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Queen of Swords

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QUEEN OF SWORDS

by

MARY ELIZABETH CHAMBLISS

JAMES BRAZIEL, CHAIR

KERRY MADDEN-

LUNSFORD

ADAM VINES

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at
Birmingham, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM,

ALABAMA

2021

QUEEN OF SWORDS

MARY ELIZABETH CHAMBLISS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Queen of Swords, titled after a card in the tarot signifying an independent, incisive woman that often keeps others at “sword’s length,” is the fictional story of Birmingham heiress Reagan Norcross. Beautiful, educated, wealthy, and accomplished, Reagan is more unhappy than she’s ever been. So when an old fling, Russell Harris, takes a job at her family’s construction and design firm, Norcross Lasting, it seems like a sign that everything is going to turn around. But even as her interactions with Russell in and out of the office become more like a romance novel, Reagan’s unhappiness and instability only get worse, ultimately culminating in a total mental break.

Using the imagery of the tarot, Queen of Swords shines a light on the ways in which the business world forces women to value facade over authenticity or accomplishment. Like Birmingham’s multicolored lights attempt to distract from the city’s issues with segregation and homelessness, Reagan uses her appearance and corporate success to hide from her unhappiness. As her facade begins to crumble under the pressure of an uncomfortable workplace, she realizes she’s lost track of what exists beneath it. The novel follows the ensuing cycle of constant self-analysis and inability to understand what she wants, while also traversing Birmingham’s class disparities via her relationships with her family and peers. Through Reagan’s inability to uphold the expectations of her job and family, Queen of Swords portrays millennial women’s struggle to define success in a climate and economy that makes traditional definitions fundamentally unattainable.

DEDICATION

To my namesake, my grandma Betty. I made our dream come true!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you thank you thank you to Jim Braziel. For your patience, your kindness, your pencil scribbles and your emails about bees. I knew the day you gave me a C on my first short story that you'd get me across the finish line. After I stopped crying.

Mom, Dad, Mark—you are each deserving of full essays for the contributions you've made to my writing and my heart. Thank you. I love you. The following story is fictional and does not depict any actual parents or sibling. Thanks must also be given to the Hansons and Chamblisses for giving me the perfect set of neuroses and history to create the Norcross family.

To the UAB English Department Coven, I'm honored to have studied under so many of you witchy, fae beings. I hope some full moon night when I'm wandering the forest, I'll find you all in your true forms. A special thank you to Jay Jesse, for bringing Edith Wharton into my life. Without *The House of Mirth*, this story would not exist and I'd probably never graduate.

I never would have returned to Birmingham if I didn't have you to come home to, Julia. Brandi, you have always somehow seen the good and decent things in me when I didn't see them in myself, so I told this story imagining turning all my readers into empathetic water signs. Daphnee, you already know that any and all questions about Reagan's humor, intelligence, persistence, and fed-the-fuck-upedness can be directed to you. Sarah, you saw the potential of this project from the very beginning, and your defense in workshop of Reagan pushed me to keep writing when criticisms would have made me abandon her.

And finally, I must acknowledge the cat that saved my life. If not for Charlie, I never would have gotten off that floor. We lived through Mississippi and Quarantine with just each other, and I'm not sure I would have survived either alone. If cats could read, I'd promise infinite treats. Luckily you can't, so I won't be eaten out of house and home. You'll have to settle for the unreasonable amounts of love I have for your furry self.

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Chapter One

It was going to be a Tower kind of day.

I stood for a moment, breathing in industrial cleaners, before lifting one foot to grip the stiletto of my red pump. Susan, Jorge, and Marco froze in the cavernous open atrium of Norcross Landing, clutching the big mops they used to make the black reflective floors gleam. Marco's Adam's apple bobbed as I removed one shoe, then the other, and dropped them in my purse.

I knew the minute I drew the Tower while I sat at my vanity this morning that everyone was about to have a very bad day. Depicting two people in blue robes careening headfirst out of a burning gray building being struck by lightning, it was the most unwelcome card in the tarot. It was an omen of big upheaval and the kind of change that *hurt*. Danger. Crisis. Destruction. Some people might see the Tower and brace for impact, but I knew better. I wasn't the blue robes who jumped and died on the rocks below the tower windows, or the building that blackened and hollowed out.

I was the lightning.

Feet bare, I started towards the elevators. The three fled the room in different directions, off to warn the rest of the staff. By the time I reached the sharp brassy divots of the entrance, numbness had set into the balls of my feet. I let them dig into the grooves of the door track, enjoying the slight tingle of almost-pain, before I stepped inside. My ruby toe ring reflected off the clean floors. I stretched my arches and fought the urge to pace the whole car.

When the doors opened to my floor, I got three steps onto grayish blue industrial carpet before something sharp impaled my toes. I plucked the bit that looked like it might have been potato chip or a peanut shard out of the carpet and tucked it into the designated purse pocket. Off to a great start.

My office was always an unwelcome sight, especially after a month away, supervising a problematic branch in Mississippi. It was half the size of any of my brothers', but still too large for the fresh-from-grad-school twenty-three year old I'd been when it had been assigned to me. With my degrees framed on the walls, the big windows overlooking the city, the perfectly appointed chairs in "Norcross Blue," and the little tribe of succulents in their perfect tiny jars being watered by someone else, it was the physical manifestation of everything I hadn't done to get my job.

My eighth floor windows overlooked the red brick and gray concrete skyline of Birmingham, Alabama, which my family had been responsible for erecting. It made quite a picture in late fall: the limited foliage of red and yellow complemented the brick and let the old ad murals for dry cleaning and barbeque peek through the branches. I could have sat at my desk and watched the sun rise until the streetlights dimmed. But the only thing I hated more than my office was that pretty view. So I reset the clock back from daylight savings, and went to find my *real* office.

Today, it was Conrad's.

I swiped my keycard to get into the office of Norcross Lasting's Director of Information Technology, Conrad Norcross III, my older brother. Using the secret notebook I kept of everyone's passwords, I logged into his computer. Before I left for Jackson, I'd heard the IT guys complain about an error that originated from a Dropbox located only on this desktop. Based on an email chain I'd been cc'd on last week, it still

wasn't fixed. It wasn't exactly a hard problem to solve. It would probably take Conrad a quarter of the time it would take me, but unfortunately for the IT Department, my big brother was always trapped in meetings that had nothing to do with him. So, per my directive from the Chairman of the Board, I did what I did best: creative problem-solving.

Three fuck-ups and two Googles later, a loud gasp came from the doorway. I didn't even have to look up to know it was Conrad, I'd heard it so many times. Only two years older, he should have been the most prepared for my hijinks; but instead he was the easiest to surprise. Conrad would never break into someone's office. Nor would he have logged onto their computer and fixed the myriad problems that had been left undone since the hiring search for a new Chief Security Officer had started, the current source of meetings he sat uselessly in. Doing these things wasn't following the rules, and Conrad *liked* rules.

"I fixed that import problem you've been having." I ran one last successful test.

"How did you get in here?" he squeaked.

"I have a master key." I shrugged, closing out of the many programs and tabs I'd opened, until only the actual Dropbox was left. I stood up from his desk and waved to the computer. "Check it out."

Conrad swooped around me, all six-foot-skyscraper of him hunching defensively over his keyboard. I hadn't actually done anything this time, mostly because he still hadn't noticed the very subtle program that I'd installed about a month ago. I'd rather wait for that to boil over.

He investigated my work, scrunching those dark bushy eyebrows that none of the Norcrosses except me attempted to wrangle. Eventually, in his Conrad way, he grunted, nodded, and locked his desktop.

“Thank you,” he grabbed a padfolio from a desk drawer before standing. “I don’t really have time to see whatever surprise you left for me.”

“Yeah, you’ve got that new security guy starting today, right?” I walked double-time to keep up with his long legs.

“Yeah, that ‘security guy’ that makes more than both of us combined is getting the grand tour and a big welcome luncheon.”

“Ooh, I love a good luncheon. When and where?”

He stopped and looked me over. The differences between us were starker than the similarities. I was in fuck-your-day-up red lipstick and a button-down in a loud floral print that looked like petals dripping fire, open one button short of appropriate; he was in one of his bland suits. It was hard for men in business attire to stand out, and unfortunately, as genetically gifted as we both were, Conrad didn’t do much in his crisp black suit, white button-down, and Norcross Blue tie. With his perfect business hair, perfect chiseled jaw, and perfect designer shoes, my brother looked like any other MBA bro wandering the halls of Norcross Lasting. You couldn’t tell that he’d been shadowing in the IT department here since he was twelve, had a PhD in computer science, or that he had knit all of our Christmas stockings. I desperately wanted to put him in some horned-rim computer glasses, a worn flannel, and sneakers. But despite his hacker-level skills, Conrad was Business Professional only.

I felt his glower on my toe ring, but I knew he wouldn’t say anything about it. Everyone seemed too afraid to ask why when I sometimes didn’t wear shoes. “This guy isn’t like Uncle Clarence. You’re going to have to be on your best behavior.”

I hadn’t liked our adoptive-uncle much anyway. “Of course.”

Conrad checked his watch. “It’s at noon in the big conference room. I’ve gotta go.”

He walked away, waving or calling a hello over his shoulder as he passed his employees. The offices were now full of people greeting each other with coffee mugs in hand, asking about their weekends. A few of the braver ones nodded to me, but no one approached. I checked my phone and spun on the balls of my bare feet, the tightly woven carpet dragging on my skin. The emails were starting again.

When Uncle Clarence, Dad’s college roommate, had suddenly retired after a heart attack, I hadn’t had time to wonder about his replacement. I’d left Clarence’s home after he got out of the hospital and gone straight to the airport for the short flight to Jackson. The Chief Security Officer position had been the opposite of mine: impressive on paper but useless in execution. Clarence had been a limp handshaking puppet. I wasn’t entirely clear on why we needed to replace him. Except that I missed having access to his cache of employee passwords that he hid behind a login that had been some variation of “PassWord12345” for as long as I’d worked for Norcross Lasting.

But whoever they hired for that position was important. When my position, Director of Special Projects, had been created, it was with the understanding that I would be The Problem Solver. All the important Chief Officer positions were slated for Henry, my oldest brother, Conrad, my smartest brother, and Lasting, the second-oldest. My other two brothers also had their senior-level positions picked out. There was nowhere for me to go, not that I particularly wanted it anyway. So they gave me this silly title with a ridiculous salary and told me to do whatever the fuck I wanted. No one answered to me, and I only answered to the Six C’s: CEO, COO, CFO, CSO, the Chairman of the Board,

and the Cunt, my mother. One of those C's changing was a big deal. I hated change I had no control over.

It probably wouldn't affect me, though. Clarence had never done much with me, probably because, like most people, he had no idea what I actually did. In exchange for free reign with basically no oversight, I slid into the cracks and patched up all the holes everyone was too busy or too stuck on bureaucracy to fill. From making a call to fix the breakroom coffee machine and filling in for a sick employee to proofreading legal briefs and sussing out corporate espionage, I made sure the cogs of this great capitalist machine kept turning. I was very good at problem-solving and even better at putting the fear of god in recalcitrant employees. Most people did their best to pretend either they or I was invisible when I left my office.

Uncle Hank, the COO, wasn't one of them.

"There she is!" he practically shouted, arms wide. "I heard a rumor you were back."

"The churches were ringing alarm bells again, huh?"

"Only the Baptist ones."

Hank Norcross, an increasingly uncanny copy of my father, was one of those men who didn't age until all the sudden he did. Until a year ago, he'd had the same black hair, dark eyes, smooth skin, and lean muscular build as his namesake, my oldest brother Henry. Then one day I looked at him and his hair was more salt than pepper, he had a little old-man pooch where a flat stomach used to be, and the skin around his eyes had gathered into unexpected folds.

“Glad to have you back, Rabbit,” he patted my shoulder and led me towards his office. “If I had to field one more call from Mississippi, I was going to come down there myself.”

“So you could thank me in person for cleaning up their mess?”

“After I disconnected all of their phones,” he confirmed, dropping into his chair.

He had an office similar in color and style to mine, just triple the size. Before abdicating the throne of CEO’s Wife, my mother had insisted on renovating the entire office, a trend she’d kept up with over the decade or so since. After the latest round, we were all crammed into ultra-modern white or Norcross Blue chairs that curved to our spines. She’d had a point about a company that was selling itself as *the* Southern tastemaker keeping our offices sleekly stylish. But the barren minimalism just made Hank’s messy tendencies more apparent. The sticky notes, scattered folders, and multiple blinking screens were jarring against the cool blues and neutrals that the Cunt had sworn would make us seem like we carried *a great respect for the past and a forward-looking passion for shaping the future*.

I crossed my legs. “So. New CSO. Fast work.”

“Doesn’t feel like it,” Hank sighed, sinking back in his chair, fingers laced across the belly he couldn’t seem to lose no matter how many personal trainers he hired.

“What do you think of him? The new guy?”

“He’s... not like Clarence.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?”

Hank shrugged. “It’ll be different. Conrad went in a new direction for this one.”

There'd been plenty of politics I was happy to stay out of involved in hiring Clarence's replacement. Ultimately, though, my father, Conrad Senior, got to make whatever call he wanted. That was just how the family worked.

"How so?"

"Well, for one, he's young. Around Matthew's age, I think. Early thirties."

"A ride or die for Henry?" I suggested. Clarence and Dad had been close, worked together for most of their lives. Maybe Dad was setting up a similar relationship for his successor.

"I don't think anyone would call Harris a 'ride or die'," Hank said, seeming amused.

"So...? Why him?"

"He's good. Really damn good. Worked for Cade Smelley at Athos Solutions in Florida."

"Am I supposed to know who that is?"

My uncle gave me a look that seemed to say *don't you know everything?* "I'll send you his resume. Interested to see what you think."

"Not that it matters."

"We should have had you in the interviews, now that I think about it."

"No way. I got so much done while y'all were busy."

"Like finding the Jackson problem, which I want to talk to you about. You did good work, like always. I should get you out into the field more often."

"As long as you don't put me in a hard hat," I gave my dark blonde curl a catty flip. "I don't get paid enough to do that to my hair."

“No hard hats,” he promised. “But I do want you to see if you can find any other Jacksons. Efficiency’s the name of the game.”

“Ok, I can—”

“I got some things started for you.” He spun around in his chair and grabbed something from the table behind him. He hefted a small mountain of paperwork in my direction.

“Jesus, Hank,” I put my arms out to take on the weight. “Did you have to kill what’s left of the Amazon?”

“What have I told you about your language?”

I rolled my eyes and arranged the papers into a more manageable shape. “You know, there’s this newfangled thing called email. Stands for electronic mail. You don’t have to print things anymore.”

“Hmmm, I’ll look into it.” A knock on the open door behind me signaled a meeting he’d probably pushed back 10 minutes to give me more work. “Get out of my office.”

I hooked my purse over my shoulder and tried to juggle the obscene stack of papers. Conrad and his guest stood in the doorway, my brother looking a little queasy. The new man wore a charcoal gray suit with a burgundy tie, a simple look that was anything but on his imposing figure. He was white, with dark brown hair and a handsome clean-shaven face marred only by a spider-web scar under his full lower lip and thick white scar tissue obliterating the clean line of his right eyebrow. He’d gotten the chin scar by biting through his lip in a fall when he was a kid. The eyebrow was from a wreck in Afghanistan. Nearly a decade ago, I’d laid in bed beside him while he told me how he got

them in his broken voice, a byproduct of a childhood surgery. That scar was hidden by his beautifully tailored suit.

“Oh, um—” Conrad started to say.

But he had already stepped forward, holding out a hand and rasping, “Russell Harris.”

Chapter Two

“Reagan Norcross,” I said several seconds too late, juggling my papers to take his hand.

I remembered him kissing each of my knuckles while we cuddled together. *I’ll never be a hand model*, I’d joked, eighteen and certain my fingers looked like they were all short a knuckle, even though they had three just like everyone else. I’d owned dozens, maybe even hundreds, of nail polish colors, but I only put them on my toes because I didn’t want to draw any attention to my man hands.

Russell—or “Russ,” as he’d introduced himself the evening before—had rolled over and grabbed his phone from the bedside table. He’d stayed on his back, naked in the mid-morning sun, and grabbed my wrist with one hand, fiddling with his phone in the other. He’d wrapped my fingers around him and pointed the camera phone down his chest. He took a few photos and showed them to me, my squat fingers making him look even bigger than he already was. *I think you could have a successful career on Craigslist or Backpage*, he’d said.

My nails today were painted Tower blue.

“Pleasure to meet you.”

Nothing in his still face indicated he remembered any of that. Great.

“You won’t think that for long,” I had to pull out one of Grandpa’s patented scary smiles because all of my confidence that I was the lightning strike and not the idiot careening out of the Tower had gone up in flames.

“Reagan is our Director of Special Projects,” Hank came from behind his desk to stand behind me.

“Special Projects?”

Good god, I was going to blush. My title had always been embarrassingly vague but now it was downright humiliating. “I solve problems,” I found myself explaining, when I didn’t explain to anyone. “If you’re not a problem, you won’t see me.”

“Which is what you want,” Hank chuckled.

Conrad laughed too and I gave him a look that silenced it almost immediately.

“Well, great to meet you, but I’ve got work to do.” I raised the pile in my arms. “Welcome to Norcross Lasting, Russ...ell.”

“Have a good one.” He stepped to the side to let me through the door. I found myself ducking my head in the universal sign for *thankyousorryfortakingupspace* like I hadn’t Miranda Priestly’d this entire company.

I felt as off-balance as the unsteady stack in my arms. We had barely touched and I could still smell him, a scent stored deep in my lizard brain that brought back the feeling of hotel sheets and the taste of his mouth mixed with cheap pink wine. There was something deeply uncomfortable about all these tactile memories coming back in the middle of my family’s office. Sex and the particular shades of blue draping the building my grandfather designed didn’t belong together.

“Fuck!”

The expletive burst from me as a stab in my left big toe brought me to a teetering stop. Using the wall for support, I slid all my papers onto my hip like a baby and lifted my foot. Imbedded deep in the flesh of my toe was half of a silver staple, blood seeping around the edges. Thankfully, no one was out in the hall. I reached down, yanked the

staple out, and tried my best not to limp to the back staircase. No one took the stairs from the tenth floor.

My phone buzzed with a new email as I lowered myself onto a top step one-footed. I probably had a Band-Aid in my purse...and I knew for a fact I had some Purell. The bottoms of my feet weren't quite black, but it wasn't pretty. Not the worst I'd ever seen them, but the day had just started. I wiped the little crumbs and dirt off of them and fished the Purell out of my bag.

Another buzz. Another email.

So I was now answering to a guy who'd eaten my pussy. That was... badass, right? I could also think of it as answering to a guy whose dick I'd sucked, but that didn't sound very empowered. And it wasn't really like he would be my *boss*. He was just one of the C's. And the C's had never really been in charge of me. I didn't listen to Henry, the CFO, when he told me to do shit, so why the hell would I listen to Russell Harris? God, that voice crawled up my skin like rubbing sandpaper against the grain, roughing away all my splinters.

I did my best with Purell-doused purse napkins, then wrapped my little toe wound up in a Band-Aid. A smarter person would put shoes back on, but I only claimed to be smart around people stupider than me. I tossed my napkins on the floor and made my way up three flights of stairs. I wasn't going to worry about this Russ thing. No. Russell. "Russ" was the name of an angry-looking boy with a shaved head and a fresh scar, only a few days home from Afghanistan. Russell was a grown ass man disproving my long-held theory that no one could out-wear my father in a suit.

He's not like Uncle Clarence. No fucking shit.

I shook my head, pushing the stairwell door open with my hip and walking with my active bitch face on through the labyrinth of cubicles to my office. Uncle Hank was right, I needed to go out in the field more. Avoid this whole Russell problem altogether by never being around him. I dropped onto the decorative couch in Conrad's office and crossed my legs, sifting through the paperwork Hank had given me. They were yearly reports for each Norcross Lasting office, dating back the last three years or so. Just the big ticket items like bid numbers, expenditures and types of jobs, all laid out in spreadsheets.

I didn't actually know that much about construction or architecture or design. I knew the codes for various types of jobs, could recognize our branding, and I knew some of the particulars of bidding on commercial versus state versus federal projects. All I'd needed to know to investigate the Jackson thing had been that the industry standard was to get one job out of every five bids. Jackson had been getting three out of five for the last year. People were rarely that good at their jobs. The last month in Jackson—like almost everything I dealt with—had mostly been me learning on the fly how to fix someone else's fuckup. I was a paper-pusher, through and through.

At one point, the Norcrosses had been engineers and architects. Before that, we'd been what every wealthy family in Birmingham was: steel tycoons. Pretty quickly when the unique convergence of iron ore, limestone, and coal in Alabama was discovered during Reconstruction, the first Jonathan Norcross had seen the potential for three little villages connected by railroad to become the largest city in the South, and had set about putting his mark on it. If political corruption hadn't scared Delta into making Atlanta their hub instead of Birmingham, everyone in the country would know the trademarked Norcross red brick design that mixed the old and the modern seamlessly together.

Even if Birmingham had really made it big, there would be no buildings with my stamp on them. Despite Dad procreating with a harpy with an artist's vision, none of his children had any design capabilities. The closest we got was being able to color-coordinate our wardrobes. All my brothers except Conrad had undergraduate degrees in engineering, but I'd nearly failed out of college attempting it for two semesters. I'd always known, deep down, that I couldn't really contribute anything to the Norcross legacy other than tracking down bullshit.

The key was stubbornness and competitiveness. I simply out-bitched anyone who tried to evade me. There were two kinds of incompetence: self-aware and self-destructive. The self-aware kinds knew that they didn't know what they were doing, and tried to hide it. That little niggling knowledge in the back of their minds that they couldn't succeed, were constantly fucking up, were going to get caught became a sickness that leeches into every area of their life. I could always smell the desperation on them, like a cancer-sniffing dog. Which wasn't very useful, since the self-aware incompetent did their best to minimize their scope and therefore the damage they inflicted on their area of not-so-expert expertise.

It was the self-destructive ones—the ones who had no idea that they were terrible at their jobs because they had so much blind faith in themselves—you had to look out for, and were harder to find because somehow corporate culture rewarded confidence as much as, if not more than, actual competence. That's how the Jackson situation and all the situations before had happened: when you put a group of educated, successful (white) men in a room, nothing in their entire lives has ever told them they should question themselves or each other.

“Reagan,” someone said, in that tone that told me this wasn’t their first attempt to catch my attention.

I looked up to see Conrad standing in his own office doorway.

“You still coming to this welcome thing? For Harris?”

Already? I thought it was at noon...

I looked around for the wall clock I tried to forget existed. Knowing what time it was skewed my priorities: if I didn’t, every problem was immediate, and took as much time as it took to solve. Deadlines and lunch breaks and 8-hour days were how important details fell through the cracks, where I had to pick them up and find a way to stuff them back into place. 11:57 AM.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something, so I’ll—” my stomach gurgled suddenly and loudly, in a way that told me this also wasn’t its first attempt to catch my attention. “Is there food?”

Conrad’s smiles started at his nose and crinkled out, like a stone dropping into a lake. “Yeah, knowing Sarah, there will be.”

Sarah Franklin, the head of HR, loved a free snack like she was still in college. I set my notebook down, leaving myself a few breadcrumbs to pick up where I’d left off, and stood carefully, avoiding any undue pressure on my bandaged toe. The need for food outweighed the need to continue ignoring the Russell problem, so I gestured to my brother and said grandly, “Lead me to sustenance.”

I had to walk double-time to keep up with Conrad’s long legs as we headed for the big conference room on the tenth floor. It was the room where Big Fights happened. When the Spaniards tried to acquire Norcross Lasting, it had gone down in this room. When the Recession left us open to the Germans, it had gone down in this room. When

my brothers and I had hosted an intervention for Dad when he wanted to fight the divorce, it had gone down in this room. This was where the Norcross family went to war.

I avoided it as much as possible.

But today, I walked through the double frosted-glass doors into what seemed like a stadium-sized conference room with a bounce in my barefoot step. The giant mahogany table that took up most of the room was loaded down with beverages, snacks, and little ceramic plates with the Norcross Lasting logo stamped in blue. The entire length of the wall opposite the doors was one unbroken slab of perfectly clean glass, looking out over the city this company built: the old UAB red brick, the original 20s elegance, the awkward concrete brutalism, and the modern designs that incorporated all the disparate parts and wove them together. Four of my five brothers were in the room, as were my three cousins, my grandfather, Uncle Hank, and my parents, who were doing a valiant job of pretending they got along just fine for “the good of the company.” There were only three other women in the crowded room, and I found myself gravitating towards the closest one once my tiny branded plate was stacked high with some sort of stuffed celery and carrots doused in ranch.

“You should’ve grabbed one of the sweets.” Judi Gautreau, one of the few people in HR I could stand, popped a delicate piece of chocolate-chunk cookie into her mouth without disrupting her mauve lipstick.

I leaned against the sideboard that matched the behemoth conference table and crossed one ankle over the other. “Can’t have dessert until I eat all my veggies.”

Across the room, my mother’s high, fake cackle rose above the low din of corporate chitchat. I followed the sound to see her standing in a group across from the new hire. With honeyed blond hair starting to go gray, smooth pale skin with no laugh

lines, and a gorgeous, perfectly fitted suit of Alabama crimson, the Cunt was an uncanny window into my future I did my best not to look through. I had more than once considered developing some kind of habit—cigarettes or maybe meth—just so I wouldn't look the same when I'm 67. Unless science discovered immortality in the next forty years, there was no way to look *better* at that age, which meant I'd have to go the other direction if I didn't want to always look like an inferior copy.

“He's no Clarence,” Judi commented, drawing my attention to the man Mom was fake-laughing for.

“Don't sound so excited about it.” I watched Dad start to circle around, almost thirty years of marriage having taught him exactly how long to leave his ex-wife alone with a stranger before she did something rude.

“I don't like change.”

“Innovation Is The Future,” I teased, using one of the terrible slogans we'd considered during a rebrand a few years ago.

She snorted and shook her head. “You better be careful, Reagan. That one's not going to stay out of your way.”

“Everyone stays out of my way.”

“He doesn't know that.”

“He'll learn.”

Judi made a skeptical noise but Uncle Hank was giving her that look that said he wanted her to wingman his jokes, so I let her move on. I was too hungry to talk anyway. I scarfed down a plate or two of “real” food before perusing the sweet side of the hors d'oeuvres spread. A lifetime spent being trotted out as another Norcross prodigy—and what's more, the only girl in four generations—had taught me exactly which desserts I

wanted. The brownies cut in perfect little moist blocks would turn into cement in my mouth, usually at the worst moment, like being asked to spell the word that had won me the regional spelling bee in 5th grade. Antihistamine. The petit-fours were a minefield. The only worse moment for me to activate my strawberry allergy from a chocolate-colored tiny cake than the time I went into anaphylaxis during my parents' first public appearance post-divorce would be now, with the best sex of my life on the other side of the room. And the peanut butter cookies? Just disgusting.

The only safe options were the shot glasses of banana pudding, oatmeal raisin cookies, and the chocolate chunk Judi had picked. The tiny glasses always left me wishing I could just get a tub of Dreamland's pudding, which left me the two cookie choices. The chocolate chunk were obviously preferable, but the chocolate could get dicey around business clothes and I wasn't having a very lucky day, if the throbbing in my punctured toe was any indication. But was it even worth it, eating oatmeal raisin? I had a pint of ice cream I was saving for the weekend that I could dig into after work tonight if I really needed to satisfy my tightly reigned sweet tooth...

"When in doubt, always go for the chocolate chip," a hoarse voice said over my shoulder.

I watched a familiar hand reach for a cookie and followed the line of the suit up to one of those faces that shouldn't have been handsome but somehow was. The Adam Driver effect. His nose was a little crooked—broken in a fight in ninth grade, he'd told me—and there were those faded white scars. But still he'd caught my interest from the first moment I'd seen him.

He lifted the cookie to his mouth and I looked away, grabbing the first thing within reach. I would look a little too hard at the chocolate everyone got caught on their lips when they bit into those cookies instead of breaking them off.

“So you’re a peanut butter person?” he asked as I raised my own cookie to my mouth without looking.

I stopped and dropped it back on the tray. “Nope.”

Fuck it. I was eating chocolate chip too. And probably that ice cream tonight.

“Unsanitary.” Russell plucked the cookie I’d dropped off the tray and tossed it in a nearby trash can.

“If you’re afraid of Norcross germs, it’s not too late to back out.”

“Actually, I think it is,” he rasped, brushing his hands together to dislodge crumbs. “I signed all the paperwork this morning.”

“Guess you’re getting my cooties, then,” I tried to joke. The implications of “cooties” and kissing sunk in and I wrinkled my nose.

His lips tipped up in a smile he was obviously trying to fight. “Can we talk?” his voice was quiet, not quite a whisper but getting close.

I smiled innocently up at him. “What’s there to talk about?”

Lasting, my second-oldest brother, was approaching from behind Russell, his eyes on the petit fours with that look I’d learned a long time ago meant to get out of his way. I tipped my head to a quiet corner, getting us out of the warpath of a 36-year-old who still ate like a high school football player. We weren’t more than a few feet from the nearest mingling group, and yet I felt strangely uncomfortable standing there alone with him. What implications were there, the two of us standing here? Could everyone see the brief history between us?

I crossed my arms, cookie in one hand and a glass of water in the other beading condensation onto my forearm, like it was sweating in sympathy. Standing close but not too close, Russell looked like his body wouldn't have the audacity to sweat in that suit. He brought the cookie back to his lips, making strangely intense eye contact with me while he did, and this time I was helpless against the flick of his tongue against his lower lip to catch the crumbs there. Too late I looked away, behind his right elbow, clocking Sarah Franklin rescuing Judi Gautreau from Hank. What I wouldn't give to be talking shit with them about my brothers right now.

"This is an uncomfortable topic but it's probably best to just get it out there," Russell said, drawing my attention back to him. The lighting here was less favorable, he didn't look quite handsome anymore.

"I would prefer it not get out anywhere."

"I would as well," he said with one of those military nods.

"So what's the play?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dad's black suit. He was wearing the Armani today, one of my favorites. It didn't move, a little dark spot on the edge of my vision.

"Play?"

I turned my head for a moment, to see who Dad was talking to. I watched him fill a little glass with lemonade and straighten, drinking it right there. No one to talk to, just...standing there. I looked back up at Russell. "Are we strangers? Old friends? We went on a date once? What's the story?"

There was only one reason Dad just hovered like that instead of networking...

"Let's keep it simple," I said before he had a chance to respond. "Strangers. We met for the first time in Hank's office. You don't know me, I don't know you."

And wouldn't that be fucking sad?

I saw her then, meandering towards our quiet corner. She was always strategic. No one had ever quite explained this to me, but you figured out over the course of a lifetime of country club events and company parties that mingling required calculation. You had to walk in with a goal, or else you'd be that one schmuck wandering around aimlessly looking for a group to insert yourself into. Most people were subtle about it, but not the Cunt. She arrived with a mission and had a precise formula for accomplishing it. Replacing one of the C's was an even bigger deal for her than it was for me. She'd hit Russell with her introduction in the group already, and now came the tactical small talk, meant to suss out if he was a civilian or enemy combatant.

I had about 30 seconds to get away before I got roped in.

"Wait, Reagan," he angled his body like he was trying to keep me in place without touching me. "We can still... I mean, how have you been?"

If you could see the whites of her eyes, it was too late. "I'd answer but then I'd have to ask you back and I genuinely don't care." I stepped around him, too busy watching Mom to look at his face. As I tried not to look like I was running scared, while still moving quickly, I tossed over my shoulder, "See ya round, Harris."

Chapter Three

It took everything in me not to limp.

The lights flickered on as I walked, building up in slow degrees to full brightness. Even at their harshest fluorescence, the hallways were still an eerie gray-green color without natural daylight, like tornado days when the sky turns nauseous. I hummed a Halloween song to myself as I navigated back to my official office and collected my things. There were few days when I wasn't in the building long after everyone else had gone home, but there was still something naughty and festive about being alone after hours. Like creeping out of the house during a sleepover and running around the front yard.

Norcross Lasting seemed the most like the office building of my childhood when it was empty. Any days off school would usually be spent here, running around after Dad or Hank or, when we were older, Henry. The point was probably to instill some sense of the job into our brains at an early age, but all their work talk was like the buzzy “womp womps” of the adults in *Peanuts*. Matthew, four years older and, in his opinion, infinitely more mature, would always wear his earnest listening face, but Conrad could be convinced to run down the hallways with me while Dad stood in someone's doorway chatting. We would race from the elevator to the cubicles and back, trying to be quiet but being recklessly loud instead. I was faster at first, but eventually I had to resort to tripping or elbowing to get the lead. Then one day he also decided he gave a shit about whatever they were saying, and I had to find other ways to amuse myself.

That was when I met Carlotta. In hindsight, she couldn't have been more than five or six years older than me, but she had seemed like a real Grown Up with her uniform and pierced nose. She taught me how to get through the "locked" roof door, and would let me smoke cigarettes with her out there, looking out over Southside. From that vantage point, you could see all the way to the old orange Sloss steel stacks, and on really clear days you could see through the smog to watch the planes landing at the airport. Carlotta taught me all the Spanish swear words and dirty phrases, and how to hold cigarettes like they did on TV, between two fingers, but lower down by your side so you didn't look like you were trying. I spent hours in front of a mirror practicing the way she would flip her black hair over her shoulder and wink, trying to get her flirty affectation.

She was fired when I was sixteen. The Cunt had taken me out of school after first period, and we spent the morning getting manicures and shopping Mountain Brook boutiques. She took me to lunch at Bottega, and even let me order the mac n cheese, instead of a salad. I should have known then that something was coming—*it's a biological fact that women just don't get to eat like boys do, Reagan*—but I was still totally blindsided when she told me she was leaving Dad. I made such a public scene that she drove me straight to Norcross Lasing and dumped me at the front door before driving off.

I was walking in crying just as Carlotta was walking out, also crying. Even with puffy red eyes and mascara smeared all over her face, she'd been so cool and beautiful. She wasn't wearing her uniform anymore and her street clothes on any other day would have inspired a thousand shopping trips. When I'd asked her what happened, she'd given me this withering look that had been almost as devastating as the news that my family was falling apart, and told me, "Ask Terry."

Looking back, I could understand Terry Slocum's point of view: any time I had wanted to find Carlotta, I had started in all the smoking spots and *then* tried finding her actually doing her job. But the sixteen-year-old that never leaves us always got a thrill out of ruining his day.

Usually, I would leave the office early enough to still find him at his desk on the first floor, in the back hidden away from what visitors—or even average employees—might see. But it was so dark out that my car was the only one left in the lot. I walked down the hallway to Terry's office. It said something about how old the building was and the sensibilities of the man who designed it that the hallways themselves were tighter, the floors uncarpeted, the windows small and too high to see through, if there were any at all in most of these rooms. There was a particular sort of disregard in the very architecture of this part of the building that I didn't like to associate with my grandfather.

If I could say one thing favorable towards the Cunt, it was that she had at least also updated the design elements back here as well. The walls were the same bright white, the chairs in the office space Terry occupied were Norcross blue, and all the furnishings were as new and sleek as everyone else's. Still, the ceilings felt lower.

I stood in front of Terry's desk and examined my options. There were a few framed pictures of his family, his keyboard and mouse, and several stacks of paper. I didn't know exactly what a janitorial manager needed paper for, but apparently he needed a lot of it because manila folders stuffed with paper filled the one corner not stacked high with mismatched boxes like the ones they used in movies when someone packed up their desk after being fired. I was too tired to feel enough animosity to fuck with his family photos or his keyboards, so I went with the simplest option: the relatively small pile of papers on his desk.

I reached into the designated pocket of my purse and fisted the grit I'd been collecting all day from the bottoms of my feet. It was always truly shocking how much I could accumulate in just a day. I raised my fist over the papers on his desk, and released. Another handful. And another. I reached back into that pocket, but only found enough grime to pick up with the tips of my fingers. I sprinkled it on top of the dirty little pile on his desk, flicking dirt off my Tower blue fingernails. My early morning daydreams of fucking someone's day up had crashed and burned me. There wasn't really any satisfaction this time in completing my little ritual with Terry, but I finished what I started, so it had to be done.

At this point, he would know the height of that pile and probably its weight. No need to write him a note. Three handfuls was fine. I wasn't a tyrant, I understood that not every bit of crust would be vacuumed out of the carpet—though it was important to try anyway. There were some times when I got four handfuls. A few dire days of five. I was always secretly hoping, for Carlotta's sake, to get six. I would fire him if I got six. But today was only three, and three was at least a passing grade.

My bag made a little *thwump* when I dropped it on the floor. I collected the last gross bits off the bottoms of my feet and then gratefully slid my red pumps back on. Any shoes at this point, even heels, would be better than going barefoot. My punctured toe was throbbing and my fantasies about cleaning my feet were bordering on sexual.

I gripped my keys between my knuckles as I walked across the desolate parking lot to my car. I always made a point to park under one of the street lamps, but light didn't inherently protect you, and the night security guards didn't inspire a lot of confidence. Clarence had never seemed to give much of a damn about any security that wasn't financial, which had made his position as Chief Security Officer a bit bizarre. He was the

kind of man who would have told me I watched too much *Law & Order* if he saw how quickly I locked my car doors once I was inside the vehicle.

The dashboard informed me it was 9:47 PM. Not too late. I pulled out my phone and scrolled until I found my last message to the little green leaf emoji, Basil. “*You up?*” I texted.

I didn’t get a response as I made my way down the mountain and into the city. I could guide my way home by night lights alone. I curved around the bright beacon of Vulcan, the iconic statue that towered over Birmingham. He was lit up green tonight, which meant there must be some big UAB sport going on. When I was a kid, Vulcan held what Matthew called his “lightsaber,” that lit up red any time there was a death on the highway. Even after all these years since they remodeled the statue and put in new, festive lights, my eyes were always drawn to the god of death or good traffic. Sloping down the mountain, the red beacon of City Federal was visible all the way from this side of the bridge. The eternal lights of UAB’s giant hospital complex glittered, figures in scrubs walking to and from the few chain restaurants still open at this hour.

Birmingham was no Atlanta, thick folds of shadows stretching for blocks where a larger city would still have bustling business. But light sparkled on the wet pavement, making it seem more alive. It was always some sort of wet in Alabama. In summer, even during droughts, the humidity was like breathing pool water, and the rest of the year it was raining. Sometimes, we’d get a flurry of snow, but most days, like today, it was just puddles in the potholes and damp on the sidewalk. I wasn’t even sure it had rained today, but it didn’t matter. Nothing ever really got dry.

I drove north down 18th Street, guided by the approaching neon of the rainbow tunnel. Vibrant, pulsing pinks, greens, and yellows alternated under the tunnel with a

mechanical efficiency that only really looked like a rolling rainbow if you unfocused your eyes. I didn't, so along with the perfectly timed rotation of color, I could also see the curled back of a homeless man sleeping on his side, his head propped on his army-green duffel bag.

Coming out of the tunnel was the most important light. My favorite light: the Alabama Theatre sign. There were two of them, the original on 3rd Ave and this new installment on 18th. Flashy, phallic, and old Hollywood, they were my favorite feature of the entire city. Perhaps because they were so completely the opposite of the kinds of buildings all around them that my family had designed. The Alabama Theatre was old-world glamour, with elaborate gilding and balconies. The sidewalk all around the block had big stars in the cement like Hollywood's walk of fame, with the names of famous Alabamians like Truman Capote and Harper Lee stamped into the cement.

If I'd had any knack for engineering or design, this was the kind of place I'd spend my career trying to bring to life. The pockets of random delusions of grandeur scattered around Birmingham were its greatest assets. They shocked you, brought an unexpected smile to your face, then made you look around at the surrounding brick buildings and wonder how you'd never noticed them before. You'd walk away feeling like you'd seen something you weren't supposed to, and wonder if you should tell someone else or carry it around like a delicate secret.

I whipped around 3rd Ave, the neon blue of the 18th Street sign in my rearview mirror and the green and red of the original sign through my windshield. It towered above a big marquee with the upcoming *Rocky Horror Picture Show* premiere laid out in perfect red block letters. The sign spelled out ALABAMA vertically, with blinking golden bulbs

around it. They went around in a circle, chasing each other, and it somehow looked less mechanical than the rainbow lights under the tunnel attempting the same effect.

I drove past the theatre, and the final light, a sickly blue “Weill 1919” sign that I had never figured out the meaning of, told me where to park my car. I lived in the old Burger-Phillips building, a 1940s department store that had been reconstructed into luxury apartments. It was one of the Cunt’s pet projects, part of Norcross Lasting’s campaign to transform downtown buildings that had been abandoned since the 80s into housing or office space. *No need to undo our own work*, Mom argued. *Just change up the inside, keep the facade. Millennials love the recycled feel.*

She wasn’t entirely wrong, though I liked this place about as much as I liked my office.

Basil texted back as I was walking in my front door. “*No.*”

A little involuntary smile spread across my face as I tucked the phone back in my pocket. Fiona was waiting right where she always did when I got home: just to the left of the front door, on top of my running shoes, big floofy tail wrapped primly over her paws. She seemed to have a cat-sense for when I was coming home, because she was there without fail, watching me regally, yellow eyes glowing in the big black mane of her fur, as if she had always been on her throne of shoes. She opened her mouth, baring her pricked canines, and let out a raspy yowl.

“Hello, hungry girl,” I cooed as I put my bag in its designated spot and kicked off my heels. We both watched them skitter under the couch, and I could see her contemplating following after them.

“Have you eaten yet?” I asked her, knowing the answer.

I didn't know if she actually understood human the way a dog might when you say "dinner" or "food," but her fur-tipped ears swiveled to me and then she was off, sprinting for her food bowl. I followed and stood dutifully beside her at the kitchen island as she ate, because she refused to do it without me, no matter how early I got up or how late I came in.

My butt buzzed. *"How was your first day back?"*

I listened to the crack and crunch of Fiona's dry food as I typed, *"Busy. Just got home."*

"Gimme the reel."

I snorted. Basil's real name was Harvey, but dicks didn't get real names in my phone and I ran out of the sexual emojis a long time ago, so now they got ice cream flavors. Like basil ice cream, he was sweet, but strange. He liked taking apart then rebuilding wind-up clockwork dolls, eating caramel popcorn while watching WWII propaganda films, and ranting about how string theory was more of a philosophy than a science. He could never say something normal like "tell me about your day," or even "what's the highlight reel."

"Just catching up on everything I missed while I was away and working on some new bullshit. A new guy started. A big-wig."

"You piss him off yet?"

I sighed and, now that Fi was too busy chowing down to notice I'd moved, went to the fridge and pulled out the bowl of leftover pad thai. *"Probably."* I stuck it in the microwave and returned to my cat's side, feeling her long fur brush against my leg as she adjusted her body to press against me.

Why had I been such a bitch to Russell? He'd only been trying to be a decent human being and catch up or whatever, but I'd just... let the same old asshole stuff fall out of my mouth without thinking just so I could get away from the Cunt. How hard would it have been to say "So sorry, I just remembered I forgot something important" or "Let's catch up later I've got work to do?" Like. What the *fuck* was wrong with me?

I could at least be some semblance of a human being now. "*How was your day?*" I made myself ask Basil, even though this time I genuinely didn't care. The microwave dinged.

"It was pretty good! No meetings, which always makes a good day. I mostly did de-duplication, so I got to listen to this podcast about infectious diseases. Have you ever heard of prions? That's what Mad Cow is. It's really kind of terrifying..."

I put my phone down as one long paragraph after another appeared on the screen, shoveling noodles into my mouth as I stood at the counter. I didn't even bother reading it.

The thing I most consistently liked about Basil—though nothing about my feelings for any of my flavors was consistent—was his brain. He could connect facts and information and hold onto them in a way not many people could. It was similar to, but much more useful than, my ability to "wear many hats." People called me smart because I could remember a simple thing like how to fix the import problem on Conrad's computer and proofread a digital ad from marketing at the same time, but that was just paying attention. Basil's ability to link disparate ideas together and find some sort of meaning in it was real smarts.

The big chunks of text stopped as I was rinsing out my bowl and sticking it in the dishwasher. Phrases that stuck out to me like "*disease-induced cannibalism*" and "*dying*

deer populations” told me that there was nothing in that I actually cared to read. Fiona had long since finished her own dinner and gone to sniff at my shoes under the couch.

“*That’s...terrifying,*” was all I could offer up to him as a response. Not being a disease ecologist, I had no idea what else to contribute. “*I guess I get why they don’t let you donate blood if you lived in England during the Mad Cow outbreak.*”

I waited a beat, so I didn’t sound as disinterested in the topic as I was, and then asked, “*Want to come over?*”

I watched the typing bubbles appear, feeling that anticipation of sex begin to build, then immediately crash: “*It’s way past my bedtime. This weekend?*”

A whole *week*? It’d already been a month! I rolled my eyes but texted back, “*Sure.*”

Maybe the period on the end was a little too passive aggressive because I got back a weak, “*Sorry,*” to which I was obligated to say “*No worries. Have a good night.*”

I cleared away his “*you too*” without really reading it. “I guess I should unpack anyway, huh, Fi?”

From her designated loafing spot on the arm of the couch closest to the kitchen, I got a growly chirp of agreement.

Chapter Four

The Four of Wands lay on my vanity, its image reflected right side-up in the useless, perfectly round mirror above it. The card was yellow, with people under a fruit- and flower-laden arch obviously celebrating something. Two figures in particular stood out, one in robes of pale blue and white, the other in wine red. I stood on the muted pink carpet of my walk-in closet, wondering if I should just try again. Not that the next one was likely to be any better. I'd learned that the hard way over the years.

The card was upside-down, known by real tarot readers as "reversed," which generally meant the opposite of its usual meaning: harmony, joy, and celebration. Not very reassuring. But my little guidebook told me that this particular card reversed was still positive, just muted: "private celebration or inner harmony." Still. The card in that position felt like a weird omen.

If anyone I worked with found out I used tarot, I would commit murder to keep it quiet, but dressing for the cards had become a sort of armor against my day. I wasn't really sure what I believed about tarot cards. The cynical parts of me—the majority of me, really—thought that they were purposefully broad and vague so that they always seemed at least partially right. I told those parts that it didn't really matter if they were "real" or not, it was just a way to start my day intentionally, a routine that forced me, for just a second, to obsess about something that wasn't work or sex or my various first world feelings of inadequacy. The tiny glass-half-full part of me that devoured romance

novels and watched the Harry Potter marathons every Christmas whispered that maybe the cards were magic.

I looked closely at the two predominant figures, both raising up bouquets of flowers in celebration. Behind them was a backdrop of a light gray castle, the sky a bright sunshine yellow. I wore red yesterday, and my big toe still stung so I didn't feel coordinated enough for white or yellow, so I went with that pale blue, the same Tower blue my nails were already painted. I tucked a light gray button-down into a high-waisted blue suit with 80's-style rolled sleeves and wide-legged trousers. I matched my heels to the wine red lingerie you might be able to see through my sheer shirt if I took the jacket off.

It was still dark when I left my building, all the lights from last night extinguished. I made eye contact with the one other lone driver on the street at whatever hour it was, feeling that momentary sleepy camaraderie, like the wan smile shared by two frequent flyers in line for breakfast before boarding a 5 AM flight. I chugged my coffee as I drifted through lanes without bothering with turn signals, but it still didn't prepare me for the email from Hank sitting in my inbox: *Harris Resume*, the subject line read. The only body of the email was his signature and a PDF attachment.

It was way too damn early for all of that.

Hunger finally coaxed me out of my color-coding at some point in the afternoon. My brain had spreadsheeted, every stimulus becoming columns and rows I was having trouble processing. In the eco-friendly fluorescents, everything looked wrong, and the little dots in my vision were numbers and codes I couldn't quite decipher. I'd been at it on the couch in Conrad's office all day. There was something interesting in Tallahassee. I wasn't sure about any of the other ones Hank had given me, but Tallahassee was

definitely... incorrect. A series of bids that seemed way under budget. A state job two years ago that we shouldn't have gotten. A revolving door of mid-level managers.

My stomach growled. This elevator was taking forever.

I blinked at the call button and realized it wasn't lit up. I sighed and shook my head, glad no one was around to see me spacing so hard. I took a last sip of coffee and actually hit the button. Two years ago, I'd done this with a group of people gathered around me, also waiting, and no one had been brave enough to push the button when they realized I hadn't. The Piggly Wiggly's "novelties" freezer section never fully recovered.

The doors of the elevator finally *dinged* open, revealing a harried looking Uncle Hank leaning against the back of the car and putting his phone away. On the other end of the elevator, Russell also looked a little on-edge. He was doing that thing only male models and movie stars did as attractively, his hands in his pockets parting the sleek lines of his jacket around tailored hips. Not for the first time, I lamented the ways ties acted as big silk arrows pointing at the crotch. The only thing worse than knowing exactly what was inside a pair of crisply pleated slacks was having your eye involuntarily drawn there while looking at a male relative.

I got in, working as hard as I could to keep my eyes on Russell's face. He met my gaze then looked away. Shit. He was definitely mad about the way I'd left yesterday. I adopted Hank's nonchalant stance that belied the way his graying hair stood up at odd angles because he'd been running his hands through it.

"Do I want to know?" I asked.

"Nope."

"Do I need to know?"

"It's under control, now."

I nodded, aware of Russell's silent presence to my left, and the floaty way my head tingled with hunger. I was not *here* enough to have any sort of conversation with him. Or in front of him. Really, if he could have not been there, that would have been preferable. At least until my blood sugar was higher. I lifted my mug instinctively to my lips, the need to fill my empty stomach superseding my critical thinking skills.

I pretended to drink so no one would realize with me that it was empty.

"I found this in my printer," Uncle Hank flapped the small stack of notes I'd printed for him this morning about project management systems that the Design department was considering. "Tell me something, do you ever sleep?"

"Sure." The familiar familial banter made my brain unfuzz a bit. "I hang upside down in my office like a bat."

"And Josh doesn't mind that you never go home?"

"Josh was last spring," I informed him. "Now it's Harvey. And no, he's fine. I think me working all the time makes him really appreciate when I do come home and unchain him from the radiator."

"So they're seasonal," he said it like he had finally googled the answer to a lingering question. "Just long enough to drain them dry, then. What do you do once they've run out of blood?"

"Release them back into the wild with a better credit score and no memory of where they've been for the last three or four months."

The elevator arrived at the fifth floor, where the employee snack room called my name.

"Is Harvey your summer or fall flavor?" Hank asked as we stepped out, and it was strange to hear him refer to them that way, like he knew what I called them privately.

“Summer,” I gave a wistful sigh.

“Summer’s over.”

“Yeah, well, maybe this one’ll be different.”

“Is he?”

“I don’t think so.”

We turned the corner and found my second-oldest brother Lasting hovering off to the side, holding a big stack of mismatched papers in his arms, chatting with one of his minions. Balanced on top of the stack was one of the disgusting snack cakes they stocked in the break room in its third World War-proof plastic container.

“Just the woman I was about to look for,” Lasting said with a manic edge that was probably supposed to sound cheerful. With that wealthy-man cowlick in his short black hair and too-big ears, he looked the most like Dad out of all my brothers. There were dark circles under his hazel eyes that made the growing crow’s feet stand out. He was even wrinkling like Dad.

“I’ve got bullshit to deal with for the rest of the week, do you think you could double-check all this for me?”

I blindly handed my mug to someone and accepted the pile. “I didn’t realize doing your homework was part of my job description.”

“I am the only reason you passed calculus,” the VP of Finance reminded me sternly. “Get these to Firman when you get a chance.”

It was the Dad wrinkles that made me agree. 36 was too young to look so old, but that seemed to be the toll for maintaining wealth. “Ok.” I settled the papers in my arms and called to Lasting over my shoulder, “Drink some water.”

My stomach saw the doors to the break room before I did and I found myself walking through them before I'd made a decision to move. I levered Lasting's pile of what looked like accounting spreadsheets onto one of the round tables and picked things out of the grocery-style fridges along one wall. I felt judgmental eyes on me as I sat down to eat them without paying, but I honestly was too hungry to give a fuck. The permanently soggy sandwich bread was both a delicacy and repulsive. I forced myself to slow down chewing before my gag reflex caught up with me.

“Reagan.”

I looked up to see Russell approaching my table. He looked dangerous for my situation in a navy suit with a brown tie that matched the color of his eyes. The tie even had a subtle gold pin patterning, just like the flecks I'd only ever seen when the morning sunlight caught his face just right. He tipped the gray travel mug in his big hands towards me and said, “I think this is yours.”

“Oh, god, thanks,” I started to uncross my legs to stand and take it, but he was already at the table.

He leaned over and placed my mug with the precision of a waiter. He was politely, professionally distant, and for some reason it felt like an indictment.

Shit, now was my chance. Say something. Apologize. Start a dialogue. I looked up at him and god, he was so tall. The world seemed to glitter around him and the taste of my sandwich festered in my mouth. I really should have gotten one of the little frozen personal pizzas in there, but the five minute microwave might have killed me.

“Thank you,” I remembered to say, giving a tight-lipped smile because there was probably something heinous stuck between my teeth. If he asked me about my day, I would answer better. About the weather. About anything.

He didn't even bother showing me any teeth with his begrudging little smile before turning and walking away without another word.

No one else in the break room seemed to think much of it, and I forced myself not to either—I *had* just shoved the mug at him unceremoniously and then run away—until I wrapped my hands around the travel mug, preparing to stand. It was heavy, and just slightly warm through the worn plastic. I pulled off the lid to see a fresh, caramel-colored brew inside, giving off steam. I lifted it to my mouth to stop whatever insane expression my face wanted to make and took a tentative sip, braced for it to be too heavy on the cream I could see swirling in the cup, or too light on the sugar, but it tasted just the way I liked it.

Russell Harris remembered how I took my coffee. And he maybe wasn't talking to me.

I left the resume until Tallahassee had drained me dry and left me a stupid, over-caffeinated husk. I usually didn't drink coffee after it stopped feeling like morning, but of course I drank every drop of Russell's. I went to my actual office on the eighth floor, because even though the building was mostly empty save the echo of a janitor's squeaky wheel, I still wanted a door between me and the world when I looked at it. His resume. His history. All the things I had wondered about all these years.

I forced myself to sit patiently through my unused desktop's slow boot, followed by the even slower loading of my email. We'd talked so much about our pasts, and so little of our futures. And now here we were, in that imagined future. I knew his father wanted him to join the family business, whatever that was, but he said he never would. I'd nodded and thought we must be the same person because I felt the same way. Had he

ever lost his backbone too, or was Norcross Lasting another step away from his father's expectations?

I settled my hand on the mouse, caressing the right click with my finger as if I could soften it up and make it click faster once I got to Hank's email. Finally, *finally*, there was the resume.

The font was something more exciting than Times New Romance, more serious than Verdana. The page was divided up into hard angles with bold, effective verbs. It was somehow very him. He had been soft and just the right kind of mean when we lay in bed together, talking about shit you could only tell a stranger. When he mentioned his family, he became sharp and untouchable and I'd always been the kind of idiot to run with scissors and hold my finger over a candle flame until it blistered.

Right under *Russell Harris*, the name I had once nearly hired private investigators to find because all I'd known about his identity was "Russ," was an address. It wasn't local. I looked at his previous job history and realized he'd been living in Miami for almost the entire eight years since we met. He'd probably spent all his free time outside, at the beach or doing something physical. He didn't like to be still or stay indoors. Any time during our week together that I couldn't find him in the pristine white hotel suite he'd been staying in, I could wander out onto the balcony and find him there, soaking in the sun and the breeze. He'd do push-ups or pace around like a trapped animal. I'd told him he could go for a walk or something, that I didn't need him to stay inside with me all the time while I worked on my valedictorian speech. He'd shook his head and said something about not being ready to be a civilian yet.

You need to work up a sweat, I'd replied every time, trying to look sexy, before wandering back to his bed, waiting to hear the *click* of the doorknob turning that said he was right behind me.

I crossed my legs and tried to concentrate. Personal curiosity aside, he was one of the C's and I needed to know exactly what Dad had gotten us into. I had the PDF open on one screen and Google open on the other, taking notes by hand. I was about halfway through deciphering all the tech and security speak when I heard one of the doors on the hall shut with a loud *click*, followed by that squeaky wheel and the shuffle of a tired blue-collar worker.

It had been perfect with Russ every time. From the minute we kissed in the middle of that hotel room couch, surrounded by random partiers neither of us knew, it had been right. And it had only gotten better over the next six days. I'd been obsessed with it, with him, and it really hadn't gone anywhere in the years since. I uncrossed and re-crossed my legs, trying to ignore the effect his *font choice* had on me.

Memories of Russ had become grooves in my brain, I'd revisited them so often. The fantasy I could always safely return to, no matter what I did with other people. A flavor, Coffee, once told me he didn't want to fuck anyone he'd regret later, after I challenged his allergy to hookup culture. I'd pointed out that anyone you don't marry is someone you regret fucking. Probably also the ones you marry. The only safe, unregrettable partner was a one night—or one week—stand, the kind where you don't have their number and you might not even know their name. Only a stranger can't disappoint.

God, was that what I'd done? Had I disappointed him with one shitty interaction?

It would have hurt my feelings, the other way around. We'd had this perfect little honeymoon away from the real world, sharing too much and hiding just enough to stay mysterious. If I'd tried to make some sort of small talk with him and he'd blown me off, it would have tarnished that soft, almost decade-old memory.

And now, of course, I would never be able to think about him without thinking about that sharp little smile when he'd handed me a fresh cup of coffee. Fuck. Only I could find a way to fuck something up so hard that I could ruin my spunk bank with a few stupid words.

There was no point in pretending I was going to finish this resume tonight. I stuffed my notes in my bag and headed out. I thought about texting Basil as I walked out the door but figured I'd get the same response I did yesterday. The man was religious about his bedtime on the weeknights. He was probably already in bed, teeth brushed, covers tucked in around him as he read about who knows what on his phone. Copyright laws of the 1870s or puppy pregnancy syndrome.

My previous arousal combined with my current self-recriminations were going to make for a lack-luster orgasm that would leave me feeling less satisfied than I did right now, but I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight without trying. Maybe I'd watch some TV for a while, try to find something to get me in a better mood, and just imagine how I was going to put Basil through his paces this weekend when his bedtime restrictions were lifted.

I unlocked my front door to find a pair of Vans where my Fiona usually perched, and the dulcet tones of a politics podcast coming from the living room. A familiar head of wiry dark hair popped up over the back of the cream-colored couch and turned to watch me deposit my bag and shoes by the door. With his Armenian build, Ethiopian hair, big

gapped teeth, dark eyes set too close together and too deep into his skull, and the most cartoonishly thick glasses I had ever seen, Basil was what my most sycophantic acquaintances might call “unconventionally attractive.” Which was just another way of saying someone was unattractive until you get used to the way their face looks and don’t really notice anymore.

Basil smiled sweetly at me. The only beautiful things about him were his kind, expressive mouth and his dick, and that was really all I needed anyway. “Hey, there.”

Fiona leapt over the back of the couch to greet me in person, rubbing up against my legs before trotting to her food bowl. I didn’t worry about her needing me to stand with her because I knew Basil would have done that whenever he came in.

“Hi,” I said, leaning over the back of the couch to kiss him. There was some sort of mechanical something that he was tinkering with on my coffee table, the iron-colored pieces neither adding or subtracting from how hideous the minimalist, geometric table was.

He was always working on something clockwork and he had taken my “make yourself at home” offer when I gave him a key very literally. I never had any idea what his contraptions were until it was totally finished and he’d given me a 20-minute explanation. I used to make it a little game with myself, trying to guess what it was and betting myself on my accuracy. But after five-ish months, I didn’t care much anymore. I mostly just wished he would put it on my unused dining room table instead of junking up my living room. It hadn’t seemed worth bringing up though. To Hank’s point earlier today, I probably wouldn’t be dealing with it much longer, anyway.

“I’m glad you’re here. I was just about to get in bed.”

Of course. I didn't need to check a clock to know it was way too late to hope I was getting any tonight. Instead, I had someone in my bed preventing me from giving myself any either.

“Ok. I'm gonna take a shower, then I'll join you.”

I walked around the big couch, through my bedroom and my closet with its thick, millennial pink carpet into my obscene master bath. Sometimes when I stood in the glass and subway-tile shower, it reminded me too much of the shower in that hotel room. I'd known even at eighteen that shower sex was a bad idea, but any time Russ showered, which was often with the amount of sweat we worked up, I would always give in to the temptation to join him. Sometimes if I touched the grout on my wall just right, I'd inadvertently remember holding on to a different tile for balance and laughing at the somber man who lathered the shampoo in my hair like he was washing a Faberge egg. When I stepped out and my foot connected with my plush bathmat, I might accidentally recall being wrapped in a towel by someone else, the way I never had been before, not even as a child.

Faced with the reality of Russell Harris, I realized how ridiculous it was that I'd let the memories of him seep into a room he'd never been in. Like he was dead, and not living in Miami doing something with computers and probably never thinking about me. I had a perfectly decent man who smiled at me and was probably reading a book about space right now in my bed, and I was pining like a teenager for some guy that was probably just another corporate asshole. I glared at my reflection in the mirror, ignoring the little imperfections in my face that only became visible without makeup.

A stupider woman might think this was about feelings, but I knew what this was really about: I needed to get laid. I'd been so good. I spent *weeks* in Mississippi without

touching anyone. There'd been opportunities, too. There were always opportunities when you had a conventionally attractive body and clearly more important things to do than talk to a man. I hadn't had any trouble respecting our unspoken—but therefore expected—contract of monogamy because I wasn't a fucking maniac, but I missed eliciting a reaction from someone that wasn't fear or frustration. Basil in particular was very reactive, gasping or shivering at the simplest touches, smiling when he did something that pleased me. It wasn't hard to wait for that. But I needed to break this celibacy streak now.

I walked back to my bedroom, ignoring my clothes, and going in tits-first. The soft yellow light of my bedside lamp illuminated the room, but the rest of my apartment was dark. There was a lump under my covers.

“Harvey?”

No response.

I padded over to the darkened side of the bed, hoping maybe if he caught sight of me, he'd rouse. But before I could even get there, a soft snore broke through the quiet ambient noise of the city outside the windows. For fuck's sake.

“Seriously?!”

I stomped back into my closet. I wasn't about to just lie there and *go to sleep* next to the man who kept not fucking me. Here I was, confronted with the grown up version of my favorite sexual fantasy and needing to fuck that all the way out of my system, and Basil didn't even have the decency to talk to me before falling asleep in my own goddamn bed.

I put on all black and a grayish-blue kimono with a white floral pattern that looked almost exactly like the backs of my tarot cards. Any time I got dressed and I

didn't have time to pull a card, I tried to embody something general about the deck. It bothered me when I didn't follow my own self-imposed rules, even the very arbitrary ones. It was a little too early in fall to wear boots, so I finished the outfit off with my most comfortable and durable flats, and pulled my hair up into a messy bun.

I came back into the bedroom to get my phone off the bedside table where I knew Basil would have left it to charge. That apparently woke him up at least a little bit because he mumbled, "You're going out?"

"Yeah," I whispered, feeling strangely guilty, like I was lying.

"Everything ok?" his eyes were open now, sleepy but alert enough.

"Lasting asked me to look at this crazy stack of spreadsheets. I'm not very good at accounting, so it'll take me a while to work through it."

"Oh," he looked at me for a long moment, pulling the covers down a bit. "There's some food in a to-go container for you in the fridge."

"I'm not going to eat your food."

"It was for you. For tomorrow," he yawned. "Or later tonight. I know you don't remember to eat sometimes when you're in the middle of it at work."

"You do?"

He rolled over onto his back, staring at the ceiling, another yawn punctuating his words. "Sure, your dad warned me about it."

"He did? When?"

"Well, we've only met the one time at that company picnic a few months ago," Basil reminded me with a little smile. "So I think it was sometime between the hot dogs and the fireworks."

"Oh."

I should've probably been bothered by that. I didn't need the men in my life discussing how to take care of me. I could take care of myself. But all I felt was warm and a little uncomfortable: warm because my dad cared enough to notice anything about me and to see to it that someone was looking after me; uncomfortable because this wasn't the first time Basil had packed me leftovers and made sure they were near my bag when I left in the morning. How long had he been quietly husband-ing me without me noticing?

"Well, thank you," I said, so uncomfortable it didn't occur to me until I was outside that he was awake again and I could probably convince him to have some sleepy sex. Instead, I scuttled out the door, giving Fiona a few pets and compliments before going back to the office.

Chapter Five

I tapped my keycard to Hank's door again. The slide of light on the side flickered green for a moment, then reverted back to red. The strap of my bag slid down my shoulder. I tilted sideways to keep it from falling all the way to the crook of my elbow and tried again. Red... green, green, green... red. The bag slipped down anyway and that part of my arm wasn't strong enough to hold it up for long. Fuck it.

I did the careful curtsy-like bending I'd been taught before I understood what it meant to bend at the waist in a skirt: knees locked together, dropping into a delicate crouch, chest against knees. I set my bag and the stack of papers in my arms on the floor. I shook my employee badge like that might actually do something, then set it carefully, barcode down, to the slim black reader on the wall. Usually I just had to tap barely a corner on these things and the door unlocked, but maybe this one needed some finessing. A full card.

It would be Hank's office if it was anyone's that wouldn't be easy. He'd held out *so long* from the switch from actual metal keys in locks. Clarence had been too cowed by him to insist when all the other locks had been installed. I'd had to take it upon myself to have one more ordered from the installation company to be done when Hank was out sick for three days almost a year after the rest of us updated.

The light flashed three times like it always did to indicate that it was actually reading the card, then stayed red.

I left the papers by his door and headed for the security offices on the second floor. My nails tapped in time to the click of my heels, and something weird was happening to my heartbeat. I'd walked into Hank's office hundreds of times while he was in meetings or at home with Aunt Lauren. I knew better than to fuck with his stuff—his retaliatory “pranks” bordered on acts of terrorism—and I never disrupted his weird, Carrollian organizational structure. I just set the stuff he needed right in the place where it would catch his attention, then I left. I never snooped. I never disrupted.

So why had he locked me out instead of just talking to me about it?

It had to be some sort of mistake. Hank had never been the avoid-conflict type. That was the kind of thing Dad could be notorious for outside of the office. Anytime there was a family fight, like when Lasting started dating Matthew's high school sweetheart and everyone ended up taking sides in the ensuing fight, he just... worked a lot until the fight blew over. But if Hank had a problem with me letting myself into his office, he would have said something to my face about it. There was something wrong with my keycard. There had to be.

I was almost to the security office when it occurred to me that I could've left the papers with Hank's assistant. Fuck I guess he *had* told me a couple of times to just leave stuff with her. But it had always been more of a “you can just leave it with Cindy when you're done” kind of thing. Not “please don't leave it in my office.” Had I not been listening hard enough?

I walked down the long blue-carpeted hallway to the glass double-doors in front of the security suite. Almost as stifling as the open concept up in the Marketing floor, Security was a series of glass-walled offices. There was some decoratively streaked film over them to give the illusion of privacy but they were still clear enough that I could see

all the bodies inside each office and the number of screens they all shared. Only Clarence's old office had fully-frosted windows, which was a blessing. I wasn't really in the mood to see Russell's disapproving face today.

Jack Grissom was the poor schmuck in charge of, among other things, key cards and locks. His section of the office he shared with two other people was minimalist to the point of barrenness, with only keyboard, mouse, and screens on the smooth white desk. No pictures, plants, or even a stray pen. I leaned on the doorframe and waited for him to finish what he was doing. I felt Kyra and Sam's awareness of me in the way they hunched over their keyboards and pretended to be busier than they probably were.

"One second..." he murmured as he clicked a few things on his screen.

"No rush."

I fiddled with my keycard, examining the slick barcode on the back. It didn't look warped or disrupted, and it had been working just fine until today. Except... there'd been something yesterday with Lasting's office too, hadn't there? When I'd finally completed his awful spreadsheet after an all-nighter. I couldn't really remember. But it had worked getting into the building before it unlocked by itself at 7:15, so it couldn't be totally faulty. I flipped the card over and examined the little picture of me. It was an old headshot taken right before graduating with my MBA. My face hadn't changed much, and I still owned that blue button-down. In the photo my hair was glossy, perky blonde, perfectly curled around my face. I'd still been highlighting it back then, and spending hours in front of the mirror and thousands in product to have magazine hair even in the worst humidity. Now the highlights were gone and I'd faded to my naturally darker, mousier blonde. My styling at best now consisted of straightening it, but usually it was

either up in a bun or just hanging around my shoulders. I should probably spend a little bit more time on it...

“Sorry about that. What can I do for you?”

Jack had turned his body towards me, hands on his knees, listening expectantly.

“I think something’s wrong with this,” I held my keycard out to him. “It’s not letting me in anywhere.”

“Hmmm, let’s take a look.” He took the card from my fingers and removed its plastic case. There was some sort of scanner thing on the table next to him that he set the card on flat. A blue flash and I watched as a copy of it appeared on the screen. I couldn’t contain my curiosity. It was fascinating to know that even after so much time spent sticking my nose in other people’s business that there was still some part of this company I was entirely unfamiliar with. I moved to stand behind him as he worked. Several program tabs popped up as Jack looked at my record, but I wasn’t close enough to read what most of the fields were.

“Everything looks fine...” he said in that way tech people had when they were more focused on the screen in front of them than what they were saying. “I’m not seeing any issues with the card itself. Let me check it myself though.” He leaned down and took the card out, turning it this way and that, running his fingers over it. “Nope. This looks fine. So let’s check your permissions. We just reset everyone’s, so it wouldn’t surprise me if a couple of people got totally wiped...”

A sense of profound, illogical relief swept through me. It really was just a technical failure. I watched a different program pop up and Jack leaned forward, reading it closely.

He hummed again. “You’ve got after-hours permissions to the building, which is right...” I nodded even though he wasn’t looking at me. “And your office is 814, right?”

“Yeah.”

“After-hours, 814, breakroom, top floor elevator access...I’m not seeing anything wrong here. What problems were you having?”

He started to spin towards where I had been, then realized I was standing directly behind him. He managed to stop the spin of his chair before his knees knocked against mine. I looked down at him, noticing the way his left eyebrow hairs were running in different directions and the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

“I need access to all of it.”

“All of it?”

“Everything. Every office. Every room. Every access.”

Jack’s left hand reached up and touched his messy eyebrow.

“It’s the permissions I had before,” I pointed out. “Clarence gave it to me.”

“Right,” he nodded slowly. His fingers gripped one of his eyebrow hairs and tugged. “You were supposed to get an email, along with everyone else whose permissions got limited. Harris looked over everyone and—”

“Harris is new,” I cut him off. I gave him a polite, close-lipped smile that I *knew* felt very scary to be on the other end of because it’s the smile Mom always gave when I said “*but Dad said...*” “He doesn’t understand how things work around here yet.”

When in doubt, make up something urgent.

“Hank expected something to be on his desk—” I made a show of checking my delicate gold wrist watch. “15 minutes ago. And I’m not going to get in trouble because

Harris is out of the loop. So if you could just restore my permissions, I'll get out of your hair and he and I can discuss it later."

Jack's chair had begun to drift away, his body moving its delicate parts away from me. His officemates weren't even pretending like they were working anymore. "I can't do that. There's a security form that has to be filled out and it has to be signed by your supervisor and Harr—"

"Do you know who my supervisor is, Jack?"

He shook his head, finally dislodging a poor eyebrow hair from its home.

"That would be Henry Norcross. The first. Does this sound like the kind of bullshit the Chairman of the Board is supposed to be dealing with?"

"N-no—"

"And when Harris was hired, did *his* supervisor, the CEO, have to fill out a security form?"

"No, but—"

"I don't need a security form, Jack. And I definitely don't need to be wasting my time with this conversation. Give me. My old. Permissions. Back."

"I can't!"

I took a deep breath.

"I really can't. There's a protocol. Harris is going to have to do it."

Alright. I snatched my keycard from his desk and walked out of the office, saying, "Thanks, Jack," over my shoulder.

I negotiated with myself on the way to Russell's office back down the hall. It went against every instinct I had to talk about this in private. In my experience, men who wanted to power trip needed to be tripped right back in public to get them to back off. It

was so *so* easy to stand there and let a man show how stupid he was. Maybe it was better to save this for some time more public. On the other hand, we could end up looking like actors in a bad romcom trying to hide dormant sexual tension. If there even *was* any sexual tension. I sure felt tense but I had no idea where his head was. For all I knew, he was happily married. Or he could hate me. Or he could simply just not care at all...

Not that any of that mattered. As long as no one figured out we'd fucked.

The door to Clarence's old office was open. I knocked as I walked in. Russell looked up from one of his computer monitors, posturing straightening as he realized how he'd been hunching. Why did he have to be wearing computer glasses? The way they were sliding down his nose was disgustingly charming.

"Reagan."

"You got a minute?"

"Not really—"

"Great," I shut the door to his office.

"Come in," he said sardonically, taking his glasses off and setting them down.

The case snapped shut. "Sorry about the mess. I'd offer you a seat, but, well..."

Clarence's office was mid-transformation. The patented blue couch in one corner was still there, as was the big desk, only now they were covered in boxes, stacks of papers and binders, and more than a few books. The television on the wall that had been turned to the weather channel for as long as I could remember was off. Clarence's one computer monitor was now three, newer, sleeker models.

"I'm waiting on Emily to find me a few bookshelves that'll match the room, then I'll have all my chairs back."

Never let the Cunt do anything for you, I would have told him but I was already bored with the small talk. “That’s fine, this won’t take long.”

He leaned back, folding his arms over his chest. With his suit jacket hanging on Clarence’s old coat rack by the door, the breadth of that chest was obvious, as were the hard curves of his biceps. “What can I do for you?”

“My building permissions got taken away.”

“Ah,” his face was soft, apologetic. “I’m sorry that you found out before I could brief you. I’m not great at communication, so I have an email going through Content right now to make sure I get it right. We worked with HR to better define roles and their permissions, and yours was one of a few that needed to be downgraded. It’s the first step in—”

“A great security plan, I’m sure.” I waved a hand. “Look, I get it. But I need my permissions back.”

He was already shaking his head. “I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. Jack out there said you’re the one. This is disrupting my regular operations and I need them back.”

He pursed his lips for a moment, then leaned forward. Was it going to be that easy? Maybe I really could work with someone who’d seen me naked...

“If you want this changed, you’re going to have to get HR to reevaluate what someone at your level needs.”

“Someone at my level”? Do you know what I do?”

“Director of Special Projects,” there was a hint of a sneer in his voice.

“Yes. But do you know what I *do*?”

I didn't realize until it went away that his face had been subtly expressive up until I said that. Now it was closed off, eyes flat, a not-quite frown. On a woman, it would be called Resting Bitch Face. On him, it was a little intimidating.

"There's a protocol now, Reagan. Explain it to HR and I'd be happy—"

"The answer," I raised my voice over his, "is that you don't. You can't reasonably set some blanket security protocols on my position when you have no idea what I actually—"

"I'm sorry." He stood, his chair rolling out behind him and bouncing lightly off the wall. "I don't want to be rude, but this is a waste of my time." He began walking around the desk, in a familiar herding gesture that meant he wanted me to leave the room. "This was an easy first step in a series of changes to make Norcross Lasting more secure. We created a plan based on the employee files provided by HR—"

"Those HR files are a fucking mess!" I didn't get this far by letting men sheep dog me out of the room. Especially not big, muscley men who'd bent me over a hotel balcony. I stood my ground, folding my arms. "You're never going to get an accurate representation of the way it actually works here based on—"

"I can't make exceptions for every position." He reached the threshold of appropriate distance between coworkers and settled on looming over me since I hadn't moved yet.

I felt physically dwarfed by him, but also metaphorically small. I'd somehow ended up sounding like a spoiled brat through this entire conversation. Might as well lean into it.

"I'm not asking you to make an exception for every position. Just mine."

“If I make an exception for you, then where does it end? This isn’t some petty keycard access issue, this is about this entire company’s appalling data governance.”

There was a thread of genuine frustration in his voice, and my own temper rose to meet it. “I’m just—”

“Just trying to help? Just trying to improve things?” I rolled my eyes with dramatic flare. “What do you think I do all day, every day? You think Clarence left you with problems, you should see everywhere else. This place is a shit-show, and I need full access to be able to fix it.”

“Then make. That pitch. To HR.”

“I don’t have time. And I shouldn’t have to. Do my brother’s have all access?”

I waited. He didn't answer.

“Did *they* have to pitch it to HR? Or get the Board to sign some pieces of paper giving them permission to get into a supply closet?”

His face was totally blank again. He leaned back, dissipating the shadow he cast over me. I didn’t need to hear him say anything to know the answer: of course they didn’t.

“Just give me back my goddamn permissions and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Something about the way he pulled air into his lungs told me he was about to say something hurtful. “I know you don’t have as much power and influence as your brothers, but that doesn’t give you the right to come into my office and berate me.”

Power and influence?

If I had to give one thing to the Cunt, it was that she was right when she told me a woman would never get anywhere in a man’s world if she cried. One breakdown, one slip up, and we would always be the delicate, breakable, unreliable one. A tear in this office

could become a tidal wave of missed opportunities outside it. The rage was building up behind my eyes and I was far too close to overflowing. There was only one way to fight it.

“Power and influence’?!” my voice raised in pitch and volume. I flung my arms out wildly as I said, “Ask anyone in this company who they’re more afraid of, Henry or me, and the answer is going to be me.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Pick any definition of power. Afraid of me, wanting to please me, expecting me to help them with their problems. The answer is me. My title may not sound very interesting or useful, but I am a vital part of this company. *Essential.*”

“Then get HR to update your position to indicate that!” he threw his hands up. “I don’t know how many other ways you want me to fucking say it, Reagan. Talk to HR.”

“Oh, I’m going to. In the meantime, restore my permissions.”

“No.”

It was a blanket “no,” tucked in on all sides. A military no. An unbreachable no.

“You do *not* want me to make this my problem.”

“Actually, I think I do,” he stepped back, a period on the end of that no. “I need to know where your ego ends and my job begins, so, please. Make this a problem.”

I scrambled for something to give me the last word, but all I found were the angry tears still waiting. So I simply turned and walked out of the office, forcing myself not to slam the door like a teenager.

Chapter Six

I made it to 5:30 before I gave up. I'd spent most of the afternoon staring at the tight rings of carpet fiber after retreating to my office, my brain trying to latch onto any thought that didn't make me feel fucking stupid and useless. The most work I managed was a few uninterrupted minutes of counting the different subtle color variations in the carpet. I got up to 11 before my eyes blurred and *you don't have as much power and influence as your brothers* started on a loop.

It was a real clusterfuck of a comment.

Obviously, my response had been the wrong one, if only because it had painted me right into that corner. I hadn't been left without the last word in a long time, and I was mostly just relieved that I hadn't burst into tears and stomped off like the last time the Cunt had managed it. I ran and reran the conversation over in my mind, trying to find where I could have done better, but had yet to find it. What could you even say to that?

It was fucking rude, for starters. The way he'd said it, like he was making allowances for my delicate feminine ego, was galling. *Especially* since he didn't know shit about me or my job or the "power and influence" I had here. Pointing that out had obviously been the wrong tactic, though. Someone with power and influence doesn't fight about it. And they definitely don't *lose* that fight.

The real problem with what he said, which I tried very hard not to think about but couldn't escape, was that I wasn't even supposed to care. I had only joined Norcross Lasting because I hadn't figured out what else to do after I graduated. Building an empire

or whatever it was that Dad and Henry and the others thought they were doing was not what I wanted from life. I'd seen what it did to Mom. I had never and would never be obsessed with power and influence in a company where my last name gave me all of that anyway. It was weak and boring and a cop-out way to live my life.

And hadn't I said as much to Russ once? Over the years a lot of the particulars of our first conversation had hazed over. I could remember trying so hard not to give enough details about my family away, but I couldn't remember what I'd had to say about the gilded road ahead of me before I'd even officially graduated high school. Exactly what had happened after he finally got tired of listening to me whine, though, was etched into my memory.

Poor little rich girl, he'd sneered, lining up his pool shot. *It must be so hard to have your whole perfect life planned out by your loving parents.*

He must've missed, because it was my turn after that.

I know this must be hard for you to understand, I'd said as I rounded the pool table with a slight swing to my hips. I'd been trying so hard to look sexy and nonchalant while we played. I was an eighteen-year-old in a college bar with a fake ID. It felt like any slight misstep and I'd get kicked out. *But not everyone is interested in signing away their choices and being told what to do with every moment of their day. Some of us—I* leaned over the table with my cue, doing the finger thing I'd seen in movies. Pulled back, then pushed forward to hit the white ball—*have fucking brains.*

There'd been a moment of satisfaction as the angry scar on his eyebrow dipped in frustration, before we both realized that my misdirected ball had slammed into his fingers gripping the edge of the pool table with a painful-sounding crunch. In the waiting room of the nearest Urgent Care—which he'd said he didn't need but I'd insisted on—he'd

pressed his big warm shoulder against mine and leaned in close to whisper in my ear,
Following orders isn't about not having a brain.

I know, I whispered, even though I didn't really, I just felt contrite about breaking his finger.

It's about having something to believe in. And being part of something that gives a shit about you. You're lucky your family does.

I still wasn't sure why I said it, because I didn't know if it was true, but I'd looked at him next to me in that waiting room and said, *I don't think they do, though*. And for some reason my eyes welled up, even though I'd been working so hard to fight my crying instincts.

Yeah. Mine either.

Fiona stepped on me as she ate, her tiny paw putting a painful amount of weight on the top of my foot. "Ow!" I reprimanded, dancing around the edge of the counter to get away. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, remembered Basil had a family thing early in the morning, then put it face-down on the kitchen counter. The question of why I'd said that back then and if it was a lie had been ricocheting around my head like an errant pool ball for eight years without a resolution and now *power and influence* might end up knocking around in there too.

Something to do. I needed something to do besides relive every stupid thing I'd ever said. Maybe I'd work off this anger in the building's gym so I could start thinking clearly...

I walked away from Fiona down the little aisle in my apartment between the massive dining table and the hideous beige rug that delineated the "living room" from the "dining room" in the cavernous open concept of the loft. I was halfway to the shelves

with their books arranged backwards in a wash of unread cream when my stomach reminded me it was empty. I reached the familiar spot by the doorway to my bedroom, where the rug stopped and the built-ins started, then turned on the ball of one foot and walked back to the kitchen counter.

I didn't delude myself into thinking I would walk to my fridge and grab an apple before my workout. My feet came to the floorboard that had started to feel looser than the others, slightly more than arm's length from the industrial chic bar stools at the kitchen island that were murder on my ass, and spun again. Back across the aisle, to the free floating space between the living room's edge and the bedroom's beginning, then around again. The floorboard by the bar stools felt softer than the rest, and like always, I wondered if it had been that way when I moved in or if the force of my turn was wearing it down. Always in the same place with the same foot.

I walked to the shelves, turned, walked back to the kitchen. Again and again, unable to stop but also not really trying to. My anxiety lived somewhere in my thighs, right above my knees. It sent orders to my legs I was helpless to follow. I should work out, my brain thought, though not very hard. It already knew: my legs would only accept this.

I imagined telling someone about today. I practiced how I would say it, first to someone who couldn't judge me, and then to someone who could. I studied the inflection points on the words I'd spoken in Russell's office, trying to find a cadence to repeat them that made me sound better. Made him sound worse. I spun the story around and around as I spun on my right foot until I reached the same question from my hypothetical listener that I'd been asking myself all day: Why did I give a damn if I had power and influence—perceived or real—at Norcross Lasting?

“I don’t care, is the thing,” I said, too many lines of dialogue stacking on top of each other until I couldn’t keep them in my mind at once. Fiona was listening, right? That was an audience predisposed to sympathy. “This is just a layover. I have my whole life to move on. I’m only here until...”

I hadn’t quite figured out the *until*. When I first graduated, it was “until I got a job offer.” But then every job an MBA grad would apply to looked the same as the one I already had and that seemed fucking boring. At least at Norcross Lasting I could reprogram Conrad’s keyboard so none of the letters corresponded correctly on his computer. When every reasonable job seemed worse than the one I already had, I gave myself an arbitrary deadline of another six months. Those six months had come and gone almost two years ago and here I still was.

Maybe this was a sign. Working with an ex-flavor—it felt wrong to think of him that way, but he was the template I’d based them on—was just not going to work for me. I mean, Jesus fucking Christ I almost *cried*. At *work*. Totally unacceptable. That could only be my hormones raging like I was 18 again. His pheromones throwing me out of wack. At this rate, my period would be syncing up with everyone’s else instead of their uteruses snapping to attention when I walked by. It was time to go.

I looked at my bag in its spot by the door but it took a few more turns before my legs would let me walk over to it, aching from the shortened stride I had to use to capitalize on the limited distance. I could spend the rest of the evening calculating just how long it would take me to clear everything off my plate before I left. I took my laptop out of my bag, set it in the counter above Fiona’s bowl so she could return to eating, and opened it. But when the familiar lock screen appeared, I paused.

One lost argument and I was really going to run away? Russell and I had shared a building for a week and I was considering a retreat. Considering letting a *man* drive me out of my own family's company. And *ruining my Friday night on top of all of that?*

I slammed my laptop shut.

"We are better than this, Fiona," I said, staring at my fridge as a distraction plan began to form. She meowed in agreement. "We're gonna make him fucking regret today."

Her warm body pressed against my shins, her back arched in that way that meant she wanted to be picked up. I obliged, raising her elegant face to mine, one hand under her butt like I'd been taught to hold a baby. She purred aggressively. "Wanna have some ice cream with me and plot our revenge?"

Purring continued.

"You are the best girl that ever lived, did you know that?"

I pressed her to my chest and walked around to grab a pint of ice cream in my freezer before going to the little reading nook by my big windows overlooking the city. When I sat down, Fiona of course immediately left my lap, freeing my hand to open my phone. Like clockwork every Friday night, the Instagram [@dairytodream](#) posted about a new ice cream flavor. "Ice cream" being a loose term for what they reviewed. There were ice creams, but also gelatos, sorbets, frozen yogurts, custards, granitas, semifreddos, and occasionally unholy "healthy" desserts like Halo Top. Dairy to Dream posted gorgeous photos of some of the strangest and most exciting flavors in the world, and included hilarious reviews, puns, and general anecdotes. I had no idea who the actual poster was, but they *had* to be pretty well off, or making some sort of money from the account. The photos never included the locations where the ice cream was from (no cone shots in front

of the Eiffel Tower or the Leaning Tower of Pisa for this account), but either the poster was traveling the world just to review desserts, or they were having them specially shipped from all over, like I was.

I was only just now getting to try one of the flavors from a couple of weeks ago: pomegranate habanero ice cream, from Peru. I stuck my spoon into the softened dark pink top and took a slow, deliberate bite. I didn't have some of the food hang-ups that so many women had; an ancillary benefit of growing up with a personal chef was that all the conversations most girls witnessed their mothers have with themselves about fad diets and "bad food" happened with the staff when the kids were elsewhere. But I did have a problem not taking the time to pay attention to my food. I was usually working, walking, driving, or glued to my phone while eating. So, like tarot in the mornings forced me to slow down and be intentional for a moment, my date with Dairy to Dream was when I checked back in with my taste buds and rewarded myself for surviving another week.

Dairy to Dream had described this flavor a few weeks ago as "*the first time Persephone let Hades touch her—complex, hot, and surprisingly sweet.*" They'd spun the story of the goddess of green things and her marriage to the god of the underworld. "*People think that Persephone must be some delicate flower who brings out Hades' softer side, but I always thought that was bullshit. I met Persephone once in a bar and she chewed me up and spat me out like so many pomegranate seeds. The Queen of the Underworld is a raging bitch with a pretty face, NOT for the faint of heart, just like this ice cream. But if you can wait out the fires like Hades, you'll find yourself in for the ride of your life. And yes, that's an innuendo.*"

As the barely-diluted habanero burned a path through my sinuses and tastebuds, leaving me wide open to the tart sweetness of pomegranate, I wondered if this is what it

felt like to be one of my flavors. Was I their Persephone? Or just a raging bitch? None of them had “*waited out the fires,*” so to speak, so I guess they weren’t my Hades. But I did wonder, often, if they regretted knowing me. Was I an experience, like this ice cream that I was enjoying but would never buy again, or a regret? When Basil inevitably got sick of bending over backwards to accommodate me when I didn’t reciprocate, I wondered if he would sit tinkering at his own coffee table humming “Thank U, Next” to himself or listening to Taylor Swift’s worst ex takedowns and throwing darts at a picture of me. Or whatever music he enjoyed, since I had no idea what he listened to.

I stared blindly at Dairy to Dream’s newest post about Cilantro Lime gelato, imaging each flavor hating me. All around this city were men commiserating with their friends about the cunt they fucked for a couple months before they came to their senses and ran. The only ones that might not were my high school boyfriend Spencer, and Basil, and only because they were legitimately good guys who wouldn’t feel better shit-talking someone else, not because they saw some inherent worth in my terrible behavior.

I left the account, leaving Cilantro Lime to consider when I was in a better frame of mind, and scrolled. Most of my feed were photos of the insufferably rich, insufferably happy, or insufferably Christian elites of Birmingham, and tarot accounts. A picture of someone’s elaborate wedding stacked above a spread about contacting your ancestors and under an ad for astrology rings from Etsy. I lifted my spoon to my mouth and immediately choked on the shocking flavor. Right, no scrolling with this ice cream.

I tossed my phone and stared out at the city. Down the street, the Alabama Theatre was having some sort of event, with adults and kids in costumes lining down the street to get in. Must be *Rocky Horror*, based on the amount of naughty maids with big hair. Among them was a little girl in a big Cinderella dress, though. She twirled around,

waving her wand at the people in line. My mouth burned as I ate and remembered my own Cinderella costume. It hadn't *really* been mine—Grandpa had kept a chest of costumes in his house for whenever we came to visit—but as the only girl, it was obviously meant for me. Once Matthew had put it on as a joke and I'd cried at the injustice until Jonathan had handed me a pirate hat and an alarmingly real sword acquired during one of Grandpa's world travels. I'd hefted that sword once and never picked up the sparkling wand that went with the Cinderella costume again. After that, I wore the dress and chased Conrad with the sword raised over my head. Whenever Grandpa caught me playing with it, he would chuckle and tell me I was just like Grandma Reagan, who'd died before I was born.

I watched the people on the street for a moment more, taking one last deliberate bite of ice cream, feeling it sizzle and diffuse on my tongue. Then I stuck the spoon into the top of the pint, reached for my phone to text my grandfather, then pulled up the note of pranks I hadn't tried yet. It would need to be good. And it would need to prove that I had plenty of *power and influence*.

Hey Judi,

I need my position reclassified so that I have full building access again. Harris is being a real ~~pain in my ass~~ stickler for protocol. Surely I'm not going to need Henry I to sign this form...

"Reagan," Basil nudged my foot with his thigh. "It's 1:30."

"Ok, yeah, one second. Just one more thing."

I stared at the email I had to send to Judi Gautreau in HR. This was so embarrassing. When I sent this, I was admitting defeat. Playing by Russell Harris's rules.

It had been a real battle of wills with myself all night while I planned my next steps. On the one hand, it was more expedient to get my permissions in order and quietly seek my revenge. On the other hand, it was more satisfying to make a big stink out of this and make it clear what I thought of Dad's newest hire. It was the quiet, nagging voice that kept whispering *not as much power and influence as your brothers* that kept me from the nuclear option.

Maybe it was better to just let this lie. I mean, sure, it would quickly become inconvenient to try to slip into Norcross Lasting's cracks if they suddenly had locks in front of them. But was it really worth all this trouble? Judi would have to do some sort of paperwork, probably deal with our clunky HR system. Then the update would go back to Jack and he'd have to do whatever it was he did to limit me in the first place. That was at least two people, if not more—if not *my grandfather*—that would be temporarily disrupted by what was objectively a pretty stupid problem.

“Ugh,” I moved my mouse to the send button. “Man up, Norcross.”

I'd dick-kick anyone who said “man up” to a man just experiencing some real human emotion, but it was a good reminder for me. No man would ever worry about inconveniencing someone, especially when it wasn't really an inconvenience but a *part of their job*. Certainly not a Norcross man. It was patently ridiculous to imagine this situation ever happening to Dad, Grandpa, or Uncle Hank, but I knew exactly what my brothers would do. Henry would have just stared Russell down with that dead-eyed thing he could do that made him seem like a serial killer and not a glorified accountant who owned at least five Baby Yoda t-shirts. Lasting would have barged into Judi's boss Sarah's office immediately and flirted with her outrageously until she was laughing and pissed off at the same time. Jonathan would have just filled out all the appropriate

paperwork *and* gotten Grandpa's signature. Matthew would have spent the rest of the day finding exactly which company bylaw or OSHA guideline or state regulation expressly prohibited limiting building access, put it on some important meeting agenda, and then argued that not only should his access not have been limited but that the existence of locks at all was a violation of his civil liberties. And Conrad would have just hacked the system and fixed his permissions himself.

So by comparison me sending a polite email to Judi and starting a war of attrition against the entire Security department was really rather tame. Too tame.

I backspaced over my email and wrote,

Can you make some time for me ASAP? Just need 10 minutes.

Then, just in case I couldn't make this work the way I wanted, I sent Russell's hallowed form to the printer in my home office.

"Ok, I'm done."

I closed my laptop on my stomach and looked at Basil. After a *you were gone for sooo long* greeting when he came by after his morning thing, we'd spent most of the day on the couch. He tinkered with his clockwork and watched a documentary while I worked to get ahead so I'd have time to hatch my diabolical plans next week. I watched him carefully put away his toys with the same hands that just a few hours ago had done some pretty incredible things to me. The worn red plaid of the flannel he wore over some nerd t-shirt was rolled up to his elbows, showing off his dark forearms.

I set my laptop on the floor and sat up, reaching out to touch those arms. What was it about forearms in particular that were so hot? Biceps were nice, sure. But *forearms*. Fuck me up. His skin was warm under my fingers, the black hair shorter and more sparse than most white men's, a strange reminder of how very vanilla most of my

flavors had been. I followed the curve of his arm to the smooth underside, skating my fingertips down to the pulse point in his wrist then up to the crook of his elbow. When he turned to me, his kiss tasted like the apple he'd had after lunch and that strange flavor that was just his. Always so surprising, to realize you'd fucked a man enough times that you'd know him by taste alone.

I was in his lap when he finally hummed and pulled away. "Reagan..."

"Please?" I did my best impression of a doe-eyed damsel.

It apparently wasn't very good because he sighed and started untangling us.

"We've missed it six weekends in a row."

I flopped onto my back on the couch. "You're right." I reached for the button of my jeans and undid them. "Good thing we've got a whole three hours."

"We've also said *that* six weekends in a row." He pointed accusatorily at me while he watched me start to slide my jeans down my hips, "We're not doing this again."

"Harvey," I whined, slipping one leg out, then the other.

"Come with me and tonight I'll show you the new thing I learned," he said in the sing-song voice one cajoled a toddler with. It worked.

"What new thing?" I stopped dragging my sweater up my body.

"Get dressed again and I'll show you tonight."

I looked at him while my vagina decided between instant gratification and new experiences. On the one hand, I could probably get him to show me right now. On the other hand, anticipation...

"Tom taught it to me," he wheedled.

Tom was Basil's roommate, whom I'd never seen because we spent most of the time at my place, but whose name I'd heard through the walls in Basil's apartment from *several* pleased individuals. At once.

"Ok!" I pulled my sweater back down and hopped into my jeans. "Hurry up, we've got a museum to go to!"

Basil laughed, and laughter always made him beautiful so of course I had to kiss him. And we almost ended up back on the couch but I managed to push him away with a stern finger to the chest. Then we were out the door and walking to the Museum of Art. It was a few blocks from my apartment, less than a mile, in an area under constant construction as Birmingham tried desperately to revitalize itself. Between the construction and the event taking up the museum's one dedicated parking lot, I was grateful for the walk even if it did mean not wearing the cutest shoes for my outfit. I'd pulled the Ace of Wands this morning, a card of subdued hues of gray and white and brown, depicting a hand reaching out of a cloud holding a big, phallic stick. It was a card about big sex energy and being struck with a new, all-consuming idea. To match it, I was wearing my best ass jeans, a low-back sweater in dove gray, and the cute little vibrator I'd found that could be worn like a necklace. I'd ideally pair this look with my thigh-high brown boots, but I was wearing plain old tennis shoes because I had too many lives to ruin next week to have blisters. And my big toe had only barely recovered from the staple incident on Monday.

The museum's facade was a prime example of the strange mixture of brutalism and art deco that a wayward great-great uncle or two had inflicted on Birmingham. It looked like it was made of five big blocks, four of concrete, the center a lovely grayish bluish greenish. People sat on the lawn or milled on the street, eating from the food trucks

parked on Rev Woods Jr. Boulevard. They were mostly black and brown, a notable—to my eyes—lack of white folks in the crowd. It was always like this at community events downtown. This morning, every white person in the Greater Birmingham Area was at the Pepper Place Farmers Market, and if there was a live show in Avondale or a pumpkin patch in Homewood Park, there'd be a congregation of blonde, tattooed millennials or monogrammed, brunette mommy bloggers. But in Birmingham proper, especially northside, I felt noticeably white.

We walked around the homeless men hovering just on the corner of the block and through the crowd until we were enveloped in the marble quiet of the museum entrance. The brightly colored, crystalline squiggly sculptures had been mounted on that wall above the stairs my entire life. Old memories I'd forgotten I forgot scratched to the front of my brain, reminding me that upstairs were the pretty Grecian vases and samurai swords. Down the hall to our right was the towering Bierstadt and the moody indigo walls. To the left, our destination, was the event space and the sculpture garden.

“Fuck, I love it here.” I was whispering for some reason.

The year of my parents' divorce, Grandpa brought me to the annual gala here. I'd worn my first floor-length, formal dress. Grandpa had approached me at the door in his tux like he was taking me to prom. Only, instead of anything as pedestrian as a corsage, he'd brought some of my namesake's jewels from the vault that would be mine when I turned thirty or married. An elaborate necklace of diamonds, sapphires, and emeralds, matching earrings, and a delicate bracelet. I couldn't have felt more like a princess if he'd put a tiara on my head, and I'd been paranoid the whole night that I would lose a diamond. But Grandpa had danced with me and introduced me to all the important, fancy

adults that I'd only ever seen during the ritual showing-off at the start of a dinner party before being ushered to my room for an evening in.

They'd asked me about school and my extracurriculars, what I thought of the art here that I'd seen on multiple class and family trips in my life. I had felt interesting and witty and important, which I suddenly realized was because neither of my parents had asked a thing about me or my life for the entire duration of their divorce.

"We have to see the witch before we leave," I told Basil as he led me to all the chattering to our left.

"The witch?"

"The, uh... sorceress, I think she's called?" I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. "After the Jesus shit before the America shit."

His reply got swallowed by the crowd noises bouncing off the high ceilings. The area that had become a glamorous ballroom for the donor's gala was now a checkered-floor children's playspace. There were tables lined with crafts and activities, drink stations, scampering youths, and black-clothed volunteers. The museum had started putting on community events celebrating different exhibits or holidays. Basil had read about it on an Instagram post and somehow we had ended up on this not-date together.

We had been very clear in our communication that it was definitely. not. a. date.

I was pretty good at establishing boundaries with my sexual relationships but Basil had a shocking amount of expertise for someone who had never had any sexual relationships before me. We'd sat down, discussed why exactly we wanted to go to the museum (nothing to do with each other and everything to do with a free drink and revisiting the museum), and agreed on one very hard rule to make this a simple friends outing, where we would just so happen to have sex before and/or after: no hand holding.

We grabbed our thematically relevant, complimentary cocktails and walked down the stairs and out into the sculpture garden. It was so much smaller than I remembered. The water features with their blue patterned tile that had once seemed big enough to wade in were now more like glorified puddles. Basil's hands taunted me as we walked among the statues embedded in thriving ivy and other insidious greenery. Ever since the first time I'd been told "you're a girl you can't play with us" by my brothers, anything that I wasn't supposed to have was exactly what I wanted. His hand reached to move a vine out of the way so he could read a plaque. It held his drink, was shoved in his pocket, fiddled with his sleeve while he admired the Shiva Nataraja balanced on one foot in the dance of creation. In one fraught moment, it brushed my knuckles as he squeezed around me to stare at the bronze ballerina.

But I understood boundaries. Sort of. I at least understood that Basil was very serious about them and would get angry with me—maybe even "take a break" from me—if I reached out for his hand. So I just kept on staring at that hand I couldn't have and wondering what Tom had taught him instead of paying much attention to the sculptures. I was more interested in paintings anyway.

But finally, finally, after his patented slow-burn, savor the moment meandering through the garden, we reached our destination. The one that had summoned us here.

The giant nude bronze.

She'd been erotic to my elementary school brain and she was erotic still. She reclined on her side, paint-me-like-one-of-your-French-girls-style, on a rumpled sheet, hair tossed back, staring up at the sky. Her thighs were thick, her belly round, her tits topped with perfect pinprick nipples. Her face was simple, her hair was boring, leaving you with only her body to admire. She was massive. The entire sculpture garden was a

giant arrow pointing to her, the climax of an artistic journey. I was too young the first few times I saw her to pinpoint exactly what role she'd played, but this smooth bronze fertility goddess had definitely been a part of my sexual awakening. When Basil had said something similar, we'd agreed we absolutely *needed* to see her. After all, she and I could now both claim some piece of his cumming of age.

There was a sort of energy I felt around her, too. Not just my own memories of seeing her and wondering if I should look away or stare. There was a vibration to her, an awareness. It was leisurely and steady, like the chest-rattling thump of the bass at a concert, the sound of your pulse in your ears, or the rolling hips of slow, nasty sex. I wanted to reach out and touch her. My hands tingled now the way they'd been for the past hour or so watching Basil's hands, only they wanted her. I wanted to grab whatever that unhurried self-assurance was inside her and hold it in my hands, put it in my chest. Or maybe I just wanted to run my hands over her curves and feel them under my fingers. Too bad I knew from experience that she would be too hot to touch after a full day in the Alabama sun. I'd have to content myself with wanting, which was its own sort of erotic worship.

My devotion to the goddess of pleasure eventually ended, the buzzing feeling subsiding as if she was finally looking away from me, back up at the sky, but Basil apparently had more to offer. I did my best not to fidget or rush him because I had some semblance of museum etiquette, but my brain kept going back to the Victorian furniture I was pretty sure they had somewhere in the building and imagining what we could do on it if they weren't alarmed. I was impatient to find out, or at least to go see the Sorceress. But Basil was still staring contemplatively.

Time for drastic measures.

I took the little silver bullet hanging heavy against my sternum and pressed it to his arm. I twisted the little top and it started to buzz against his skin. Basil jumped and looked at what was in my hand.

“What is that?” he hissed, even though we were outside.

“Guess.” I held it up for his perusal.

“Is that...?” he looked around for any children and stepped close. “Are you wearing a vibrator in an art museum?”

I grinned and nodded. “Yup.”

He laughed and mumbled something that might have been “you’re ridiculous” before pressing his lips to mine. Technically not hand-holding, though definitely violating the spirit of our arrangement. Still I was smiling as I kissed him back and we probably slid right into PDA territory before we managed to stop.

His fingers flexed on my hips where he’d held me steady while I stood on my tiptoes to reach his lips. “Ok, let’s go try that thing.”

“Right now?” I made a big show of looking around.

He kept laughing and it felt so nice to feel funny.

“Come on,” he said, leading me through the green glass doors without touching my hand.