran out of questions. Either way, I found myself alone in the back office with ten precious minutes before showtime.

I closed my eyes and did what Beau had suggested. I pictured the beach. The sound of waves rolling in and out. The salt air. The feeling of sand between my toes. His hands on my waist as we tumbled through the surf.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I went through the speech in my head, not reading the cards this time, just letting the words flow. I knew this material better than anyone because I'd lived it. Every design decision, every late night reviewing prototypes, every argument with the manufacturing team about settings and stones.

This collection was mine. My vision. My passion. And passion was exactly what I'd been accused of lacking.

I opened my eyes and looked at myself in the mirror hanging on the office wall. The woman staring back at me looked composed. Professional. Ready.

The event coordinator knocked softly on the door. "Ms. Corwin? We're ready for you."

"Coming." I tucked the index cards into my pocket, even though I knew I wouldn't need them.

My father stood near the small stage that had been set up for remarks. He caught my eye and nodded. I saw pride and encouragement in those eyes. This was it.

My father stepped up to the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us today for this very special occasion." His voice carried easily through the room, commanding attention the way it always did. "I've spent my entire career building the Corwin Gem legacy. But today isn't about the past. Today is about the future."

He paused, letting the words land.

"It's my privilege to introduce the woman who will be leading this company into its next chapter. My daughter, Darcy Corwin."

Applause filled the room. I climbed the two steps to the stage. My father squeezed my shoulder as he handed me the microphone.

I faced the crowd and smiled.

"Thank you, Dad. And thank you all for being here today." I launched into the speech. The cards were there, but I had it memorized.

"To love. To partnership. To falling and staying."

"To love!" the crowd echoed, glasses raised.

The applause that followed was so different than the last time I stood in front of a crowd. It was a success. I could feel it in the energy of the room,

see it in the way people's eyes lit up when they looked at the rings.

But all I could think about was Beau.

I worked my way through the crowd, accepting more congratulations, answering questions from journalists, posing for photos that would end up on social media within the hour. The whole time, I kept track of where he was. Near the champagne station. Talking to my father. Examining one of the display cases with what looked like genuine interest.

Finally, I found a moment to slip away.

He saw me coming and straightened.

"I'm sorry," I said. No preamble. No excuses. "I was awful to you earlier. You were trying to help, and I pushed you away, and you didn't deserve that."

His expression softened. "You had a lot going on. I know how important this is to you."

"I told you I sucked at this whole relationship thing."

"Practice makes perfect."

"How can I make it up to you?"

His eyes dropped to my boobs and then back up to meet mine. "A bed."

"Come again?"

"Let's get out of here right now and find a bed."

I laughed softly. I loved his one-track mind. Maybe because I'd been on the same track.

"Deal."

I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the side exit before anyone could stop us. The event was in full swing, champagne flowing, cameras flashing, but we slipped out like two teenagers ditching prom. Her fingers tightened around mine. I felt the same urgency thrumming through her that was already making my cock twitch in my slacks.

When I had propositioned her, I honestly thought she'd tell me hell no. But she didn't.

My car was parked out back. We slid inside without a word. The engine roared to life and I peeled out of the lot. Darcy's hand landed on my thigh, sliding higher until her fingertips were brushing over the erection that was trying to bust through my pants. I bit back a groan.

"Fuck, baby, not while I'm driving," I muttered, but she just laughed, her palm cupping the growing bulge.

"Payback for earlier," she said. "I was an asshole. Let me make it up to you."

I found the nearest upscale hotel two blocks away, a sleek glass tower with valet out front. I tossed the keys to the attendant, grabbed her hand again, and strode straight to the desk. One night, executive suite, whatever they had. The clerk didn't even blink when I slid my card across. Minutes later the elevator doors closed behind us. I had her pinned against the mirrored wall, my mouth on hers, tongue pushing deep.

I barely noticed the room. Didn't give a shit about the decor. I kicked the door shut. She dropped to her knees right there on the carpet before I could even shrug off my jacket. Her fingers worked my belt open, zipper down, and then her hand wrapped around my cock, stroking once, twice, slowly and deliberately.

"Jesus, Darcy," I hissed, fingers threading into her hair. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I want to," she cut in, voice already husky. "I snapped at you. Let me suck your cock like I mean it."

"Damn, dirty Darcy is impossible to turn down."

She didn't wait for permission. Her tongue dragged flat along the underside, swirling around the head. I groaned, hips jerking forward on instinct. She took me deeper, lips stretching wide around my length, hot and wet and perfect. One hand cupped my balls, rolling them gently while she bobbed her head, sucking hard on every upstroke.

"Goddamn, that's it," I growled, watching my cock disappear between those pretty lips. "Take it all, baby."

She moaned around me, the vibration shooting straight to my spine. Her free hand slid down to unbutton her own blouse, shoving it open so I could see the lace of her bra straining over her tits. She worked me faster, throat relaxing, taking me until her nose brushed my stomach. I thrust into her mouth while she looked up at me with those blue eyes glassy and hungry.

"You feel so fucking good," I rasped.

Her hand stroked what her mouth couldn't reach. My balls tightened, pressure building fast and hot. That tingle at the base of my spine was a strong warning my control was slipping.

I hauled her to her feet and kissed her hard. "We're just getting started."

I reached for her blouse, ready to rip the thing off her.

"No, you don't," she said and took a step back. "I have to walk out of here."

I pouted. "Next time I want buttons flying."

She grinned and quickly unbuttoned her blouse. "Next time."

The second that shirt was off, I was on her. My hand tugged at her bra, freeing those perfect tits. I palmed them roughly, thumbs circling her hard nipples, and slammed my mouth over hers. She gasped, opening her mouth wide. She fought with my shirt next, yanking it free from my pants. I didn't care if I lost a few buttons. I shrugged it off without breaking the kiss, then

kicked my slacks and boxers down in one motion, kicking them aside along with my shoes.

Darcy was frantic. My hands ran over her body, tweaking her nipples while my mouth moved down to her neck. She shimmied out of her pants and panties until she stood naked in front of me, skin flushed and breathing ragged. I backed her toward the bed, hands everywhere at once, mapping the curves I already knew by heart but still couldn't get enough of. She hit the mattress and I followed, crawling over her, my cock hard and aching as it dragged against her thigh.

"Fuck, I need you," I muttered against her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin there. She arched up, rubbing her naked body against mine. The heat of her slick core brushed against me.

"Condom," she murmured.

I froze. Did I have a condom? Shit. I should have thought ahead.

"Uh."

"Beau!"

"Let me look," I said and found my wallet. I stretched the little pouch and found it empty. I looked back at her.

"Wait!"

She jumped up, tits bouncing, and grabbed her purse that had been tossed to the side. She pulled out a pink package.

"Bridal shower. It was a joke. We were supposed to—" She stopped and waved a hand. "Doesn't matter."

I took the condom and felt a moment of weirdness. "I don't think I've ever worn a pink condom."

"Hurry up!"

With a smirk, I tore open the package, rolled it on. She'd moved back to the bed.

I pounced. The bed knocked against the wall. Her legs opened, cradling my body against hers.

I slid into her slowly, feeling her heat engulf me. She threw her arms around my neck and moaned, hips bucking up to meet my thrusts. Her nails dug into my shoulders.

I sank into her deep, feeling everything I'd been missing. She was tight and warm and oh so slick. I withdrew almost all the way, then slammed back in, hitting something deep inside her that made us both gasp. Her

fingers twisted in my hair. Her body moved with me, rocking against my hips.

“Fuck yeah,” she panted. “That’s it.”

My hips snapped into a rougher rhythm, taking control. The mattress creaked beneath us as we fucked like it was the last night on earth. I drove into her harder.

Darcy moaned, her legs locking around my waist as she arched up to meet me. “Harder, Beau. Fuck me like you mean it.”

I loved how bossy she was. The polished, uptight Darcy carried over into the bedroom and I was here for it. A woman who knew what she wanted was hot.

I braced one hand beside her head and pounded into her, the wet slap of skin echoing in the room. Her tits bounced with every stroke, nipples tight and begging. I dipped my head and sucked one into my mouth, biting just hard enough to make her cry out and grind harder against me.

“Yes,” she gasped, nails raking down my back. “Don’t stop. I’m so close.”

I reached between us, thumb circling her swollen clit in fast, firm strokes. Her walls squeezed me tighter. “Let go. Let me feel you.”

She shattered with a broken cry, pulsing around me as her whole body shook. The sight of her coming undone pushed me over the edge. I buried myself deep, hips jerking as I spilled into the condom with a guttural groan. We rode out every wave together. Jerking and panting through every tremor.

I collapsed beside her, pulling her against my chest while we caught our breath. The chemistry with this woman was off the charts. I had found my match in the bedroom. Was she my match outside of it as well? It was hard to think straight when I constantly wanted to be buried inside her.

“Still think we should keep things professional?” I murmured, pressing a kiss to her damp hair.

She laughed softly, breathless. “Not even a little.”

“Hungry?” I asked.

“Starving. I was too afraid to eat breakfast.”

“I’ll order room service. Want brunch or lunch?”

“Lunch. A BLT. Curly fries.”

“My girl likes her greasy food,” I teased.

I pushed myself off the bed and walked into the bathroom to deal with the pink condom. Beggars couldn’t be choosers.

When I returned to the room, she was still stretched out on the bed in all her naked splendor. I stood beside the bed and ogled her body while she grinned up at me.

“Maybe I’ll have you for lunch,” I said. “You look delectable.”

“Feed me first.”

I flopped on the bed, covering her naked body with mine again. We kissed again. Slow. Leisurely. Not a care in the world. Did I have clients to get back to? Yep. Would they wait? Maybe. Didn’t matter. I was right where I wanted to be.

A vibration sound filled the air.

“Mine or yours?” I asked.

She sighed. “Let’s hope it’s yours.”

I rolled off her and picked up the room-service menu. She got up and dug in her purse once again to pull out her phone.

“Oh, want a milkshake?” I asked.

“Oh shit!”

I looked up. “What? What’s wrong?”

I watched her face go from relaxed and satisfied to pure panic in half a second. Her eyes were glued to the screen, scrolling rapidly through what looked like a shit-ton of notifications.

“Darcy? What’s going on?”

“My father,” she breathed. “He’s called me seventeen times.”

My stomach dropped. “Seventeen?”

She didn’t answer, too busy reading through what I assumed were text messages. The color drained from her face, leaving her pale enough that I started to worry she might pass out.

“Baby, talk to me. What did he say?”

She looked up at me. I saw genuine fear in those blue eyes. “The board called an emergency meeting. Thirty minutes after my speech.”

“Okay.” I waited for the rest, already sensing where this was going and not liking it one bit.

“I wasn’t there.” Her voice cracked. “I left. With you. I ditched the biggest moment of my career to come fuck you in a hotel room.”

The words felt like she’d dropped a bomb. I felt dirty. What we just did was too good to feel guilty about. I opened my mouth to say something, anything that might make this better, but she was already moving.

She snatched her clothes off the floor, yanking on her panties and pants with shaking hands.

“Darcy, slow down.”

“I just destroyed everything. Everything I’ve worked for. My entire career. Gone. Because I couldn’t keep my legs closed for two hours.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” She spun to face me, eyes blazing. “You asked me to leave. You wanted to find a bed. And I said yes like an idiot because apparently when you look at me with those eyes and that smile, my brain stops functioning.”

I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. “You’re blaming me for this?”

“Yes!”

I jerked back. Having an argument naked was a very uncomfortable feeling. I needed a second. I needed to work through this rationally. But she was in an absolute panic and I had no idea how to fix it.

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The word came out like a slap. I saw Beau flinch. Some distant part of me knew I was being unfair. I lashed out because I was terrified and he was the closest target. But I couldn't stop myself.

"This fake relationship was supposed to fix my image," I spat, fumbling with my bra clasp. "It was supposed to help my career, not destroy it. That was the whole point, Beau. The whole goddamn point."

His jaw clenched. Hurt flashed through his eyes before I saw something I'd never seen on his face before. Anger. "Fake relationship," he repeated.

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?" He grabbed his boxers off the floor and pulled them on with jerky movements. "Because from where I'm standing, nothing about what just happened felt fake. Are you going to try and tell me dinner with my family felt fake? Bullshit. Nothing about the beach or your garden or any of the rest was fake."

My chest felt tight. Breathing was suddenly difficult. He was right. Of course he was right. But admitting that meant admitting I'd just torpedoed my entire future for something real, and that was somehow worse.

"I can't fuck up this job." My voice came out small, revealing my deepest fear. "That's all I meant. This is everything I've worked for. Everything."

"And I don't want to get in the way of that." He yanked his shirt on, not bothering with the buttons. "But that's how you've been making me feel,

Darcy. Like I'm an obstacle. A complication. Something to be managed between meetings."

The accusation landed hard. I wanted to deny it, but the words stuck in my throat because some part of me knew he wasn't wrong.

"You're right," I whispered. "I don't have time for this."

The silence that followed was deafening. Beau stared at me. I watched him shut down. That easy warmth, that playful light in his eyes? Gone. Replaced by something cold and distant. The man I looked at now was a shark. The lawyer I thought he was on that first day. I did that. I turned him hard as stone.

"Clearly, you need to figure out who you are. Not what your father wants you to be. Not what the board likes or the investors." He grabbed his jacket off the chair, shoving his arms through the sleeves. "Find out who the fuck you are, Darcy. If you ever figure that out, give me a call."

He walked to the door without looking back.

"Beau—"

The door clicked shut behind him. I stood there in the middle of the hotel room, half-dressed, my blouse hanging open. I felt the weight of what I'd just done crash over me. My eyes burned. My throat ached. I looked at the bed that was a mess after what we'd done. The smell of sex hung in the room. His cologne. I saw something shiny on the floor and bent to pick it up.

A cufflink with BB.

I closed my hand around it, squeezing it and thinking about him putting it on that morning. Every instinct screamed at me to crumble. I wanted to sink onto that bed and sob until I couldn't breathe. But I didn't have time.

I didn't have the luxury of time to process the look on his face when I'd called us fake. There was no time to think about what just walked out that door and what that meant. I had to get back to the office.

I finished dressing, buttoning my blouse with fingers that wouldn't stop shaking. I checked my reflection in the bathroom mirror and barely recognized the woman staring back at me. Smudged lipstick. Hair a disaster. Eyes wild.

I splashed cold water on my face and fixed what I could. Twisted my hair into something resembling professional. I wiped away the mascara smudged under my eyes. Good enough. It would have to be good enough.

I grabbed my purse and phone, scanning through the messages as I headed for the door. My father's texts were increasingly urgent.

Where are you?

The board wants to meet. Now.

Darcy, call me immediately.

This is important.

Where the hell did you go?

I didn't have answers for any of it. I'd left my own launch event to have sex with my fake boyfriend who wasn't actually fake, and now everything was falling apart.

The elevator ride down felt endless. I kept seeing Beau's face. The hurt. The disappointment. The way he'd looked at me like I was a stranger.

Who the fuck you are, Darcy?

I didn't know. That was the terrifying truth. The perfect daughter. The competent executive. The ice queen.

I burst through the hotel lobby and onto the street. I couldn't afford to let my personal life interfere with the professional crisis waiting for me. Beau had abandoned me. I couldn't blame him.

I hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of Corwin Gems headquarters, my leg bouncing with nervous energy the entire ride.

My phone buzzed again. Another text from my father.

Board meeting concluded. We need to talk.

My stomach dropped. Concluded. Whatever they'd decided, they'd decided it without me.

By the time I walked through the doors of Corwin Gems, I'd managed to regain my composure. There was nothing to do with the scent of Beau clinging to me. I just hoped no one else smelled it. My father's assistant saw me coming and her eyes went wide.

"Ms. Corwin, your father is in his office. He's been trying to reach you."

"I know." I didn't stop to explain. Didn't offer excuses. Just walked straight to my father's corner office and pushed open the door.

He was sitting behind his desk, phone in hand. When he saw me, his expression cycled through about five different emotions. Relief. Confusion. Frustration. Disappointment. And finally, a blank look that was worse than all the others.

"Where the hell have you been?"

“I stepped out for a bit. I’m sorry I missed the meeting.”

“Stepped out.” He set down his phone. “Darcy, the board called an emergency session thirty minutes after your speech. Do you have any idea how that looked when you weren’t there?”

My stomach twisted. “What did they want? The launch went well. People loved my speech. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

He leaned back in his chair, studying me with those sharp eyes that never missed anything. Did he notice the swollen lips? The redness on my neck from Beau’s very exuberant tongue and teeth?

“They wanted to make it official,” he said. “The launch *was* a success. Better than projected. The board was ready to formally announce their support for your appointment as CEO.”

The words should have made me feel something akin to joy. Finally. The thing I wanted most in the world was right there for the taking. Instead, I just felt numb.

“*Was* ready?” I repeated.

“It was supposed to be a celebration, Darcy.” His voice was heavy with disappointment. “A moment to acknowledge everything you’ve accomplished. But you missed it. You disappeared without telling anyone where you were going, and now there are a few board members expressing their doubts.”

“Doubts about what?”

He waved his hands. “Everything.”

“What exactly did they say?”

My father hesitated. “They think the relationship has become a distraction.”

“The relationship you arranged?”

He frowned. “This is no longer what I arranged.”

“I want to understand. You hired Beau to make me look more approachable. Now that the strategy is working, they’re questioning my judgment because I spent time with him?”

“Their concerns are about whether you’re truly committed to this position. They are trying to decide if you have the necessary judgment to lead this company.” He spread his hands. “We’ll have to do something to win them over. Another event, maybe. A public statement. Something to reassure them that this was just a momentary lapse.”

I stood there, listening to him outline the latest hoops I'd need to jump through. More impossible standards I'd need to meet despite doing everything right. I'd proved myself over and over. They wanted to move the goal posts again.

Something inside me snapped.

"Fuck their doubts."

My father's mouth fell open. In all my years, I'd never seen him look so shocked. "Excuse me?"

"I said fuck their doubts." The words kept coming. I'd been holding them back for years. Doing this stupid dance and getting nowhere. Like a rubberband pulled too tight for too long, I snapped. "I'm so tired of this, Dad. So tired of these people telling me what to do. I'm constantly being told I'm not good enough. Smile more. Be softer. Show more emotion. Show less emotion. I can't win. No matter what I do, it's never enough."

"Darcy—"

"I had a huge part in creating that collection." My voice rose, but I couldn't stop it. "I spent months perfecting every detail. I gave a speech today that had people crying into their champagne. The launch exceeded projections. And none of that matters because I left a party early?"

"It wasn't just a party. It was your chance to show off."

"I know what it was." I was shaking now, trembling with rage and exhaustion and something that felt dangerously close to despair. "It was another test. Another chance for them to evaluate whether I'm worthy. Yet another opportunity in a very long line of bullshit performances. All done for a bunch of old men in suits to decide if I'm good enough to run the company I've been working at since I was a child."

My father stood, moving around his desk toward me. "You need to calm down."

"No." I stepped back, holding up a hand. "I don't need to calm down. I need to stop pretending that their approval is the only thing that matters."

"The board's approval is essential for you to get the position. I want them to see what I see."

"If they can't fucking see it by now, they're blind!"

"Darcy! Stop it. This is business."

"Bullshit. You and I know I'm being forced to jump through all these stupid hoops because of who I am."

"And you've done so well."

“For what? Why? So I can feel like I’ve finally earned something? I have to prove I’m not just your daughter but an actual competent human being?” I laughed. “If they still don’t want me after everything I’ve done for this company, then the question isn’t whether I’m good enough to run Corwin Gems.”

My father frowned. “Then what is the question?”

“The question is whether this company is good enough for *me*.”

Silence. Absolute, stunned silence.

My father stared at me like he’d never seen me before. Maybe he hadn’t. This was the first time he was meeting the real Darcy. This version of me had been buried under layers of expectations and obligations and desperate attempts to please.

I didn’t wait for his response. Didn’t give him a chance to talk me down or remind me of everything I’d be throwing away. I turned on my heel and walked out of his office, leaving him standing there speechless.

The hallway stretched before me, familiar and foreign all at once. I’d walked these halls thousands of times, but today they felt different, like I was seeing them through new eyes.

I passed Maya from marketing, who started to say something before apparently thinking better of it. The conference room where I’d sat through countless meetings, nodding along while men twice my age judged me, was on my right.

I kept walking. The elevator doors closed behind me. My shoulders drooped. I finally let myself breathe. My heart raced and it felt like someone had put a vise on my lungs. But surprisingly, underneath the panic and the anger and the bone-deep exhaustion, I felt something else.

Freedom.

Figure out who you are.

I didn’t know the answer yet. But for the first time in my life, I was ready to find out.

The elevator reached the ground floor. The doors opened. I stepped out into the afternoon sun, blinking against the brightness.

I didn’t know where I was going. Didn’t have a plan or a destination or any idea what came next. But that was okay. I’d find out who Darcy Corwin really was.

I canceled all my appointments, which my receptionist just loved. I told her it was an emergency. I didn't say family emergency because that was too easy to disprove. And if a client heard there was something wrong with a Blackwell, it could set off an international incident. Maybe not international but pretty close.

Emergency was just vague enough to work.

I got home, closed all the blinds, and put my phone on Do Not Disturb. I needed to settle in for a good sulking session. I changed into shorts and a tee, no socks and definitely no shoes.

I went to my bar, searched for the bottle I had yet to open. I'd been saving it for something special. Today was especially shitty, so it worked.

I sat on the wooden steps leading down to the beach. I opened the bottle of whiskey and took a drink. It burned. But not enough. I watched the waves roll in and out like they didn't give a damn about anything. The waves usually calmed me. I tried to get into that mindset. Remind myself I was just a small cog in a massive wheel.

Unfortunately, all I could think about was how she'd looked at me in that hotel room.

Like I was the problem.

I took another long pull from the bottle, letting the burn settle in my chest. It didn't help. Nothing helped. The ocean kept doing its thing, waves

crashing and retreating. I kept sitting there like an idiot, replaying every word she'd said.

What the fuck had I been thinking? I had let myself get caught up. She never really said the words. She agreed with me but didn't really say it. I was the guy that made her look soft. Normal. I melted the ice queen. That was the illusion that even *I* bought for a while.

I was a fucking fool.

The whiskey went down easier after the first few swallows. By the time the stars came out, I'd stopped feeling much of anything. That was the goal, right? Numb the pain until it didn't exist anymore.

Except it still existed. It just got a little fuzzy, but it still ached. Sat in my gut and made me nauseated. It had nothing to do with the whiskey. It was a different kind of sickness. I climbed back up the steps, leaning heavily on the railing.

I stumbled into the house and debated making a sandwich to soak up some of the whiskey but decided it wasn't worth the effort.

The second day, it was the same. No work. Another bottle of whiskey on the beach. I woke up the next morning on the beach with the sun trying to kill me. I had sand in places sand had no business being. My head pounded like someone had taken a hammer to my skull. The bottle lay empty beside me, half-buried in the sand. I stared at it for a long moment, trying to remember how I'd gotten here.

Right. Darcy.

I dragged myself up the steps and into the house, every muscle protesting. I was hungry and sick. Sick because I was hungry. I hauled my ass into the shower. I had to support my weight against the tile wall.

The shower helped a little. But when I caught sight of my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I barely recognized the man staring back at me. Bloodshot eyes. Two days of stubble. The hollow look of someone who'd had their heart ripped out and stomped on.

Pathetic.

I crawled into bed and stayed there. For three days, I existed in a haze of sleep and self-pity. The curtains stayed closed. The phone stayed off. I ordered food I barely touched and watched TV I didn't actually see. It was noise to drown out the silence.

My brain kept circling back to her. The good memories. The beach. My bed. She'd been happy. And then the other memories filtered in. The ones

that hurt.

I didn't have time for this. I pulled the pillow over my face and groaned into it.

On the fourth day, I finally dragged myself into the office. Not because I wanted to but because the pile of work I'd been ignoring had reached critical mass. When I finally charged my phone and turned it on, the notification count made me want to throw it against the wall.

I scrolled through the messages, feeling absolutely nothing. Some lawyer I was. These people were paying me good money to handle their issues, and I couldn't even handle my own life. All of their problems felt trivial. Insignificant. Like worrying about a paper cut when you were bleeding out from a gut wound.

I knew that wasn't fair. These were real issues affecting real people's careers and livelihoods. But I couldn't bring myself to care. Not when every time I closed my eyes, I saw Darcy's face. Heard her voice.

Fake relationship.

I shoved the phone aside and stared at the wall.

My assistant knocked on the door around noon, poking her head in with a concerned expression. "Mr. Blackwell? Your two o'clock is here. The Spencer contract review?"

I blinked at her. "Reschedule it."

"Sir, this is the third time we've rescheduled. They're getting frustrated."

"Then they can find another lawyer."

Her eyes went wide. I'd never said anything like that before. I was the guy who bent over backward for clients. I answered calls at midnight and worked weekends without complaint. But that guy felt like a stranger now.

"Just... give me another day," I said, rubbing my temples. "Tell them I'm dealing with a personal emergency."

She nodded slowly and retreated, closing the door behind her. I sat there in the silence, surrounded by case files I couldn't focus on and messages I couldn't answer. The office felt wrong. Too quiet. Too empty. The walls pressed in like they were trying to suffocate me. I wanted to be on the beach with fresh air and an endless horizon.

I thought about calling her. I pulled out my phone with my finger hovering over her contact. One tap. That was all it would take. I wanted to ask her how she was doing. I even considered apologizing for walking out.

But apologize for what? For being hurt that she'd called us fake? For wanting more than she was willing to give?

Hell no.

She was the one who had pushed me away. She was the one who had chosen her career over whatever we had. If she wanted me, she knew where to find me.

Somehow, I made it through the day and was far too eager to get home and into a fresh bottle.

I was three drinks in when my phone rang. I almost ignored it. But something made me glance at the screen.

Lou Corwin.

My stomach dropped. For one wild second, I thought maybe something had happened to Darcy. Maybe she was hurt or in trouble.

I answered before I could talk myself out of it. "Hello?"

"What the hell did you do to my daughter?"

Not concern. Not worry. Accusation.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't know what ideas you put in her head, but she yelled at me." Lou's voice was tight with barely contained fury. "Yelled at me, Beau. In my own office. Said things I never thought I'd hear from her mouth. And now she's not talking to me. Won't answer my calls, won't respond to my texts. It's been days."

I let out a bitter laugh. "You think I did that?"

"She was fine before you came along. Focused. Driven. Now she's questioning everything, throwing away everything she's worked for."

"Maybe she's finally figuring out what she actually wants." The words came out harsh and filled with venom. "Did you ever think about that? Maybe your daughter has spent her whole life trying to live up to your expectations, and she's finally realized she doesn't have to."

Silence on the other end of the line.

"If she's not talking to you," I continued, my voice rough with all the liquor I'd been dumping down my throat, "that's between you and her. I didn't put any ideas in her head. My big crime was seeing her. The real her. Not the ice queen everyone expects her to be."

"You were supposed to help her image!"

I laughed again, but there was no humor in it. "I did. Maybe too well."

"What the hell does that mean?"

“Nothing.”

More silence.

“She’s not talking to you either, is she?” he asked.

“Nope,” I admitted. “She’s not.”

A long pause. I could hear Lou breathing on the other end, processing this information. We were both on the outs. And we were both suffering. I knew he loved her. He wanted the best for her, but in my humble opinion, he had done it wrong. He made her feel inadequate whether that was his intention or not.

“Well,” he said finally. “I suppose I still owe you your fee.”

I snorted. “Keep it.”

“What?”

“I don’t want your money.” I stared out at the ocean, watching the waves catch the last light of the dying sun. “It was never about that.”

“Then what was it about?”

I didn’t have an answer. Or maybe I did, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud. What was the point? Darcy had made her choice. She’d chosen her career. I wasn’t part of that equation.

“Goodbye, Lou.” I hung up before he could say anything else.

I thought about throwing my phone into the ocean. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t make it all go away. Instead, I just set it down on the step beside me and went back to watching the sunset.

I thought about all the things I should have said. Should have done. Should have been.

Maybe I should have fought harder to make her hear me. I could have refused to leave that hotel room until we’d talked it out. I should have made her understand that what we had was real. She mattered more to me than any contract or arrangement or business deal.

But she’d looked at me with her eyes full of panic and fear, and she had called us fake. And something inside me had broken.

I’d meant it when I said it. I still meant it. She’d spent so long being what everyone else wanted her to be that she’d lost sight of herself somewhere along the way. I’d seen glimpses of the real her and that woman was extraordinary.

But she had to find that for herself. I couldn’t do it for her.

Tomorrow, I’d go back to work again. Return the calls. Handle the cases. Pretend to be the competent, charming lawyer everyone expected me

to be.

But tonight, I would sit with the pain for one more day. I'd let it wash over me like the waves on the shore. I would let it pull me under, keep me buried, and tomorrow morning, I would get up and be done with the sulking.

If she ever figured out who she was and decided that the life she wanted included me, she could come to find me.

If not, then it wasn't meant to be.

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The dirt felt wrong in my hands. It didn't smell the same either. I knelt in my garden, trowel digging into the soil around my tomato plants, but the usual peace wouldn't come. The familiar rhythm of weeding and pruning that always centered me felt hollow today. Empty. Like going through the motions of a ritual that had lost all meaning.

I sat back on my heels and stared at the raised beds I'd built with my own hands. The peppers were thriving. The squash was coming in nicely. Everything was growing exactly as it should be. The basket of beautiful tomatoes and peppers I picked earlier sat beside me. The plan was to make salsa.

But I didn't want to. I didn't want to make strawberry jam or pie. I was surrounded by perfect veggies and I wanted none of it. I always told myself if I got a little time off, I'd spend it in the garden building new trellises. I wanted to take out some of the decorative boulders and put in new garden beds.

Now that I had the time, I didn't have the desire.

I hadn't been to work in four days. Four days. The longest stretch I'd taken off since forever. I always worked. I worked weekends and holidays, desperate to prove I wasn't just the boss's daughter. I'd sacrificed friendships, relationships, any semblance of a personal life, all for that company.

And what had it gotten me? A bunch of old men in suits deciding I still wasn't good enough.

I yanked a weed from the soil. The roots came up clean, which should have been satisfying. It wasn't.

The truth was I didn't know what to do with myself when I wasn't working. My whole identity had been wrapped up in that place for so long that without it I felt untethered. Lost. Like a ship that had slipped its anchor and was drifting aimlessly in open water.

I moved to the next row, attacking the weeds there with the same restless energy. My knees ached from kneeling. Sweat trickled down my back despite the mild afternoon. I didn't care. Physical discomfort was easier to deal with than the mess inside my head.

The board could go fuck themselves. I had said that to myself no less than a hundred times.

I deserved that CEO job. I'd earned it a hundred times over with late nights and brilliant ideas and profits that spoke for themselves. I refused to beg for something that should already be mine. A woman had to know her own worth, and I was worth more than they were giving me credit for.

So fuck them.

I could get a job with a rival company this afternoon if I wanted to. There had been several companies sniffing around for years. Cartier would probably roll out the red carpet. Hell, I could start my own company and watch Corwin Gems scramble to compete.

But I wasn't ready to make any decisions yet.

I sat back again, wiping dirt on my yoga pants. My phone sat on the patio table. I'd thought about calling Beau at least fifty times in the past few days. I had picked up the phone. Stared at his contact. Put it back down.

I still felt like shit about our last conversation. The look on his face when I'd called us fake. I'd hurt him. Badly. And I wasn't sure I could take it back even if I wanted to.

The problem was that I still didn't know if I was mad at him too.

He'd asked me to sneak off with him. He'd wanted to find a bed. And I'd said yes because apparently when he looked at me with those eyes and that smile, my brain stopped functioning. That part was true. But was it his fault that I'd made that choice?

No. That was on me. I had a voice. I was a fucking executive and very capable of rejecting a proposition. And at the time, I didn't have any reason

to expect a meeting with the board. My responsibilities had been mostly finished for the day.

But he'd walked out. Left me standing there half-dressed in a hotel room while my career imploded. He hadn't stayed to talk it through. He didn't try to help me figure out what to do next. He'd just delivered his judgment and disappeared.

Figure out who you are.

Easy for him to say. He'd always known exactly who he was. Confident, charming Beau Blackwell who could talk his way into or out of anything. He'd never had to prove himself to a board of directors who'd already decided he wasn't good enough before he walked in the room.

I stabbed the trowel into the soil again, taking out my frustration on an innocent patch of earth. The afternoon sun beat down on my shoulders. I should probably put on sunscreen. I didn't move to get any. Instead, I kept working, kept pulling weeds, kept trying to find the peace that usually lived in this garden.

A shadow fell over me.

I whirled, trowel raised like a weapon, my heart trying to escape my chest. The silhouette resolved into a familiar figure, which should have relaxed me. Instead, I felt my jaw clench.

My father stood a few feet away, hands raised in surrender, looking at the small shovel in my hand. The shovel wasn't the danger. I was.

"Easy there," he said. "I come in peace."

I didn't lower the trowel. "What do you want?"

He dropped his hands, his expression shifting to something I rarely saw on his face. Uncertainty. Maybe even guilt. "I came to apologize."

I stared at him, waiting for the catch. He'd had days to apologize and hadn't. There had to be an ulterior motive.

"You were right," he continued, the words coming out like they cost him something. "About the board. About everything."

I still didn't lower the trowel. "Go on."

If he thought I would simply accept his apology and forget everything, he was wrong. I had days of stewing and it had only made me feel more justified in telling all of them to fuck off.

He sighed, running a hand through his silver hair. He looked tired. Older. When had that happened?

“They’ve been unreasonable with you,” he said. “The hoops they’ve made you jump through, the standards they’ve held you to. It’s not fair. They never made me prove myself like that over the years.”

“Because you’re a man.”

I watched him flinch. I could see him struggling with whether to deny it or deflect.

“Yeah,” he finally admitted. “Because I’m a man.”

I felt a tiny bit of relief. Not much but enough to notice. I lowered the trowel slowly, letting it rest against my thigh.

“You still have my support,” he said. “That still means a lot in that boardroom. More than those old bastards want to admit.”

“Does it?”

“It does.” He took a step closer, careful, like he was approaching a wounded animal. “The job is still yours if you still want it. I know what you bring to the table, Darcy. I’ve always known. And I appreciate it, even if I haven’t always shown it the way I should have.”

Tears pricked at my eyes and I blinked them back furiously. I would not cry in front of my father. Not now. Not after everything.

“I don’t know if I want it anymore,” I admitted, the words scraping past the lump in my throat. “I don’t know what I want.”

He nodded slowly. “That’s okay. You don’t have to decide right now.”

We stood there in silence for a moment, the sounds of the garden filling the space between us. Birds chirping. Wind rustling through the leaves. Buzzing insects and my windchimes.

“What’s happening with you and Beau?”

The question caught me off guard. I felt my walls go up automatically, that familiar defensive instinct kicking in.

“Why do you ask?”

“He told me you weren’t talking to him.”

I blinked. “You spoke to him?”

“I had a bill to settle.” My father shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “But Beau didn’t want any money from me. Said it wasn’t about that.”

I chewed on that for a moment. Beau had turned down his fee. The money that had been the whole point of our arrangement, at least at the beginning. He’d walked away from a significant payday because it wasn’t about that.

What was it about, then?

I thought I knew the answer. I'd seen it in his eyes every time he looked at me. Felt it in the way he touched me. He listened to me like no one had, not even my father. I thought about the way he'd knelt in my garden pulling weeds just because I'd asked him to.

"I don't know what's happening with us," I said finally. "I said some things. He said some things. And now neither of us is talking."

My father nodded like he understood. Maybe he did. He'd been through his own share of relationship disasters over the years, though we never talked about them.

"He seemed pretty upset about it," he offered.

The tears threatened to fall again. I turned away, pretending to examine a tomato plant.

"Thank you," I said, my voice rough. "For coming over. For saying all that."

"You're my daughter." He said it simply, like it explained everything. Maybe it did.

I turned back to face him, this man who had shaped so much of who I was, for better and worse. He wasn't perfect. He'd pushed me too hard, expected too much, and made me feel like I could never measure up. But he was here now, standing in my garden, admitting he was wrong.

That counted for something.

"I don't know about the CEO job yet," I said. "I need more time to think."

"Take all the time you need."

I hesitated, then made a decision. A small one but it felt significant.

"Would you like to split a pizza with me? I've got a six-pack of beer in the fridge."

He smiled and looked years younger. "I would love that."

We walked inside together, leaving the garden behind. I washed the dirt off my hands while he pulled up the delivery app on his phone, debating toppings like it was the most important decision either of us would make today. Maybe it was.

We settled on half pepperoni, half veggie, because some things never changed. He sat at my kitchen island while we waited, looking around at the space like he was seeing it for the first time.

"You've done well for yourself," he said. "This place. Your career. Everything you've built."

“Even if I walk away from Corwin Gems?”

He considered the question seriously. “Even then. You’d land on your feet. You always do.”

I grabbed two cold beers from the fridge and handed him one. The pizza arrived. We ate standing at the counter, not bothering with plates, grease dripping onto napkins we’d spread across the counter. It was messy and informal and nothing like the stiff family dinners I remembered from childhood. Pizza and beer was one of the few times we didn’t have to pretend to be fancy.

“Your mother would have been proud of you,” he said suddenly, between bites. “She always knew you’d do great things.”

I stopped chewing. We never talked about my mother. It was an unspoken rule between us, a wound too tender to touch.

“You think so?”

“I know so.” He set down his slice, meeting my eyes. “She saw something in you, even when you were tiny. Said you had fire. She was certain you’d change the world if we just got out of your way.”

I swallowed hard, the pizza suddenly tasteless in my mouth. “I don’t feel like I’m changing anything right now. I feel like I’m falling apart.”

“Sometimes you have to fall apart before you can put yourself back together the right way.” He picked up his slice again, taking a bite. “That’s what your mother used to say, anyway. She was smarter than me about that kind of thing.”

We finished the pizza and the six-pack. When he finally left, he hugged me at the door.

“Call him,” he said as he pulled away. “Whatever happened between you two, it’s worth trying to fix.”

I didn’t promise anything. But after he drove away, I stood in my doorway for a long time, thinking about Beau.

I wasn’t ready to call him yet. I still had too much to figure out about myself first.

But maybe, when I did figure it out, I’d find the courage to try.

The sun had already set by the time I heard the cars pulling into my driveway. I didn't bother getting up from the couch. Whoever it was could let themselves in or fuck off. I didn't particularly care which option they chose.

The front door opened without a knock. Footsteps. Multiple sets of them.

"Jesus Christ, it smells like a distillery in here."

Callum's voice. I cracked one eye open to find three of my brothers standing in my living room, staring at me like I was some kind of science experiment gone wrong. Drew, Callum, and Micah.

"Go away," I muttered, closing my eye again.

"Not happening." Drew moved into the room. I heard him picking up empty bottles. "How long have you been like this?"

"What day is it?"

"Thursday."

I did the math. Or tried to. The numbers kept slipping away from me. "A while."

"That's not an answer." Micah appeared in my line of vision, arms crossed, looking like a disappointed parent. "When did you last eat something that wasn't liquid?"

I thought about it. The pizza I'd ordered three days ago? Or was it four? "Recently."

“Bullshit.” Callum grabbed the beer from my hand before I could react. “You look like death warmed over. Scratch that. Worse. What’s worse?”

“Dogshit. Cow shit.” Drew’s commentary was really unnecessary.

“Feel like it too.” I made a weak grab for the beer. He held it out of reach. “Give that back.”

“No.” He disappeared into the kitchen. I heard the fridge open and close, followed by the distinct sound of bottles being poured down the drain.

“That’s expensive whiskey,” I called out, not moving from the couch.

“Then you shouldn’t have been drowning in it.”

Drew sat down on the coffee table across from me, studying my face like he was trying to see inside my brain. “Want to tell us what happened?”

“No.”

“Too bad.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “We’re not leaving until you talk.”

“Then get comfortable. I’ve got nothing to say.”

Micah sighed and dropped into the armchair. “We already know the basics. You’ve been MIA from work. Your assistant called Mom in a panic because you’ve been canceling appointments left and right.”

“It’s definitely girl trouble,” Drew said. “Seen this before. It’s Darcy. What the hell happened?”

I flinched at her name. Couldn’t help it. Even through the haze of alcohol, hearing it hurt.

“There it is,” Callum said, returning from the kitchen with a glass of water and what looked like a sandwich. “Eat this.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I don’t care.” He shoved the plate into my hands. “Eat it anyway.”

I stared at the sandwich with leafy green lettuce and slices of tomato. Both reminded me of her and her stupid garden. My brothers weren’t going anywhere. I knew from experience they could outwait me. I took a bite. It tasted like cardboard, but I chewed and swallowed anyway.

“Now talk,” Drew said.

So I did. The words came out messy and disjointed, fueled by days of drinking and wallowing. I told them about the launch and the situation in the hotel room.

“She said she didn’t have time for this,” I finished, my voice rough. “For me. Like I was just another item on her to-do list that she couldn’t fit

in.”

Callum whistled low. “That’s rough.”

“Yeah.” I took another bite of the sandwich because it was easier than looking at them. “So I left. Told her to figure out who she was and call me when she did.”

“And she hasn’t called,” Micah said. It wasn’t a question.

“Nope.”

Drew was quiet for a moment, processing my info dump. “Do you want to be with her?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I do.”

“Then why are you sitting here getting wasted instead of fighting for her?”

“Because she doesn’t want me!” The words exploded out of me. “She made that pretty fucking clear. I’m a distraction. A complication. Something that gets in the way of her precious career.”

“Is that what she said?” Callum asked. “Those exact words?”

I thought back, trying to remember through the fog. “Yes. Basically.”

“That’s not the same as saying she doesn’t want you.”

“Close enough.”

“No, it’s not.” Drew leaned forward again. “It sounds like she was scared. Overwhelmed. She’d just had a huge professional moment, found out she missed an important meeting, and was probably spiraling. People say stupid shit when they’re panicking.”

“She called us fake,” I said flatly. “That wasn’t panic. That was her telling me exactly where I stood.”

Micah shook his head. “Or it was her trying to protect herself. Push you away before you could hurt her.”

I stared at him. “Since when are you a relationship expert?”

He smiled. “Grace tried to push me away a dozen times before she finally let me in. Some people, especially people who’ve spent their whole lives building walls, don’t know how to handle it when someone actually gets past them.”

The Darcy that drank beer while eating pizza had been real. I knew she had been. That version of her was something I knew few others got to see. She’d trusted me enough to let me see her all raw and natural.

“So what am I supposed to do?” I asked, hating how defeated I sounded. “Just show up at her door and hope she doesn’t slam it in my face?”

“Basically, yeah.” Callum shrugged. “Look, maybe she tells you to fuck off. Maybe she says she never wants to see you again. At least then you’d know where you stand. You could start actually healing instead of sitting here marinating in whiskey and self-pity.”

“Wow. Thanks for the sympathy.”

“You don’t need sympathy. You need a kick in the ass.” He grabbed the empty plate from my hands. “Right now, all you’re doing is churning up doubts and regrets. That’s not helping anyone, least of all you.”

Drew nodded in agreement. “Go talk to her. Tell her how you feel. If she rejects you, at least you tried. But if you don’t even try, you’ll spend the rest of your life wondering what might have happened.”

“You’re blowing up your whole life over what might have been a simple bad day,” Micah said. “You’re fucking up your career. I heard one of my actors talking about how his lawyer bailed on him. You. You’re the lawyer that bailed. People talk. Do you really want to destroy your career over this?”

I wanted to argue. They didn’t understand. But the truth was, they understood better than I probably did. They’d all been through their own version of this. They’d all found their way to the other side.

“I’ll think about it,” I said finally.

“Good.” Micah stood up, stretching. “Now drink some water, take a shower, and go to bed. You stink. I thought it was the house, but it’s you.”

“You’re a dick.”

“I’m honest. Seriously, you’ve got some funk.”

They stayed for another hour, making sure I drank enough water to offset some of the alcohol, forcing me to eat another sandwich. When they finally left, Callum paused at the door.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, “I think she’s into you. She just doesn’t know how to handle it yet.”

I didn’t respond. But after they were gone, I dragged my ass upstairs and got into the shower. My stomach was full, but the more I sobered up, the hungrier I got.

I woke up to my phone buzzing. The sound drilled into my skull, which was already pounding from the hangover I’d earned through days of dedicated drinking. I grabbed the phone, ready to tell whoever it was to eat shit and leave me alone.

Then I saw the name on the screen.

Jack Montana.

I squinted at the time. Seven thirty in the morning. Jack wouldn't be calling this early unless there was some kind of emergency. Knowing Jack, it could be anything from a contract dispute to an animal control complaint to a request for bail money. The man attracted chaos like a magnet. Great for my coffers because that man burned through a retainer pretty quick. He'd be writing me another check very soon.

I answered, my voice rough. "What?"

"Finally, man." Jack sounded stressed, which was unusual for him. "I need you in court this morning."

That woke me up. I sat up too fast. The room spun and my stomach rolled. "Court? What the hell, Jack? You don't have any hearings scheduled this morning."

"It's some kind of emergency injunction. Just got served with the papers like an hour ago."

I rubbed my eyes, trying to force my brain into lawyer mode despite the hangover. "An injunction for what?"

"Llama drama." Jack's voice dripped with frustration. "What do you think? Some neighbor is claiming Clover ate her rosebush. I don't know, man, the paperwork is confusing. I just need you there. This is why I pay you all that money. You're supposed to be here when I call."

I sighed heavily. Of course it was llama drama. With Jack, it was always llama drama. When you had ten fucking llamas in your backyard, there tended to be a lot of drama.

"Fine. I'll be at the courthouse in half an hour."

"Courtroom two," Jack said. "And hurry. That judge isn't messing around."

I hung up and dragged myself out of bed. I took a cold shower. It shocked some life back into my system. I threw on a suit without really looking at it, ran my fingers through my hair, and grabbed my keys.

I wasn't entirely sure I was legal to drive. Technically, it had been a good fourteen hours since my last drink, but I was still fucked up. Not by alcohol. By life. The pounding in my skull was next level. I kept one hand on the wheel while I dug through my glove compartment for aspirin. I found some, dry-swallowed three pills, and prayed they'd kick in before I had to form coherent legal arguments.

Parking was a nightmare, as usual. I spotted a security guard I knew near the entrance and rolled down my window.

“Hey, Cory. Do me a favor and park this thing for me?”

Cory raised an eyebrow. “Do I look like a valet?”

I climbed out of the car and pulled out my wallet. Thank God, I had a hundred dollar bill. I shoved it in his hand and gave him the keys. “Please. Thank you.”

“You’re lucky I like you, Blackwell.”

“I know. You’re a saint.”

I ran up the courthouse steps, dodging other lawyers and clerks and the usual morning crowd. Courtroom two. Jack had said courtroom two. I made my way through security, nodding at the guard who knew me well. The grimace on his face told me I didn’t look as put together as I hoped for.

I found Jack standing outside the doors, arms crossed, looking more amused than stressed now.

“Finally,” he said. “You better get in there, man. That judge isn’t messing around.”

I didn’t stop to question it. I pushed through the courtroom doors, an apology already forming on my lips for whatever judge I was about to face.

I stopped dead, confused. No opposing counsel at the tables. No bailiff, no clerk, no court reporter. Just rows of empty seats and the faint smell of wood polish.

Then I saw her.

Darcy sat on the bench where the judge should have been. She wore a simple white blouse, her hair down around her shoulders. She looked nervous. Uncertain. Nothing like the confident woman with her hair pulled up in a severe style.

I looked back over my shoulder to see Jack grinning through the small window before he disappeared from view. That son of a bitch had set me up.

I turned back to Darcy. She was watching me with those blue eyes I’d been trying so hard to forget. My pulse was too fast. The hangover, the exhaustion, and the days of misery all faded into background noise. Part of me wondered if I was caught up in a fever dream.

“Hi,” she said softly.

Nope. Not a dream.

I stood there, frozen, unable to move or speak or do anything except stare at the woman who had turned my entire world upside down.

She took a shaky breath. “I think we need to talk.”

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I looked down at Beau from the judge's bench, my heart swelling with a joy I hadn't expected to feel so intensely. I'd missed him. God, I'd missed him so much. I hadn't realized the true depth of it until this exact moment. Seeing him standing there in a rumpled suit with shadows under his eyes and confusion written all over his handsome face was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

He came. My ridiculous plan with Jack Montana had actually worked. I'd been up since four in the morning putting this together. The idea came to me in the middle of the night. I remembered a story Grace told me about helping her and Micah get back together.

She was right. He was a closet romantic. Jack had listened to the whole silly plan without interrupting, then said "I'm in" before I'd even finished asking. I'd spent the rest of the pre-dawn hours on his couch rehearsing what I was going to say while Chantilly brought me tea and told me I was brave. I wasn't sure I agreed with her assessment, but I'd appreciated the sentiment.

Turned out, Jack wasn't a terrible guy. And his llamas were kind of cute. Except the one that spit. Carl or Cupcake or something. That one was *not* cute.

I picked up the gavel I'd borrowed and banged it against the wooden block. It was a lot heavier than I expected. The sound echoed through the empty courtroom.

“Court is now in session,” I announced, trying to keep my voice calm and steady despite the nervous energy thrumming through my veins.

Beau’s confusion slowly transformed into a smile. That smile that had gotten me into this mess in the first place. The one that made my brain short-circuit and my common sense evaporate.

“You’re going to get in serious trouble if the real judge sees you sitting up there,” he said, but there was laughter in his tone.

“I got the judge’s permission,” I said. “Judge Thompson has a son that wants to get engaged and needed the perfect ring. Long story short, I have the perfect ring, and therefore, I get the gavel.”

He shook his head slowly, that smile growing wider. “What’s going on, Darcy?”

I gripped the gavel. “Today, I’m on trial.”

“You’re on trial?”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath. “My crime? Being a complete and total dick to you.”

He let out a surprised laugh. I pointed the gavel at him with mock severity.

“This is serious business, counselor. No laughing in my courtroom.”

He pressed his lips together, clearly fighting another smile. “My apologies, Your Honor. Please continue.”

I set the gavel down and folded my hands in front of me, suddenly finding it harder to maintain the playful facade. The words I needed to say were too important for games. I needed him to know none of this was a joke. It was the most serious moment of my life.

“I want to apologize,” I said, my voice dropping the playfulness. “I pushed you away. Pretended what we had was just a business arrangement when I knew damn well it had become so much more. I was scared, Beau. Terrified, actually. Terrified of how much I cared about you. I didn’t know what that meant for my life and all the plans I had.”

He stood very still, watching me with those dark eyes that saw too much. I hated how well he could read me. I’d spent years perfecting the art of being unreadable. Controlled expression, measured tone, no tells. Beau had dismantled all of it like it was nothing. He didn’t give a shit about the walls I’d put up. He acted like they’d been made of paper the whole time.

That was the thing about him. He didn’t push. He just showed up in his annoying sunshine way, until one day I looked up and realized I’d let him

all the way in without noticing. And the week apart had given me perspective. Having him in my life was a hundred times more important than having that stupid CEO title.

"I'm sorry for worrying more about what those dicks on the board thought of me than about your feelings," I continued. "You were standing there trying to support me and calm me down, and I treated you like an inconvenience. I acted like you were the problem when the problem was always me and my inability to let anyone get close."

"Darcy—"

"I'm not finished." I held up a hand. "I need to say this. All of it. I've been practicing this speech, and if I don't get it out now, I might lose my nerve. Or say something stupid, which is what got me in this mess that turned into something amazing."

He nodded, waiting.

"You asked me to figure out who I am. And I've been trying. It's harder than I thought it would be, separating who I actually am from who I've been pretending to be for so long." I swallowed hard. "But I know one thing for certain. The version of me that existed when I was with you? The one who laughed in the ocean and ate greasy burgers on the beach? That's the real me. You saw her when no one else did. You made me feel like she was worth seeing."

Beau took a step closer to the bench, his expression softening. "It started as a business relationship," he said quietly. "I won't pretend it didn't. But it stopped being that the moment I kissed you at that first event. Maybe even before that. The moment you walked into that conference room and looked at me like I was something stuck to the bottom of your shoe."

I let out a watery laugh. "I did not."

"You absolutely did. And I thought, 'I'm going to make that woman smile if it kills me.'" He shook his head. "I don't know exactly when things changed for you, but I know they did. I saw it. Felt it. And yeah, the timing sucks. It's not convenient. You've got your career and your goals and a million things that are more important than some lawyer who can't stop thinking about you."

"You were never a burden," I said quickly, the words tumbling out. "Never. All you ever did was support me. Show up for me. See me in ways no one else bothered to. I was the one who couldn't handle it."

We stared at each other. The courtroom looked a lot bigger from my perch.

I picked up the gavel again, needing something to do with my hands. “This court finds Darcy Corwin guilty of all charges. She’s guilty of being a damn idiot. She’s definitely guilty for taking way too long to get her head out of her ass.”

Beau’s lips twitched. “That’s a lot of charges.”

“I’m a repeat offender.” I set the gavel down with a decisive thunk. “The question now is: what’s my sentence?”

He raised an eyebrow. “It’s up to me to decide?”

I nodded, trying not to let the panic take over. This was it. The moment when he either forgave me or walked away for good. I’d given him every reason to choose the latter. I wouldn’t blame him if he did.

But God, I hoped he wouldn’t.

Beau was quiet for way too long. I watched him thinking, that brilliant legal mind working through the options. Then that smile spread across his face again. My panic lessened.

“You don’t understand how court works at all,” he said.

“I’m not a lawyer. Sue me.”

“Maybe I will.” He moved closer, stopping just below the bench where I sat. “But first, I’m issuing your sentence. One night out with me. Dinner. Maybe a walk on the beach afterward. And then we see where the evening takes us.”

Relief flooded through me so intensely I felt dizzy with it. I grabbed the gavel and banged it one more time.

“Sold!”

Beau laughed, the sound bouncing off the courtroom walls. “This isn’t an auction, Darcy.”

“I don’t care.” I was already scrambling down from the bench, not bothering with dignity or grace. “I accept my sentence. Enthusiastically. With no possibility of appeal.”

I reached him just as he opened his arms, and then I was pressed against his chest. His arms wrapped around me so tight I could barely breathe. I didn’t care. I buried my face in his neck and inhaled the scent of him. That cologne I’d actually searched for online just so I could have a piece of him.

“I missed you,” I mumbled against his skin. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too.” His voice was rough. “These past few days have been hell.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.” He pulled back just enough to look at me, one hand coming up to cup my face. “We both said things. We both made mistakes. But we’re here now. That’s what matters.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. He kissed me and I melted into it, my arms wrapping around him and pulling him closer.

I’d forgotten what this felt like. Or maybe I’d never known it with anyone else. I felt actual relief being held by the one person who’d seen the worst of me and showed up anyway. His hand was in my hair. His heart pounded against mine. I pressed closer, not caring that we were standing in the middle of a courtroom, not caring about anything except the fact that I hadn’t ruined this.

“Don’t let me do that again,” I said against his mouth.

“Do what?”

“Run.”

He pulled back just far enough to look at me. “Not a chance. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I abandoned you at the hotel.”

I smirked. “Yeah, not cool.”

“I know. Dick move. Won’t happen again.”

“I commute your sentence.”

“Sure about that?” He kissed the tip of my nose and then slid to my ear. “I’d be willing to get on my knees and ask forgiveness.”

I shuddered. “Your place?”

“Fuck yeah,” he confirmed.

We left the courthouse hand in hand, not caring who saw us. Jack Montana was waiting in the lobby, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“Told you it would work,” he said to me with a grin.

“Thank you,” I said. “I owe you one.”

“You owe me nothing. Seeing Beau’s face when he walked in was payment enough.” He clapped Beau on the shoulder. “Take care of her, man. She went through a lot of trouble to set this up.”

Beau looked at me with something like wonder. “How did you even pull this off?”

“I have my ways.” I tugged on his hand. “Come on. I believe you owe me dinner.”

“It’s not even nine.”

“Then breakfast. I’m flexible.”

He laughed again, and the sound was everything. We walked out into the morning sunshine together, leaving the courthouse and all its legal formality behind. I followed behind him in my car, silently encouraging him to speed up. I needed to be naked with him.

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The sight of her in the rearview mirror, her bumper practically connected to mine, almost made me laugh. She wasn't letting me out of her sight. We pulled into my driveway in a squeal of tires that would have earned me a ticket on any other day. I killed the engine and was out before she'd even parked, meeting her at the front door with hands that shook just a little as I fumbled the key.

The second the door shut behind us, she was in my arms. I lifted her without thinking, her legs wrapping around my waist like they belonged there. Our mouths crashed together, desperate and sweet all at once. I'd been afraid I'd lost her forever.

"I missed you," I murmured against her lips, carrying her toward the stairs. "God, Darcy, these last few days have been hell."

She silenced me with another kiss, fingers threading into my hair. "I know. Me too."

We barely made it to the bedroom. I set her down on the edge of the bed and stepped back just long enough to look at her. She was already reaching for my shirt, popping the buttons with impatient fingers.

"Slow," I said, catching her hands. "I want to cherish this."

Her eyes softened. "Okay."

I took my time undressing her, peeling away the blouse and pants like unwrapping the most delicate gift. Every inch of skin I revealed felt like an offering. When she was down to nothing but the lace of her bra and panties,

I shed my own clothes, letting them fall where they landed. Her gaze tracked over me, hungry and warm.

I eased her back onto the mattress and followed, settling between her thighs. The kiss this time was slower. I savored her, pouring everything I hadn't been able to say into it. I hoped she understood how terrified I'd been she'd never come back.

She pulled me closer, her hands sliding down my bare back. I kissed my way down her throat, her collarbone, taking my time with the soft swell of her breasts. Her hands roamed my back, nails gently scratching across my skin.

I needed her right then. I knew there'd be time for more later, but in that moment, I had to be inside her.

"Hold on," I whispered. I pulled away but stopped when she grabbed my arms.

I looked down at her. "What's wrong?"

"I love you."

I blinked. The declaration took me by surprise. Love? She loved me?

Holy shit.

"Darcy."

"I just wanted you to know that. I hope one day you will feel the same."

"Baby, not one day. This day. I love you. I'm crazy about you."

She smiled, tears glistening in her eyes. "You love me?"

I moved back over her. "I do. Like I said, I knew from that first kiss. I'm not big on love at first sight, but apparently it's real because it happened to me."

I kissed her, showing her how true it was.

And then she pulled away again. "Wait."

I groaned. "Woman, you're killing me here."

"Are we together?" she asked.

"Yes. Absolutely. Do you want me?"

"I do. Only you. I want you and no one else."

"Cool. Me too. Can I please get a condom?"

"I'm on the pill. And I haven't been with anyone in a while."

I understood what she was saying but was almost too afraid to believe it. "Me too. I mean, it's been a while and I've always used protection."

She licked her lips. "Can we—"

I slid my hand between us. As if she had to ask.

“We can. You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

I guided myself to her and slipped the tip of my cock inside. We both gasped at the contact. I slid into her. It was like coming home. She gasped, legs tightening around me. I paused, forehead pressed to hers, breathing her in and doing my best to slow things down.

“I love you,” I said. “I love you, Darcy.”

Her eyes filled, but she was smiling. “I love you too. So much it scares me.”

I started to move. Every thrust a promise. Her hips rose to match my rhythm, hands clutching my shoulders. The pleasure built gradually. A combination of emotions washed through me. Most importantly the knowledge that we’d chosen each other through the mess.

Her release came first, a soft cry against my neck as she clenched around me. I followed seconds later, burying my face in her hair and letting the words fall again. “I love you. I’m not going anywhere.”

We lay tangled together in the aftermath, sweat cooling on our skin, hearts still racing. I ran my lips across her bare shoulder while she curled into my side, her head resting on my chest. I could feel her breath against my skin. I thought I might never move again.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured against my chest. “For everything I said. I knew it wasn’t true.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I know. I’m sorry too. I hate that I walked out on you. Definitely one of the biggest regrets I have.”

“You had every right to leave. I was awful.”

“You were scared. There’s a difference.”

She lifted her head to look at me, those blue eyes still a little glassy from everything we’d just shared.

“I can’t promise I won’t make mistakes again. I’m going to screw up. Probably a lot. I’ve never done this before. The real relationship thing. I don’t have a playbook.”

I slid my fingers over her arm. “Neither do I. Not for something like this. But I can promise I’ll try. Every day. Even when it’s hard. Even when we’re both being stubborn idiots.”

“Especially then,” she said with a small smile.

“Especially then.”

We lay there listening to the sound of the ocean through the open window.

“So,” I said eventually, my hand still stroking her shoulder. “What happened with the CEO job? Your dad called me, but he didn’t give me details.”

Darcy let out a long breath. “I went back to the office,” she said. “My father was waiting for me. They were ready to make it official. Announce their support for my appointment.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Would have been. Except I wasn’t there.” She laughed, but it was bitter. “I was in a hotel room with you while they were trying to celebrate my success. A few of them started having doubts. Questioning my judgment. My commitment.”

I winced. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” She traced a pattern on my chest, her fingers light. “My father wanted me to fix it. Do another event, make a public statement, jump through more hoops. And I just snapped.”

“Snapped how?”

“I told him to fuck their doubts.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. The image of Darcy telling her father and the board to fuck off was too perfect.

“It’s not funny,” she said, but I could hear the smile in her voice.

“It’s a little funny. What did he say?”

“He was shocked. I’ve never talked like that to him.” She propped herself up on her elbow to look at me. “I told him I was tired of not being good enough. And I was done jumping through hoops. And then, get this, I told him I wasn’t sure the company was good enough for me.”

I stared at her, genuinely impressed. “Damn, Darcy.”

“I know. It was a lot.” She bit her lip. “I walked out. I haven’t been back since.”

“Shit.”

She’d been in a worse way than I had been.

She lay back down, her head finding its place on my chest again. “My father apologized.”

That surprised me. Lou Corwin didn’t strike me as the apologizing type. “He did?”

“He admitted the board had been unfair to me.”

“That’s actually kind of huge.”

“It is.” Her voice was quiet. “He also said the job is still mine if I want it. He’s got enough influence to make it happen, doubts or no doubts.”

“You’re going to take it, right?” I asked. “It’s what you’ve been working toward your whole life.”

She was quiet for a long moment. I waited, not wanting to push, even though my curiosity was eating me alive.

“I’m thinking of taking a few weeks off first,” she said finally. “I want to really think about it. I need to make sure I’m choosing it for the right reasons and not just because it’s what I’ve always assumed I wanted.”

“That sounds smart.”

“Plus, I think it’s time for the board to start kissing my ass instead of the other way around. Let them sweat a little. I want them to wonder if I’m going to walk away and take all my brilliant ideas to a competitor.”

I grinned at the ceiling. “There she is. The woman who told her father to fuck their doubts.”

“She’s been hiding for a while. Turns out she has opinions.”

“I like her opinions.”

Darcy tilted her head up to look at me. “You’re really okay with this? Me taking time off? Not knowing what I’m going to decide?”

I shifted so I could meet her eyes properly. “I’m proud of you. Seriously. People have been deciding what your worth was and who you should be or shouldn’t be. You’re finally putting yourself first. That takes guts.”

“It doesn’t feel brave. It feels terrifying.”

“Same thing sometimes.” I brushed my thumb across her cheekbone. “I’ll support whatever you decide. If you want to take the CEO job, I’ll be there cheering you on. If you want to start your own company, I’ll help you find office space. If you want to become a full-time gardener and sell tomatoes at the farmers market, I’ll build you more raised beds.”

She laughed. “Million-dollar tomatoes.”

“You have options.” I pulled her closer, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “The point is I don’t care what you choose. I care that you’re making the choice you want. Not the choice everyone expects. Not the choice that looks good on paper. Only the one that makes you happy.”

She sighed. “No one’s ever said that to me before.”

“Then everyone else has been doing it wrong.”

“Thank you,” she whispered against my lips.

“For what?”

“For seeing the real me and introducing me to her.”

“That’s kind of my thing now. Seeing you. Supporting you.”

We lay there for a while longer, wrapped up in each other, letting the morning slip away. At some point, my stomach growled loud enough to break the spell.

“Breakfast?” I asked.

“God, yes. I’m starving.”

“I think I have eggs. Maybe bacon.”

“Let’s just order in. I don’t want to move.”

Neither of us moved to grab a phone. The bed was too comfortable. She was too soft against me. I could wait a little longer to eat.

I pulled her closer, breathing in the scent of her hair, feeling her heartbeat against my ribs. I realized how lucky I was. I found someone that loved me as much as I loved her. Darcy was someone willing to do things that weren’t easy. She’d go toe-to-toe with whoever challenged her.

“Beau?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you didn’t give up on me.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Never. You’re stuck with me now, Corwin. For better or worse.”

“That sounds suspiciously like wedding vows.”

“Does it?” I grinned. “Interesting.”

She stared at me like she was trying to see if I was joking. I wasn’t. Not really. I could see her fighting the smile. Fighting and losing.

“You’re insane,” she said.

“Probably. But you love me anyway.”

“Apparently I do.” She shook her head, but she was smiling. “God help me, I really do. I’m hungry.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll feed you under one condition.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“Naked. You have to stay naked.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Depending on what you order. Bacon grease on my bits would be bad.”

I couldn’t stop the laugh that erupted from my chest. I got up and pulled a clean t-shirt from my drawer. “Fine, wear this. Only this.”

“Deal.”

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The sand was warm beneath my back, heated by the afternoon sun that had been beating down on us for hours. It was late October and yet it was still a very pleasant day. Not hot, but one of those perfect Southern California days that made the traffic, smog, and occasional earthquake worth it.

I lay on the oversized beach towel with my eyes closed, listening to the rhythm of the waves and feeling utterly, completely at peace. My sunglasses shielded my eyes and the sunblock protected my porcelain skin.

Three days. Three days of nothing but this. Sun and sand and the man beside me, whose fingers were currently tracing lazy patterns on my bare stomach.

“You’re going to burn,” Beau said.

“I put on sunscreen.”

“That was two hours ago.”

“Then put more on me.”

I heard him chuckle. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

A moment later, cool lotion was being smoothed across my body. His hands were thorough. Methodical. Taking their time in a way that felt more like we were in the privacy of his bedroom instead of the beach.

“You’re getting good at that,” I murmured.

“Practice makes perfect.”

I smiled without opening my eyes. I was starting to understand what Beau had been trying to tell me about the benefits of beach days. There was something healing about the ocean. The endless horizon. The salt air that filled your lungs and cleared your head.

My phone sat in my bag, untouched since morning. My father had called once yesterday, not to pressure me about the CEO decision, but just to check in. He wanted to see how I was doing. It was strange, this new dynamic between us. Like we were both learning how to be father and daughter without the company as the defining factor.

I liked it.

“What are you thinking about?” Beau asked, his hands still moving across my skin.

“Nothing, actually. That’s the weird part.”

“The hamster finally took a break?”

I laughed. “I think the hamster retired. Moved to Florida. Took up shuffleboard.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “Good. He deserved a vacation too.”

I rolled onto my side to face him. He looked different out here. Younger. His hair was messy from the salt water, his skin golden from days in the sun. He looked happy.

I hoped I looked the same.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“For taking time off with me. I know you have clients. Work. Things that actually matter.”

“Nothing matters more than this. Than you.”

My heart skipped a beat. I still wasn’t used to it. Being someone’s priority. Having a person who chose me over everything else without hesitation or resentment.

“I love you,” I said because I could. Because the words came easier now.

“I love you too.”

He caught my hand, bringing it to his lips. The kiss he pressed to my palm sent warmth spreading through my entire body.

We stretched out beside one another once again. The silence between us was comfortable now. It didn’t need to be filled with conversation or

activity. We could just exist together.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, voices were drifting toward us. Familiar voices, accompanied by the high-pitched squeals of children.

I opened my eyes to find Beau already sitting up, shading his eyes against the sun.

“Incoming,” he said with a grin.

I pushed myself up just in time to see a small army descending upon us. Cleo led the charge, her designer beach coverup billowing behind her like a cape. Behind her came Callum and Victoria, each carrying bags and towels and all the paraphernalia that seemed to accompany children everywhere. Drew and Kensey brought up the rear, with Katie perched on Drew’s shoulders and Grant racing ahead on unsteady toddler legs.

“Surprise!” Cleo announced, dropping an enormous beach bag onto the sand beside our towel. “We brought reinforcements.”

“And snacks,” Kensey added, pointing at a cooler.

Victoria spread out a blanket beside ours. “We brought food. Sandwiches. Fruit. Those little cheese things the kids like.”

Grant launched himself at Beau. Beau caught him easily, swinging him up into the air while Grant shrieked with delight.

“Uncle Beau! We’re at the beach!”

“I can see that, buddy. You ready to build a sandcastle?”

“The biggest one ever!”

Katie was demanding to be put down, her chubby arms reaching toward me. Drew lowered her to the sand, and she immediately toddled over, her gait unsteady but determined. I caught her before she could face-plant into the towel, lifting her onto my lap. She smelled like coconut.

“Hi, sweetheart,” I said. “Did you come to play in the sand?”

She nodded vigorously.

“Should we build a castle better than Grant?”

She flashed a big smile. “Juice, please?”

Kensey pulled a juice box from the cooler and popped the straw in. Katie took it and took a drink.

“You’re a natural with them,” Cleo said, stretching out on her own towel. “I don’t know why you ever thought you weren’t good with people.”

“Because I wasn’t.” I bounced Katie gently on my knee, earning another giggle. “I’m still not, really. Not with most people.”

I looked around at the group that had assembled on the beach. Beau was already knee-deep in sand with Grant, the beginnings of a castle taking shape. Drew was setting up an umbrella while Callum unpacked the cooler. Victoria and Kensey were arranging towels and toys that would keep the kids busy.

These people had accepted me. Not because of my last name or my position or what I could do for them. They'd accepted me because Beau loved me, and that was enough for them.

Katie grabbed my sunglasses off my head and immediately tried to put them on her own face. They were comically oversized, sliding down her nose and making her look like a tiny movie star.

"Picture!" Cleo demanded, already holding up her phone. "This is too adorable."

I posed with Katie, both of us hamming it up for the camera. The old Darcy would have worried about how she looked, whether her smile was right and what people would think if the photo ended up online. This Darcy just enjoyed the moment.

The afternoon unfolded in a blur of sand and laughter and the kind of chaos that only happened when small children were involved. I helped Grant decorate his sandcastle with shells we'd collected. I let Katie bury my feet in sand while she shrieked with delight at her own mischief. I ate sandwiches and drank cold lemonade and listened to the Blackwell siblings bicker and joke and talk over each other in that way families do.

At some point, I found myself sitting at the water's edge with both kids, letting the gentle waves lap at our toes. Katie was fascinated by the foam, reaching for it each time it retreated. Grant was explaining to me, with great seriousness, that the ocean stretched around the world.

I felt Beau before I saw him, his presence warm at my back as he settled onto the sand beside me. His arm came around my waist, pulling me close.

"Having fun?" he asked.

"More than I expected to."

He pressed a kiss to my temple. "You're amazing with them. You know that?"

I watched Katie go after a retreating wave. Grant dug a trench in the wet sand.

"They make it easy," I said. "Kids don't care about all the stuff adults care about. They just want you to be present and pay attention to them."

They want to be taken seriously even if they are very unserious humans.”

“That’s harder than it sounds for some people.”

“I know.” I leaned into him, letting his warmth seep into my sun-warmed skin. “I used to be one of those people.”

“And now?”

I thought about the question. “Not going to lie, but I might have faked it in the beginning.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Maybe.”

This was the life I wanted. Not the corner office and the board meetings and the endless performances.

“Every day, I’m learning something new about myself,” I said. “I didn’t think I liked kids. Honest to God, they scared me. Now, I see how much fun they are. Just wild and carefree.”

Katie came running back. She threw herself into my lap, small arms wrapping around my neck.

“Darcy, look!” She held up a shell, presenting it to me like the most precious treasure in the world.

“It’s beautiful, sweetheart. Should we add it to the castle?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

“Duty calls,” I said to Beau, dropping a quick kiss on his cheek.

I let her lead me back to where Grant was still working on his architectural masterpiece.

I glanced back at Beau. He was watching me with an expression that made my breath catch. Wonder. Love. Something deeper that I understood because I felt the same way.

Later, when the kids were worn out and the sun was starting to go down, we all gathered on the blankets for the last of the snacks. Katie had fallen asleep in my arms, her small body heavy and trusting against my chest. Grant was curled up between Callum and Victoria, fighting sleep with the determination of a kid who didn’t want to miss anything.

“She’s out,” Kensey observed, nodding at Katie. “That’s impressive. She usually won’t nap for anyone.”

“Darcy’s magic,” Drew said. “Clearly.”

I stroked Katie’s hair, marveling at how silky it was. How small she was. How completely she’d trusted me to hold her while she slept.

The conversation flowed around me. Stories and jokes and that way a conversation ebbed and flowed. I didn't feel like an outsider anymore. I felt like I belonged.

Beau's hand found mine, our fingers intertwining.

"You okay?" he asked quietly, under the cover of Cleo's animated retelling of some fashion week disaster.

"Better than okay."

He squeezed my hand. "I've been watching you today."

"Creepy."

He laughed softly. "I mean it. Watching you with Grant and Katie. The way you light up around them."

I looked down at the sleeping child in my arms. "They're pretty great."

"They are." He paused, and something in his voice made me look up. "I can't wait until we have our own."

The words hung in the air between us. My heart stuttered, then began to race.

"Our own?"

"Kids." He said it simply, like it was the most natural thing in the world. "A family. With you."

I should have panicked. The old Darcy would have panicked. I would have been calculating nanny costs and got our names on the best private school waiting lists. But I wasn't the old Darcy anymore. I looked at Beau and the family gathered around us. I felt like I already had a large family. Any children Beau and I had would be well loved. They'd have cousins to grow up with. No holiday would ever be lonely.

"I'd like that," I said, surprised to find that I meant it. "A family with you."

His smile was brighter than the setting sun. He leaned in and kissed me with the promise of forever in it.

The Corwin Gems headquarters had never looked better. Whoever had been in charge of decorating for today's announcement had outdone themselves. Fresh flowers were everywhere. A table covered with a white cloth had several bottles of champagne sitting in ice buckets. Glasses lined up in neat rows. Another table had an assortment of appetizers.

Two young women wearing black slacks and white shirts were filling glasses with champagne anytime one was picked up. The Corwin crowd was taking full advantage of the free champagne. They'd all be drunk by noon at the rate they were going.

I stood near the back of the crowd, trying not to draw too much attention to myself. This was Darcy's day. Her moment. I was just here to watch her shine.

And damn, was she shining.

She stood near the front, talking to board members and executives, looking every inch the leader she was about to officially become. Her hair was in a half-up half-down style. Gone was the severe braid that had been her armor for so long. This Darcy didn't need armor. She'd figured out that her real strength came from being herself.

She had on a navy blue dress with a sparkly belt around the waist. Diamonds in her ears and a diamond bracelet on her wrist. She'd found that balance she'd been searching for, the one between who she was and who everyone expected her to be.

I caught her eye across the room. She smiled at me like I was the only person in the room. I winked at her. She rolled her eyes but the smile stayed.

My family had shown up in force. They all insisted on supporting her. Callum and Victoria were somewhere to my left. Micah and Grace had flown in specifically for this, which had made Darcy tear up when she'd found out. Cleo was near the front, phone already out, ready to document everything for posterity.

Even Mom and Dad were here. Mom had insisted. She'd told me over the phone that Darcy was family now, and family showed up for the important moments. I hadn't argued. There was no point arguing with Tiana Blackwell when she'd made up her mind about something. They weren't staying because Mom didn't want to steal the spotlight, but she was not going to miss this big moment in Darcy's life. I loved my family more for it. I loved that they had basically adopted her. She was a Blackwell in every way except by name.

Lou Corwin stepped up to the small podium that had been set up on the stage. The crowd quieted, champagne glasses lowering, conversations trailing off. He looked distinguished in his dark suit. There was something different about him today. A lightness I hadn't seen before. He was ready to sail off into the sunset in the very literal sense.

He'd changed too, these past few weeks. The relationship between him and Darcy had shifted into something healthier. More honest. He'd stopped treating her like a subordinate who needed to prove herself and started treating her like a daughter he was proud of. He'd always been proud, but they'd worked together long enough. It was time for him to simply be her father. Not her boss.

"Thank you all for being here today," Lou began, his voice carrying easily through the space. "This is a momentous occasion for Corwin Gems. A passing of the torch, if you will, from one generation to the next."

He paused, letting the words settle.

"I've spent my entire career building this company. It's been my life's work, my passion, my legacy. But every legacy needs someone to carry it forward. Someone with vision and dedication and the kind of fire that can't be taught."

He turned slightly, gesturing toward the side of the stage. An assistant wheeled out an easel with a large photograph mounted on it. I leaned

forward, curious.

The photo showed a little girl, maybe five or six years old, sitting behind an enormous desk. Her feet didn't reach the floor. Her platinum hair was in pigtails. She was pretending to talk on a phone that was bigger than her head, a serious expression on her tiny face.

The crowd let out a collective *ahh* sound.

"This is Darcy," Lou said, his voice softening. "At my desk pretending to run the company before she could even spell the word 'diamond.' She's been preparing for this moment her entire life. There was never any doubt she'd take over the company one day."

I watched Darcy's face. She was staring at the photo with a smile but I could see she was fighting back tears.

"My daughter has worked harder than anyone I know to earn this position," Lou continued. "She's put in the hours and the sacrifices along with the late nights and early mornings. She's proven herself a hundred times over, not because I asked her to but because that's who she is. She doesn't know how to do anything halfway."

He turned to face her directly.

"Darcy, I haven't always shown it the way I should have, but I want you to know how proud I am of you. Not just for what you've accomplished professionally, but for the woman you've become. Your mother would be so proud."

Darcy's hand came up to press against her chest.

"This company is in the best possible hands," Lou said, turning back to the crowd. "I know Darcy will lead us into a prosperous future. She has the vision, the talent, and the heart to take Corwin Gems to heights we've never imagined." He raised his champagne glass. "Please join me in congratulating our new CEO, Darcy Corwin."

The room erupted in applause. I clapped so hard my palms stung. Darcy made her way to the stage and hugged her father. He held on for a long moment, saying something in her ear that made her nod and wipe quickly at her eyes.

Then she stepped up to the microphone. "Thank you," she said, her voice steady despite the emotion I could see in her face. "Thank you all for being here. And thank you, Dad, for that embarrassing photo. I'm sure it'll be all over social media within the hour."

Laughter rippled through the crowd. Cleo was indeed already tapping away at her phone.

“I’m not going to give a long speech,” Darcy continued. “You all know me well enough to know I prefer action over words. But I do want to say this.” Her eyes met mine for a half-second. “Find someone that will make you feel seen and heard. Someone who can see the parts of you that you hide from the world. That’s who gets a Corwin Gems ring.”

My throat tightened. More applause. Board members nodded like they had written her speech. My family beamed like Darcy was already one of their own.

Because she was.

The formal part of the event gave way to mingling and congratulations. I hung back, letting Darcy have her moment. She deserved to be surrounded by colleagues and well-wishers. I wanted her to soak in everything she’d worked so hard to achieve.

I watched her move through the crowd, accepting handshakes and hugs, her smile genuine and warm. The ice queen was nowhere to be seen. In her place was a woman who had finally figured out that strength and softness weren’t mutually exclusive. My family took the opportunity to personally congratulate her before they quietly left.

She finally made her way to me.

“Hey, boss,” I said.

She laughed. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not? It’s accurate.” I pulled her into my arms, not caring who was watching. “I’m so proud of you.”

She melted into me, her face pressed against my chest. “Thank you for being here.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it.”

I cupped her face in my hands. “You did it, Darcy. You actually did it. CEO of Corwin Gems. Your name on the door. The whole empire at your feet.”

“It doesn’t feel real yet.”

“Give it time. It’ll sink in when you’re drowning in paperwork and boring meetings.”

She groaned. “Thanks for the reminder.”

I leaned in closer, lowering my voice. “You know, I’ve discovered something about myself recently.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Turns out I have a thing for boss babes.”

She burst out laughing, drawing a few curious looks from nearby. “Boss babes?”

“Women in power. Authority figures. CEOs of major jewelry companies.” I wagged my eyebrows. “It’s a real thing.”

She rose up on her toes and kissed me, quick but sweet. “Thank you. For everything. For believing in me when I didn’t believe in myself.”

“Always.”

I glanced toward the hallway that led to the executive offices. “So, speaking of your new position of power... how soon can we christen that corner office of yours?”

She swatted my chest, but she was still laughing. “Beau!”

“What? It’s a legitimate question. You’re the CEO now. You can do whatever you want.”

“My father’s stuff is still in there. He hasn’t even moved out yet.”

“So we wait until tomorrow?”

She shook her head, but I could see the flush creeping up her neck. “You’re impossible.”

“Impossibly charming. Impossibly handsome. Impossibly in love with you.” I pulled her close again. “Take your pick.”

Before she could respond, Lou appeared at our side.

“There you two are,” he said. “I was hoping to steal you both for a drink. If you can spare a moment from all the celebrating.”

Darcy looked at me. I nodded.

“Of course, Dad.”

We followed him to a quiet corner of the atrium where a small seating area had been set up. Lou had already commandeered a bottle of champagne and three glasses. He poured for all of us and raised his glass.

“To Darcy,” he said. “May your tenure be long and prosperous.”

“To Darcy,” I echoed.

We clinked glasses and drank. The champagne was excellent. Lou Corwin didn’t do anything halfway either. Now I knew where Darcy got it from.

“I want to thank you, Beau,” Lou said, settling into his chair. “For everything you’ve done for my daughter.”

“I didn’t do anything. She did all the work.”

“That’s not true and we both know it.” He fixed me with those sharp eyes, so similar to Darcy’s. “You helped her recognize her value. That’s no small thing. I thought I was doing that all these years, but I think I missed the mark a bit.”

I shifted uncomfortably. Compliments from Lou Corwin still felt strange. “I just showed up. She figured out the rest on her own.”

“Showing up is half the battle.” Lou took another sip of champagne. “I didn’t always do that. Show up for her the way I should have. I let the company come first too many times.”

“Dad,” Darcy said softly. “I am who I am and where I am because of you. You were mom, dad, and boss. That’s a lot of hats to wear. It’s a testament to your love for me that I am who I am.”

“Thank you for saying it,” he said. “It means a lot.”

“I can’t wait until I find you stretched out on a beach in the middle of an afternoon,” Darcy teased. “Trust me, it is amazing.”

He chuckled. “I’ll admit I’m looking forward to that.”

We sipped our champagne, nodding at the staff returning to their work.

Lou turned toward me, all serious again. “Now, Beau. Let’s talk about your client.”

“My client?”

“That man and his llamas.” Lou shook his head.

“Jack. He is my client. A good client.”

“I know. I guess he’s not so bad. But I need you to promise me something.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

Lou chuckled. “As long as he doesn’t get any more fucking llamas, we can remain friends.”

I laughed. “I cannot make that promise, but I will discourage him from getting any more. Chantilly tends to be fickle. It’s only a matter of time before she finds something else that catches her eyes.”

“It better not be lions or snakes,” Darcy said.

“I’ll make sure they are aware of the county and city codes about all exotic animals,” I assured her.

Lou raised his glass. “Here’s to no more llamas.”

We clinked glasses again. Darcy beamed, clearly happy to have finally gotten the best of both professional and private worlds.

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EPILOGUE

DARCY

One Year later

A year ago, I'd walked into a masquerade ball as the ice queen, desperate to prove myself worthy of a position I'd been fighting for my entire life. Tonight, I walked in as the CEO of Corwin Gems, hosting the event I'd designed from the ground up. The difference was staggering.

Last year, I was a fiery phoenix. That was a representation of a woman trying to prove she wasn't cold. This year, I was showcasing my transformation. I felt every inch of the mask I wore.

My gown was a deep amethyst purple. Gauzy layers made up the skirt. The bodice was fitted with a corset style, covered with delicate beading that caught the candlelight. The skirt billowed out and made me feel like I was floating. It was soft. Feminine.

But the mask was the real statement.

It was shaped like a butterfly with delicate wings sweeping up around my eyes in shades of violet, silver, and midnight blue. Tiny crystals caught the light along the edges. It concealed enough of my face to preserve the mystery without hiding me completely.

A butterfly. Because that was what this year had been. A transformation I never saw coming. I'd been wrapped up in a cocoon of my own making

until I met Beau. Now, I was soaring.

I moved through the crowd, accepting compliments and congratulations, playing the gracious hostess while my eyes kept scanning the room. I knew he was here somewhere. We'd driven separately on purpose, part of the game we'd been playing all week.

"Looking for someone?"

The voice came from behind me. I turned to find a man in a fox mask watching me with familiar dark eyes. The mask was burgundy and gold. It perfectly suited the face I knew was underneath.

But we were playing a game. I didn't know the clever fox.

"Should I be?" I asked, tilting my head. "I don't believe we've met."

He stepped closer. I caught the scent of his spicy cologne. The same one I'd fallen asleep breathing in just last night. My pulse quickened despite trying to play it cool.

"We haven't," he said, playing along. "But I've been watching you all evening. You're the most beautiful woman in this room."

"That's quite a claim. There are a lot of beautiful women here."

"None like you." His eyes traced over my mask, my gown, lingering on the curve of my neck and then the cleavage perfectly accentuated in the corset. "You look like something out of a dream. A butterfly who just discovered she has wings."

My breath caught. He always did that. Said things that cut right to the heart of me.

"And what about you?" I asked, quickly recovering. "A fox is notorious for causing trouble. Are you a troublemaker?"

"I am. The best kind of trouble."

We stood there, the crowd swirling around us, caught in our own private bubble. I'd missed this. The flirtation. The spark. Even after a year together, he still made my heart race like we were meeting for the first time.

"Dance with me," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I don't dance with strangers."

"Then let's become acquainted." He offered his hand, palm up, waiting. "One dance. If you hate it, I'll disappear into the crowd and never bother you again."

I pretended to consider it. Drew out the moment. Made him wait.

Then I placed my hand in his.

The orchestra was playing something slow and romantic, perfect for the game we were playing. He pulled me close, one hand in the small of my back, the other holding mine against his chest. I could feel his heart beating beneath my palm.

“You’re good at this,” I said as we moved across the floor.

“I’ve had some practice.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“Only of one woman.” His thumb traced circles on my back, sending shivers down my spine. “She’s brilliant and beautiful and drives me absolutely crazy.”

“She sounds terrible.”

“She’s perfect.” He spun me out, then pulled me back in, closer than before. “I’ve been waiting my whole life for her. I just didn’t know it until I found her.”

My breath hitched. The game was slipping, the pretense falling away. I could see the real emotion in his eyes, even through the mask.

“Tell me about her,” I whispered.

“She’s stubborn. Passionate. She works too hard and forgets to eat lunch. She talks to her tomato plants like they can hear her.” He smiled, that devastating smile that had undone me from the very beginning. “She makes me want to be better. Not for her, but because of her. Because knowing someone like her exists in the world makes me want to deserve her.”

“Beau.” His name slipped out before I could stop it.

“There she is.” He pulled me closer still, our bodies pressed together as we swayed to the music. “My beautiful butterfly.”

I reached up and traced the edge of his fox mask. “I love you.”

“I love you too. More than I knew was possible.”

The song ended, but neither of us moved. We stood in the middle of the dance floor, wrapped up in each other, while the world continued around us.

“I have to give my speech soon,” I said reluctantly.

“I know.”

“Will you stay close?”

“Always.”

I reluctantly pulled away, already missing his body against mine. There would be time later. All the time in the world. But right now, I had a job to do.

The next hour passed in a blur of conversations and photographs and the kind of networking that used to exhaust me. But tonight, it felt different. Easier. I wasn't trying to prove myself. I had the job. And I was killing it.

When the time came for my speech, I made my way to the small stage at the front of the ballroom. The crowd quieted as I approached the microphone.

"Thank you all for being here tonight," I began. "A year ago, I stood in this same room hoping I could prove I wasn't the ice queen. Yes, I'm looking at several of you."

Nervous laughter filled the room. I paused, letting my gaze sweep across the crowd. I found Beau near the front, his fox mask tilted up toward me.

"This year has taught me something important. Success isn't about becoming who everyone thinks you should be. It's about having the courage to be who you actually are."

I touched the edge of my butterfly mask.

"I chose this mask tonight because butterflies represent transformation. The caterpillar was always going to have wings. It just needed time to grow into them."

Movement at the edge of the stage caught my attention. Beau was walking toward me with his eyes locked on mine. The crowd murmured, confused, as he climbed the steps.

"I'm not quite finished," I said, half-laughing, half-confused.

"I know." He took the microphone from my hand. "But I have something I need to say first."

My heart started pounding. What was he doing? Was this part of his fox persona? Was this how he was planning to make trouble?

He turned to face the crowd, then back to me.

"A year ago, I met a woman who was pretending to be someone she wasn't," he said, his voice carrying through the ballroom. "She was brilliant and beautiful and completely convinced that no one could love the real her. She thought keeping everyone at a distance was the only way to get ahead."

He reached up and removed his fox mask, revealing the face I loved so much.

"I made it my mission to close that distance. Not because I wanted to fix her. She was never broken. But because I could see what was underneath, and I knew the world deserved to see it too."

He reached into his jacket pocket.

Oh God.

“Darcy Corwin, you are the most extraordinary woman I’ve ever known. You’re the most passionate woman I’ve ever met. You care so deeply about everything you do. You’ve made me laugh and you’ve driven me crazy and you’ve shown me what it means to truly love someone.”

He dropped to one knee. The crowd gasped. I heard Cleo’s unmistakable squeal somewhere in the audience. My hand flew to my mouth, tears already blurring my vision.

“I don’t want to spend another day without you knowing exactly how committed I am to this. To us.” He opened the small velvet box in his hand, and I saw the ring inside.

It was a stunning brilliant-cut diamond surrounded by sapphires. One of a kind. I’d designed it myself, never imagining it would end up on my own finger.

“How did you get this?” I gasped.

“Your father helped,” Beau admitted with a grin. “Turns out he’s pretty good at keeping secrets when he wants to.”

I let out a watery laugh.

“Darcy.” His voice softened, intimate despite the hundreds of people watching. “Will you marry me?”

This man had seen me at my worst and loved me anyway. He’d shown me that strength and softness could coexist. He had taught me that letting someone in wasn’t weakness, it was the bravest thing a person could do.

I thought about the past year. The beach days and family dinners. The quiet mornings in my garden and the late nights wrapped up in each other. The fights we’d had and the way we’d learned to work through them. But mostly when I looked at him, I saw my entire future.

I pulled off my mask, letting it fall to the floor. I wanted him to see my whole face.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, absolutely yes.”

He was on his feet in an instant, sliding the ring onto my finger before pulling me into his arms. The kiss was deep and passionate and probably not appropriate for such a public setting, but I didn’t care. The crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

Beau stepped back. He had turned off the mic. “I love you,” he said. “So much it scares me sometimes.”

“I love you too.” I held up my hand, watching the ring catch the light. “I love this ring.”

“I know, which is why I insisted on you getting to wear it on your finger.”

I looked out at the crowd filled with the faces of people who had watched my transformation over the past year. Board members who had doubted me. Colleagues who had underestimated me. My new family. Because that was what the Blackwells had become. My family.

“I think I need to finish my speech,” I said.

“By all means.” Beau gestured toward the microphone with an exaggerated bow. “The floor is yours, Ms. CEO.”

I picked up my mask from the floor and held it in my hands as I turned on the microphone again.

“Well,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. “That wasn’t exactly how I planned to end this evening.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

“But I suppose that’s fitting. Because if this year has taught me anything, it’s that the best things in life rarely go according to plan.” I looked at Beau. “Sometimes you have to let go of the script and trust that the story will write itself.”

I raised my champagne glass. The crowd followed suit.

“To love,” I said.

“To love!” the crowd echoed.

I drank and then walked straight into Beau’s waiting arms.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of congratulations, champagne, and stolen kisses whenever we could manage them. At some point, we ended up on the dance floor again, swaying slowly with my head on his shoulder. His arms wrapped tight around me.

“Perfect,” he said. “So perfect.”

He didn’t have to be specific. I knew exactly what he meant.

**Did you love Darcy and Beau? Want more? I’ve got an Extended
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**WANT A SNEAK PEEK OF SNEAK PEEK OF
TEMPTED TO BE MINE? LOOK NO FURTHER!**



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CHAPTER 1

LUCY

I drummed my fingers on the back of my laptop and glared at the empty chair beside me. Something was wrong. Jeremy had left the seat twenty minutes ago, and he should be back by now, which meant he'd either gone to craft services or a pretty girl had smiled at him and he'd gone chasing after her.

Knowing Jeremy, it was probably the second one.

I glanced toward the pool, then the cabanas, searching for a flash of dark hair and an expensive pair of sunglasses. Nothing.

Around me, the Blackwell Couture crew had taken over the pool deck at the hotel with the perfect pool for a backdrop. We were in Santa Monica, not far from home in LA. I was just glad to be on a job that meant I could sleep in my own bed tonight.

I scooted my chair closer to the table, putting myself in the shade. The umbrella was the only thing between me and a slow death by sunshine, and I was grateful for it. It was a perfect seventy-eight degrees in the middle of fall. The *ber* months—September, October, November, and December—lacked the *brr* in sunny southern California.

And I loved it.

The pool shimmered beside me, dotted with pink floats shaped like flamingos. On the other side of the low stone wall, the Pacific stretched out flat and gleaming all the way to the horizon. Tourists with Australian accents walked by in a pack of laughter and bright-colored bathing suits.

Each held a drink in their hands sporting tiny umbrellas, and they brought their drinks into the pool with them, joining other travelers from all over the world enjoying their little slice of paradise.

I had an iced coffee in a tall glass with a paper straw and vanilla cold foam on top. And instead of a sexy two-piece, I wore my blue pantsuit with a silk sleeveless blouse.

I minimized the Milan calendar, opened Jeremy's bookings, and grimaced. He was in demand. Models had short shelf lives, which meant they worked their asses off while they could. Jeremy Blackwell was aging better than fine wine. It didn't look like the jobs were going to be drying up anytime in the near future.

And that was why he was the only client I managed. I tried juggling other clients, but they all complained I didn't have time for them. I didn't.

I was only one woman trying to keep up with the hottest male model in the world at the moment. And he insisted I come with him everywhere.

I didn't mind at first. When Jeremy asked me to start traveling with him to shoots and shows, I thought it would be glamorous. Paris Fashion Week. Milan. Tokyo. The kind of places seventeen-year-old me cut out of magazines and taped to the inside of my locker door in high school. Now I got to go on someone else's dime while doing my job. The reality was less glamorous and more exhausting.

I'd seen incredible things that made those cut-out pictures look like, well, cut-out pictures. They couldn't compare to the real thing. I'd eaten at Michelin-star restaurants I could never afford on my own, stayed in hotels that cost more per night than my monthly rent, made a wish in Trevi Fountain, walked the Great Wall of China, and seen the sunrise over Angkor Wat in Cambodia. But I'd also spent those trips hunched over my laptop trying to keep up with the mountain of work that came with managing Jeremy's career.

Contracts. Negotiations. Scheduling conflicts. Travel arrangements. The endless back-and-forth with brands and agencies and publicists. All of it fell on me.

Jeremy and I had spent days living in a trailer together on deep-location shoots early on in our working relationship, and it had been a crash course in getting to know him. I knew how he took his coffee. I knew he was terrified of snakes but would never admit it. I had learned that one really fast on a jungle shoot that he refused to speak of to this day.

I knew he talked to his mom on the regular and that he enjoyed it. It wasn't just an obligation. He was close with his family. He liked to laugh and make people laugh. Oh, and he used to sleep in socks until I bullied him out of it. If the world knew one of the sexiest men alive slept in socks up to his calves, he would fall from grace. Period. And I didn't want to find another model to work for. I liked it right where I was.

He knew things about me too. Perhaps not as meticulously as I knew things about him, but I didn't blame him for it. I was the type-A one here. Self-awareness was also one of my skills.

And hindrances.

Speaking of hindrances, where the hell *was* Jeremy, anyway?

I twisted around in my chair, shielding my eyes as sunlight reflected off the light stones of the pool deck. A tall shadow approached, but I couldn't make out his face as the sun nearly blinded me.

"Dang it, Jeremy," I said. "Where have you been?"

The man laughed, and I knew right away it wasn't Jeremy. It was his cousin, Sebastian Blackwell, from the New York branch of the family. He was a co-owner of Blackwell Couture, and once upon a time, he'd been the face of the brand. Jeremy looked a lot like Sebastian. The Blackwell genes were no joke. They won the gene pool lottery. Sebastian was now acting as the creative director for Blackwell Couture campaigns.

Sebastian moved under the shade of my umbrella and slid his hands in his pockets. "Lucy, have you seen Jeremy? We're ready for the next setup and he seems to have..." He made a vague gesture with his hand. "Wandered off."

I suppressed a sigh. "I swear, I need to put a leash on that man. I'll find him."

Sebastian's mouth quirked into a smile. "I appreciate it. We've got about twenty minutes before the light shifts and I'd really like to get these shots done."

"Give me ten."

He nodded and headed back toward the photographer. I pulled out my phone and called Jeremy. It rang. And rang. And then, quite expectedly, went to voicemail. His smooth voice filled the line.

This is Jeremy Blackwell. Text me like a normal person, will you?

I hung up. He knew better than to ignore my calls during a shoot. I tried again. Same result.

Fine. Text it was.

Me: *Where are you? Sebastian needs you on set.*

I watched the screen. Delivered. No typing bubbles. No response.

I waited thirty seconds that felt like thirty minutes, then typed again.

Me: *Jeremy. Answer me.*

Nothing.

I clenched my jaw. Thanks to Jeremy, I would need dentures by forty with as much as he had me grinding my teeth. I typed one more message, my thumbs hitting the screen harder than necessary.

Me: *If you're ignoring me, I'm going to make you regret it. And you know I'm creative.*

Still nothing.

I grabbed my laptop and shoved it into my bag, abandoning my perfect shady spot by the pool. So much for getting any work done today.

I headed up to his suite, passing tropical plants that smelled like hibiscus and water features glittering in the sun in open-air atriums. When I finally arrived at his door my breathing was clipped and my cheeks felt hot.

I knocked. "Jeremy? It's Lucy. Open up."

Silence.

I knocked again, harder. "I know you're probably in there with company," I said. "But I don't care. Sebastian needs you downstairs."

More silence.

I pulled out my phone and called the front desk. This wasn't my first rodeo. The room was booked under my name to protect my celebrity client. I never invaded his personal space, but there had been a time or two I needed to wake his ass up. My name. My room.

A minute later, I had a staff member opening the door for me. "Thank you." I tipped him a twenty.

I opened the door and shielded my eyes. I'd learned the hard way Jeremy slept in the nude, now that he didn't sleep in socks. And if he wasn't sleeping, he was probably doing something else with someone else. Both parties nude. Another lesson learned the hard way.

"Jeremy, stop what you're doing. Or wake up."

Nothing.

I popped one eye open like that would somehow lessen the trauma. The room was empty. The bed was made. His suitcase was open on the luggage

rack, clothes spilling out of it in typical Jeremy fashion. His phone charger was plugged into the wall but no phone was attached.

So he wasn't here ruining the sheets for housekeeping like I'd suspected. But it also meant he could be anywhere. If he was in someone else's room, I'd never be able to track him down without causing a scene. And I was running out of time.

I pocketed Jeremy's room key in case I lost him again and hurried out of the room to the lobby. Maybe I could GPS his ass. That'd make my life easier.

Now genuinely panting, I scanned the luxurious lobby and once again found no Jeremy. I checked the hotel restaurant and the bar and came up empty handed.

There was zero chance I'd find him in the gym, but I looked anyway.

"*Sonofabitch*," I hissed.

This guy. This was the part of my awesome job that sucked. Tracking down a man that seemed determined to get lost.

I moved to the massive patio off the back of the lobby and stopped at the railing to stare out at the beach. The sand stretched to the pier in the distance. The Ferris wheel was doing its thing. The beach was dotted with umbrellas and sunbathers. It was beautiful. Postcard perfect.

It was also not meant for walking in heels.

I looked down at my pumps. They were relatively sensible but still three inches of heel that would sink into that sand like it was quicksand.

I could take them off, but then I'd be walking barefoot on hot sand, and I didn't have time to go back to my room for flip-flops. Sebastian wanted Jeremy in ten minutes. I'd already burned five.

I cursed Jeremy as I descended the stairs to the beach. The first few steps weren't terrible. The sand near the hotel was packed down from foot traffic. But the farther I got from the building, the softer it became. Soon I was doing an awkward half-walk, half-wobble that made me feel like Bambi testing out his new legs.

I didn't want to be Jeremy's babysitter. That wasn't in my job description. I was his business manager and agent, not his mother. He was twenty-seven years old, for God's sake. A grown man.

A grown man who should be capable of staying on set during a photoshoot for the family business.

But Jeremy was still in a different phase of life than I was. At thirty-five, I'd gotten most of my wild impulses out of my system. I'd done the partying, the bad decisions, and all that living in the moment bullshit. I knew what it was like to act without thinking about consequences. I'd learned. I'd grown up.

Jeremy was still in the thick of it. Young, hot, rich, and very successful. The world was his oyster and he was shucking it with enthusiasm. I couldn't really blame him for enjoying himself. If I looked like him and had his life, I'd probably be doing the same thing.

But that didn't make it any less annoying when I was the one trudging through sand in designer heels trying to find him.

I shaded my eyes against the sun and scanned the beach. Families with kids building sandcastles. Couples on towels. A group of college-aged guys tossing a football. No Jeremy.

Then I spotted the tiki bar. It was just down the beach from the hotel, maybe a hundred yards away. I started toward it, my heels protesting every step.

As I got closer, I could make out the details. Thatched roof. Bamboo bar top. A bartender in a Hawaiian shirt mixing something in a blender. And there, leaning against the bar with the casual confidence of someone who'd never been told no in his life was Jeremy Blackwell.

He wasn't getting a drink. He wasn't even facing the bar. He was turned toward a woman perched on one of the stools.

He leaned in, one arm resting on the bar and the other gesturing as he talked. I knew he was telling some charming story. He had plenty of those.

The woman was blonde. Perky. Young. Wearing what could generously be called a bikini but was more accurately described as dental floss. One sneeze and she'd be split in two. She laughed at something he said, tossing her hair over her shoulder in that way women did when they wanted a man to notice them.

I felt my blood pressure spike as I closed the distance between us. My feet were killing me. Sand rubbed my heels, promising blisters.

I'd abandoned my work and my iced coffee and my perfect shady spot to track down a grown man who couldn't be bothered to answer his phone because he was too busy chatting up a woman in a string bikini.

Oh, hell no.

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CHAPTER 2

JEREMY

The sexy woman in front of me had my full attention. I knew I should get back to the photoshoot, but beauty like this wasn't something I could walk away from. If they needed me back on set, they would let me know.

I had gotten bored waiting around at the photoshoot. After watching Lucy work for a while, I had grabbed some egg-white bites instead of the cheeseburger I actually wanted. A photoshoot wasn't the place to show up looking soft. It was evening wear, but sucking in my gut showed up on camera.

I had eaten the bite and stared out at the ocean, knowing it would be at least thirty minutes before they were ready for me. I could have sat there and listened to Sebastian lose his mind over a lighting stand, or I could have taken a walk.

The ocean had won.

I had grabbed my sunglasses and headed down the few steps to the sand. I had kicked off the slides I wore between shots and sank my toes into the sand. I had curled them and exhaled a sigh of relief. The breeze coming off the water had been exactly what I needed after spending the last hour being directed and positioned until we had the right shot. My muscles had needed a chance to loosen up.

I had walked along the edge of the water, letting my gaze drift over the waves. I should've booked the rest of the week off. No cameras. No fake

smiles. No Sebastian barking orders.

I loved the job, but months of nonstop work had left me craving a few days where nobody needed me to smile on command.

I had walked closer to the water, foam swallowing my feet as the waves washed up the shore.

Then a blonde had walked past me, her hips dancing to and fro with every step, a couple of gold bracelets chiming on her wrists like a siren's call. Suddenly, the ocean had lost some of its appeal.

She had the kind of curves that made a man forget where he was going. The barely there bikini didn't hurt, either. She had glanced over her shoulder and caught me looking. And then she had smiled. That had been all the invitation I needed.

I had followed her to a bamboo stool at the tiki bar and signaled the bartender.

I had slid up beside her, leaning one elbow against the bar in a pose that had graced a dozen magazine covers. "Let me guess," I had said. "Piña colada?"

She had laughed, a light, bubbly sound. "How'd you know?"

"You look like a woman who appreciates the classics."

The bartender, a guy in a hideous Hawaiian shirt, had raised his eyebrows at me. "And for you?"

"Just water." I had flashed an apologetic smile. "I'm working."

The blonde had tilted her head, curiosity sparking in her eyes. "Working? On a beach?"

"Photoshoot." I had gestured vaguely back toward the hotel. "For a clothing brand."

Her eyes had widened. "Are you a model?"

I had shrugged like it was no big deal, even though I knew exactly what that shrug did to my shoulders in the basic white tank I wore. Another part of the gig. "Guilty."

"That's so cool!" She had touched my arm, her fingers light against my skin. "What kind of—"

"I'm Jeremy." I had held out my hand, eager to move past the details of my career and on to more exciting things, like what her plans were for the evening.

"Brittany." She had giggled again. "So what kind of photoshoot? Like swimsuits or something?"

“Fashion. High-end stuff.” I had waved a hand, dismissing the topic again. “What do you do for work?”

She had laughed, tossing her hair over her shoulder. The sun had caught the blonde strands and I had decided I wanted to run my fingers through it.

“I’m an ultrasound technologist,” she’d said.

The bartender had slid her piña colada across the bar, complete with a tiny umbrella and a cherry on top. She had taken a sip and made a little sound of appreciation that sent my imagination into overdrive.

I had angled toward her. “Nothing gets me into more trouble than a woman who’s smarter than me.”

Brittany had looked at me with those big eyes, hanging on my every word. She kept finding excuses to touch my arm. My hand. Each touch had been light and seductive, just enough to make sure I knew she was interested.

Message received. After all that, it was now time to go in for the kill.

“So,” she said, twirling the tiny umbrella between her fingers, “how long is your photoshoot?”

“Hard to say.” I watched her lips close around the straw. “Could be another hour. Could be three.”

“That’s a long time to be working on such a beautiful day.”

“It is.” My gaze drifted down her body, slow and appreciative. “Seems like a waste.”

Her mouth curved with an invitation on those plump lips. “Maybe you could take a break?”

The hotel was right there. Five minutes to get her upstairs, ten minutes in my room to give her a little preshow of what tonight could be, and I’d be back on set before anyone noticed I was gone.

“A break sounds nice,” I said, leaning closer. “What did you have in mind?”

She flashed another seductive smile. “I’m staying at the hotel, and my room has this amazing view of the ocean, and—”

Her eyes went wide, focusing on something over my shoulder. Her whole demeanor shifted, the flirtatiousness vanishing.

“Um,” she said. “Who’s that?”

“*Jeremy Blackwell.*”

I knew that voice. More importantly, I knew that tone. *Lucy.*

Shit. I turned around.

My agent stood there in the sand, her heels sinking into it, her pantsuit looking out of place on the beach. Her hands were planted on her hips. I could see her jaw clenching. She looked absolutely pissed.

“I should have known you’d be out here cheating on me again,” she said.

I frowned, my brain trying to process the words. Cheating on her? Lucy and I had never dated. We’d never even come close to dating. We’d never slept together. Never kissed. Never so much as touched outside of a professional context. We were friends. Professionals.

So what the hell was she up to?

Behind me, Brittany made a small, startled sound. “Whoa. I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.”

Lucy’s gaze shifted to Brittany. I watched as Lucy pushed her sunglasses up. Those blue eyes flashed fire. Her blonde hair, normally perfectly styled, was flattened against her face and neck. Five feet seven inches of righteous fury stared back at me and I had no idea why.

“Fiancée,” Lucy corrected.

My jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

Lucy held up her left hand, bare and ringless, and waved it in my direction. “Not that you’ve ever given me a ring!”

Brittany’s expression shifted from confusion to outrage. She turned to me with narrowed eyes. “You didn’t even get her a ring, you jerk?”

I shook my head, trying to catch up with whatever game Lucy was playing, and offered a chuckle that I hoped was disarming. “It’s because we’re not engaged.”

Brittany crossed her arms over her chest, and suddenly the barely there bikini seemed less inviting and more accusatory. “That’s what all cheaters say.”

“I’m not—” I started, but Lucy cut me off.

“Engaged or not, Jeremy,” she said, her voice rising with theatrical emotion, “I’m pregnant. Get ready to raise a baby with me.”

Brittany’s eyes went wide as dinner plates. She looked at Lucy, then at me, then back at Lucy. Her hand came up to cover her mouth.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “You got her pregnant and you’re cheating on her? Wow! You’re a real piece of shit.”

“I didn’t—” I tried again.

“I’m out of here.” Brittany grabbed her piña colada and slid off the stool, giving me a look that could have curdled milk. “Good luck with your baby daddy drama. And girl,” she added, pausing to give Lucy intense eye contact, “you deserve so much better.”

She stalked off across the sand, her hips swaying with considerably less invitation than before. I watched her go, then turned back to Lucy.

Some of that bullshit bluster had faded, but now her sunglasses were back on so I couldn’t see her eyes. But I could see the way she fought to keep her lips from curling up in a grin.

I shook my head, a laugh bubbling up from my chest. “What the hell, Lucy?”

She dropped the act entirely, her hands falling from her hips. “That’s what you get for ignoring my texts.”

“I left my phone by the pool!”

“I’ve called and texted. A lot, Jeremy.”

I held up both hands and shrugged. “Oops.”

“Oops.” She rolled her eyes. “Come on. Sebastian’s ready for you. He’s going to have a stroke if you’re not back on set in the next two minutes.”

I fell into step beside her as she started back toward the hotel. Her heels were giving her trouble in the sand. I had to slow my pace to match hers.

“I can’t believe you told that girl you’re my pregnant fiancée,” I said, still chuckling.

She snorted. “She’s lucky she left when she did. I was about to start talking about my tender nipples.”

I laughed again. “By all means,” I said, gesturing grandly. “Continue. Tell me all about your nipples.”

She snorted, shaking her head. “In your dreams, Blackwell.”

“Frequently.”

That earned me a punch to the shoulder, but there was no real force behind it. We were both grinning like idiots. The tension of her anger dissolved into the easy rhythm of our friendship.

This was what I liked about Lucy. She could be furious with me one minute and laughing the next. She didn’t kiss my ass or keep her distance. She treated me like a normal person.

In my world, that was rarer than it should’ve been.

“Where did that come from? The whole pregnant fiancée thing?”

She shrugged, her heels finding more solid ground. “You weren’t answering your phone. I had to walk across this entire beach in three-inch heels. My feet are going to be hamburger tomorrow.” She glanced at me. “You deserved to suffer a little.”

“Fair enough.” She had a point. “But pregnant? Really?”

“It was the nuclear option.” A smile tugged at her lips. “I figured if regular girlfriend wasn’t enough to scare her off, I needed to escalate.”

“Well, it worked.”

Lucy’s smile turned smug. “Maybe next time you’ll check your phone before wandering off to flirt with beach bunnies.”

We reached the steps leading up to the pool deck. Lucy paused to scrape sand off her heels. I waited, letting her hold my arm for support. Her hair was windswept and her face was flushed from the walk in the sun. A few grains of sand clung to the hem of her pants.

She looked nothing like the polished professional she normally was. She was rumpled, irritated, and completely herself. This was the version I only got to see when it was just the two of us after a long day.

We climbed the steps together, and back up on the pool deck, the chaos of the photoshoot swallowed us whole. Sebastian spotted us immediately, his expression cycling through relief, annoyance, and resignation in rapid succession.

“There you are,” he said, striding toward us. “I was about to send out a search party.”

“No need.” Lucy gestured at me like I was a prize she’d won at a carnival. “Found him at the tiki bar.”

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed. “The tiki bar.”

“Drinking water,” I clarified.

He looked me up and down like he might be able to see the truth.

“Get to makeup.” Sebastian pointed toward the tent set up on the far side of the pool deck. “We’ve got maybe ten minutes of good light left. I want to get at least three more setups before we lose it.”

I gave him a lazy salute and headed in the direction he’d pointed. Behind me, I heard Lucy say something to Sebastian, probably apologizing for my behavior or making some excuse. She was good at that.

Smoothing things over. Making my messes disappear.

She deserved a raise.

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And I've never had a problem enjoying the attention.

Private jets. A different country every week. No promises, no complications, and absolutely no settling down.

It's a good life.

Then I sleep with my best friend.

She's far too responsible for me, and she's the woman I pay to keep my charming ass out of trouble.

My handler, if you will.

She also wants forever.

I've never wanted anything past tomorrow.

For three years, that made her the one woman I couldn't touch.

One night stranded together in Alaska destroys that rule.

Now I want her in my bed. On my arm. Beside me when the cameras disappear.

But she knows exactly what kind of man I am, and she refuses to risk her heart and her career on a playboy who's never stayed.

Just when I'm ready to prove her wrong, she disappears halfway across the world with a secret that could change *everything*.

She thinks she's protecting my future.

Cute.

Because my biggest career opportunity means nothing if I lose the woman I finally realize I can't live without.

The world can have the man on the billboards. I'm fighting for the woman who made me want everything beyond them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, two dogs, three cats, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

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Arranged To Be Mine

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