



BLACK
TIES
WHITE
LIES

KAT SINGLETON

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&
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*For all my besties who are just looking for the simple things in life—a hot
billionaire to spoil you with gifts and orgasms. Beck is for you.*

PLAYLIST

Mostermind - Taylor SwiR

Sotellite - Harry Styles

You Are In Love - Taylor SwiR

About You - The J975

Souvenir - Selena Semez

Wildest Dreoms(Taylor's Version) - Taylor 5wiß

Falling Like The Stars - James Arthur

Whal Have I Dane - Dermal Kennedy

floppiast Year - Jaymes Young

What A Man Saito Do - Jonas Mathers

Stp - Gracie Abroms

waxNg(feat. Kaloni) - zAYN

Want You Back -5 Seconds of Summer

Dirty Thoughts - Chloe Adams

All For You - Dean Lewis

1

Margo

“MARGO, MARGO, MARGO.”

A familiar voice startles me from my computer screen. Spinning in my office chair I find my best friend, Emma, hunched over the wall of my cubicle. Her painted red lips form a teasing grin.

Pulling the pen I was chewing on out of my mouth, I narrow my eyes at her suspiciously. “What?”

She licks her teeth, flicking the head of the Nash Pierce bobblehead she bought me ages ago. “Who did you piss off this time?”

My stomach drops, and I don’t even know what she’s talking about. “Are you still drunk?” I accuse, thinking about the wine we consumed last night. We downed two bottles of cheap pinot grigio with our roommate and best friend, Winnie. Split between the three of us, there’s no way she’s still tipsy, but it’s the best I could come up with.

She scoffs, her face scrunching in annoyance. “Obviously not. I was refilling my coffee in the lounge when *Darla* had asked if I’d seen you.”

I stifle an eye roll. Darla knew I’d be at one of two places. I’m always either at my desk or huddled in front of the coffee maker trying to get the nectar of the gods to keep me awake.

Darla knew *exactly* where to find me.

She just didn’t want to.

You accidentally put water in the coffee bean receptacle instead of the carafe and suddenly the office receptionist hates you. It’s not like I’d meant

to break it. It's not my fault it wasn't made clear on the machine what went where. I was just *trying* to help.

“I haven’t heard from her,” I comment, my eyes flicking to Darla’s desk. She’s not there, but her phone lights up with an incoming call. Darla rarely leaves her desk. It isn’t a good sign that she’s nowhere in sight. The sky could be falling, and I’m not sure Darla would leave her perch.

Emma rounds the wall of my cubicle, planting her ass on my desk like she’s done a million times before, even though I’ve asked her not to just as many times.

“I’m working.” Reaching out, I smack her black stiletto, getting her foot off the armrest of my chair.

She laughs, playfully digging her heel into my thigh. “Well, Darla, that *amazing woman*, told me the boss wants to see you.”

“I thought Marty was out for meetings all day today?”

Emma bites her lip, shaking her head at me. “No, like the *boss*, boss. The head honcho. Bossman. I think it’s somebody new.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, but I cut her off. “That can’t be right.”

“Margo!” Darla barks from the doors of our conference room. I almost jump out of my chair from the shrill tone of her voice.

Emma’s eyes are wide as saucers as she looks from Darla back to me. “Seriously, Mar, what did you do?”

I slide my feet into my discarded heels underneath my desk. Standing up, I wipe my hands down the front of my skirt. I hate that my palms are already clammy from nerves. “I didn’t do anything,” I hiss, apparently forgetting how to walk in heels as I almost face-plant before I’m even out of the security of my cubicle.

She annoyingly clicks her tongue, giving me a look that tells me she doesn’t believe me. “Obviously, I knew we had people higher up than Marty, they’re just never *here*. I wonder what could be so *serious*...”

“You aren’t helping.”

There’s no time for me to go back and forth with my best friend since college any longer. Darla has her arms crossed over her chest in a way that tells me if I don’t haul ass across this office and meet her at the door in the next thirty seconds, she’s going to make me regret it.

I come to a stop in front of the five-foot woman who scares me way more than I’d care to admit. She frowns, her jowls pronounced as she glares at me.

Despite the dirty look, I smile sweetly at her, knowing my mama told me to always kill them with kindness. “Good morning, Darla,” I say, my voice sickeningly sweet.

Her frown lines get deeper. “I don’t even want to know what you did to warrant his visit today,” she clips.

Your guess is as good as mine, Darla.

“Who?” I try to look into the conference room behind her, but the door is shut.

Weird. That door is never closed.

“Why don’t you find out for yourself?” Grabbing the handle, she opens the door. Her body partially blocks the doorway, making me squeeze past her to be able to get in.

Whoever this *he* is, doesn’t grant me the luxury of showing me his face. He stands in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, his hands in the pockets of the perfectly tailored suit that molds to his body effortlessly. I haven’t even seen the guy’s face but everything about him screams wealth. Having only seen him from behind, I can tell that he exudes confidence. It’s in his stance—the way he carries his shoulders, his feet slightly apart as he stares out the window. Everything about his posture screams *business*. I’m just terrified why *his* business is *my* business.

When they said boss, they really meant it. *Oh boy.*

What have I done?

Even the sound of the door shutting behind me doesn’t elicit movement from him. It gives me time to look him up and down from the back. If I wasn’t already terrified that I was in trouble for something I don’t even remember doing, I’d take a moment to appreciate the view.

I mean *damn*. I didn’t know that suit pants could fit an ass so perfectly.

I risk another step into the conference room. Looking around, I confirm it’s just me and the mystery man with a nice ass in the empty space.

Shaking my head, I attempt to stop thinking of the way he fills the navy suit out flawlessly. From what I’ve been told, he’s my boss. The thoughts running through my head are *anything* but work appropriate.

“Uh, hello?” I ask cautiously. My feet awkwardly stop on the other side of the large table from him. I don’t know what to do. If I’m about to be fired, do I sit down first or just keep standing and get it over with?

I wonder if they’ll give me a box to put my stuff in.

His back stiffens. Slowly, he turns around.

When I finally catch a glimpse of his face, I almost keel over in shock.
Because the man standing in front of me—my apparent boss—is also
my ex-boyfriend's *very* attractive older brother.

2

Margo

“IT’S BEEN AWHILE, MARGO,” Beck drawls, his scowl making me squirm. I forgot how sexy his voice is, especially with my name on his lips.

“Beck...” I say in disbelief. My ex-boyfriend, Carter, had told me that his brother was successful. But then, the whole Sinclair family was wealthy. I’d been so swept up in Carter I hadn’t really paid too much attention to it. Quite frankly, I’d tried to forget Beckham ever existed. But now, with Carter out of the picture, and Beckham “Beck” Sinclair standing in front of me, it’s hard not to be hit in the face with just how successful he is.

The shiny cufflink he fiddles with probably costs more than my rent. The suit, probably more expensive than the fuel-efficient car I share with Emma. When I’d met Beck, he hadn’t looked like this. It’d been during a weekend trip to one of their many vacation homes in The Hamptons. He was dressed incredibly casual compared to the way he stands in front of me right now.

Beck smiles but the gesture doesn’t make me feel any more comfortable. In fact, it has quite the opposite effect. I almost wish Darla had followed me in; maybe it’d alleviate some of the tension radiating between us. My insides are jumbled, and I feel completely disarmed by the way he’s looking at me.

He stares at me with unwavering attention. Reaching out, he points to the incredibly oversized table in front of us. “Have a seat, Margo.” His tone leaves no room for discussion. Like a child, I follow his command immediately. I pull out the large leather office chair from in front of me, wincing as one of the wheels squeaks loudly as I attempt to pull it out.

Unlike me, he takes his seat with grace. I, on the other hand, had to struggle with the stuck wheel and embarrassed myself with loud grunts as I tried to get the chair far enough away from the table to take a seat.

His blond eyebrows stay raised as he stares at me with what looks like amusement. Eventually, I manage to plop my ass in the chair. My cheeks are on fire, making any attempt to mask the embarrassment futile. There's no way he doesn't see the red hue of my face as I comb through any potential reason for his arrival.

I scoot the chair up to the table, finding the nerve to look him in the eye as I fold my hands in my lap. "You're the boss? What are you doing here?"

Beck drinks me in, his eyes raking over me slowly.

I'm right here, Violet.

The words catapult into my mind, flinging me back to last summer. It was a little over a year ago, only weeks before I'd found out that Carter had been cheating on me during the entirety of our relationship. It was something Beck had said to me late one night when he'd caught me doing something I shouldn't have. At the time, I hadn't said anything about him having my name wrong. At the time, I'd hated that I didn't quite hate the way it sounded coming from his lips. The way it rolled off his tongue did funny things to me.

I stare back at him, the moment we had during the summer combined with how stunningly handsome he is now only makes this encounter more awkward.

"Beck?" I ask, unsure. My voice shakes, betraying me. One deep stare from him and I'm at a loss for words.

His fingers steeple underneath his chin, his shiny watch catching a beam of light. "You've been ignoring my calls."

I pick at my cuticles underneath the table, a nervous habit my mom has chastised me about for years. No matter how hard I try not to, it's no use fighting the urge. I'm disarmed under his deep, indigo gaze.

"I didn't have anything to say to you—or Carter," I snap. It's crazy that Beck and Carter are brothers. They're complete opposites. Carter is tall, but the tone to his muscles weren't super defined like Beck's. He preferred running over lifting weights. Most of all, he preferred to golf eighteen holes with his elitist friends. *Or* fuck anyone that wasn't his actual girlfriend. He was probably getting a decent workout judging by the amount of people he was screwing a week that *were not me*.

Did Beck know Carter wasn't faithful?

It doesn't matter. Carter and I are done. I thought by never seeing Carter again I'd never see his brother, either. I'd certainly never expected to have to call him *boss*.

Carter is tall, but Beck is taller. Where Carter has muscles from his rigid diet and obsession with cardio, Beck has more defined muscles everywhere. Underneath the sleeves of his tailored suit there are biceps that I'd dreamt to sketch one day. During that weekend with his family, I caught a glimpse of what he hides underneath his button-up shirt. His abs are the wet dream of any artist. Painter, sketch artist, sculptor—*anyone* would love to be front and center with his six-pack. *Or is it an eight?*

He clears his throat. When I pull my gaze from the delicious veins of his hands, I find him smirking at me. "Are you done?" He's blunt, even if there is a tinge of amusement laced in his voice. I've been alone in this conference room with him only for a few moments, and the tension between us could already be cut with a knife.

"Done with what?"

"Eye fucking me."

I almost fall out of my chair at the boldness of his words.

"I wasn't—"

A corner of his full lip twitches. "You totally were, Violet. Don't pretend like you weren't."

My jaw snaps open and shut. Why is he using that name again? Why do I still love it? I have no freaking clue how to respond to him.

Again, he's my new *boss*. Or at least I think he is. That's what Emma called him. Darla seemed to be under the same impression. I need to know how long he's been in charge.

And why is he here?

Most importantly, why is he staring at me like he wants to have his way with me?

"My name's not Violet."

He runs his thumb over his plump bottom lip. "I know."

Shaking my head, I wonder if maybe I had more wine last night than I remember. Am I dreaming? This entire scenario can't be real.

"I'm sorry," I begin, taking a deep breath. "I'm just wondering why you're here? I'm a little confused on what's happening..."

Sighing, he pushes the chair far enough from the table that he can cross one leg over the other. His ankle rests on the opposite knee, his perfectly shined shoes catching the light from the windows.

“You were ignoring my calls,” he explains, seemingly annoyed that he’s having to repeat himself.

“Yes. We just talked about this. I didn’t want to talk about your brother.”

“No, we didn’t talk about this. We *started* the conversation, but then you decided instead of listening, you were going to undress me with those large eyes of yours.” A loud vibrating sound halts his words. His straight eyebrows pull in as he reaches into a pocket inside his suit jacket. His eyes quickly scan the name on the screen before he silences the call. Tossing his phone onto the black wood table, he focuses on me once again. “If you’d been listening the first time, and not eye fucking me, you’d know I was telling you that me calling you had absolutely nothing to do with brother dearest.”

I bite my tongue, wanting to ask why he’s referencing Carter with such disgust. There’s clearly more to his feelings toward his brother than I’m aware of. Carter never seemed like the biggest fan of Beck, but he didn’t speak like he totally hated him. I can’t say the same from the tone of Beck’s voice just now.

“It didn’t?”

“Fuck no,” he spits. For a moment, there’s angry fire in his eyes. I’ve always been told I’m too curious for my own good, and I feel it in this moment. Everything in me is yearning to ask why he looks so angry when speaking of Carter, but I keep my lips sealed. I’m far more interested about why he’s here. “You’re better off without him. I’d never try and convince you otherwise.”

“I didn’t know that. I figured you were calling for him. I’d blocked his number after he called forty-six times in one night.”

“Pathetic,” he growls under his breath.

He straightens, both feet on the ground once again. Beck leans over the table, getting as close as possible to me. “Well, you ignoring me caused me to have to resort to other options.”

“Like what?”

He shows off his large wingspan as he widens his arms, gesturing to the dingy room around us. He looks out of place here, the fading paint on the

walls and the fraying, stained carpet not fit for someone as regal looking as him. “Like buying this company.”

He did what? Surely I’m not understanding this correctly.

“What does buying this company have to do with me ignoring your calls?”

“Stop asking questions before you’ve even thought about it,” he fires back. “Isn’t it obvious? I bought the company so you had no choice but to talk to me. I am your boss now, after all.”

Excuse my French, but *what the actual fuck?* People don’t buy companies just to talk to someone. They call, or show up at their house, or I don’t know...send a fucking email. Not buy companies.

“No you didn’t.”

Beck shakes his head at me. The movement shakes one of his perfectly gelled locks of hair out of place. One strand rebels and hangs in front of his eyes until he finally pushes it out of the way. “I can assure you, Margo, I most certainly did.”

3

Beck

SHE LOOKS ENTIRELY out of place in this dark, crummy office space. Margo Moretti shines too bright to be working at 8-bit Security. Her usual black hair looks dull underneath the terrible lighting of the room. Even her eyes, the light green a color I'd never seen before until I'd first met her, don't hold the same vibrancy that I know them to have.

"Stop messing with me, Beck. That's ridiculous."

I shrug, wondering how a woman as beautiful as her ever fell for my brother. "You're probably right. It is ridiculous. It doesn't change the fact it's what I did. I needed to talk to you."

"What could we possibly have to talk about if it's not about Carter?"

I wish she'd stop saying his name. He doesn't deserve it. He never deserved it, but I'm not sure anyone really would deserve having their name fall from her lips. I only had the pleasure of getting to know Margo over the span of a weekend—and it was more observing her than speaking with her—but it was enough time to realize she lives her life like it's her world—and we're all just living in it. She was polite just enough to my parents but didn't fold underneath my father's pestering questions about what her family did for a living. Margo smiled, joked, enough for me to know that every reaction from her was genuine, but still had to be earned. She spent time with Carter, proving that she's a loyal girlfriend that enjoyed his presence, but was never clingy. The moral of the story was, I don't know how someone like Margo ended up dating someone like my brother. By the end of what I have planned, I'm hoping to have the answer.

I clasp and unclasp the Rolex on my wrist. Not daring to look away from her. I don't think I could if I wanted to. There's a long pause between us. She squirms in her chair, clearly anxious as she waits for whatever I have to say. Finally, I ease her tension, or maybe I add to it, by speaking up. "You're getting promoted."

Her plump, puffy lips separate. There isn't a hint of makeup on her mouth, yet her lips are the perfect shade of red without going overboard. I fucking despise that my brother knows exactly how her lips taste. "Promoted? Why?" she asks, bewildered.

My fingers tap on the table, my eyes flicking to my vibrating phone next to my hand. She looks down as well. "You can get that if you need to."

It's rang a handful of times since she joined me in the room. I've ignored every single call, something that is out of character for me. I'm usually on the phone more than not, but right now, I want to give her my full attention, even if she's taking precious moments of my time by asking dumb questions.

I flip my phone over, putting the screen face down for the time being. "It can wait," I lie. I'm supposed to be joining a meeting via a phone call in five minutes, but I already know it's one I'll be missing. I refuse to talk to anyone else before I have the chance to finish this conversation.

Margo runs her fingers through her hair but eventually grows bored with the action and tosses the long locks over her shoulder. "Look," she begins, her voice tight. "I don't know if this is some sick, twisted joke of yours to get payback on me for breaking up with your brother, but I want no part of it."

My thumb glosses over my bottom lip again as I inspect every one of her movements. I'm puzzled by what Carter has told her that has her thinking I'd ever go to these lengths to get back at one of his ex-girlfriends. Especially knowing that he was unfaithful to said girlfriend over the entirety of their three-year relationship. My brother and I aren't close. I've never meddled with his love life, and I never had the desire to—well, until he met her. We don't have the kind of relationship where either one of us give a damn about what the other is doing.

The sound of my exhale of annoyance echoes around the otherwise silent room. Leaning forward, I look Margo dead in the eye. Whatever she sees on my face finally makes her stop fidgeting. "I don't know how many

times I need to say this to get it through your head, but listen closely, Margo, because I despise repeating myself.”

“I’m listening,” she whispers. I bask in having her full attention.

“My brother has absolutely nothing to do with the reason I’m here. No part of me thinks you should get back with him. Quite frankly, I’d find it rather pitiful for you to go back to him, considering he wet his cock with half of the NYU population while you were together. So, let’s make it clear from here on out. My motives for being here, for buying this company, have nothing to do with the punk I have to call blood. You got it?”

Her fingers have turned white from gripping the armrests of her seat so tightly. When she pulls her hands from the chair, I wonder if there’ll be half-moon indents from her nails on the stained leather. Margo is silent, apparently stunned by my words because she doesn’t strike me as someone who’s often rendered speechless.

“Words, Margo. I need words to know you understand.”

“I’m trying to understand,” she finally gets out, her eyes still pinned on me. She watches me closely, her eyes slightly narrowing. I can almost see the gears in her brain working overtime as she tries to decipher my intentions for being here. I fight the urge to tell her it’s no use. I still don’t understand what compelled me to take the lengths I did to get to this moment. But for this to work, for me to get what I want, I need her to have some semblance of understanding.

“Let me explain further,” I begin. My shoulders find the back of the chair once again as I lean backward. “I’m now the proud owner of this shithole. I had to fight numerous investors for them to back me with this purchase, but in the end, they couldn’t tell me no. I have the money to fund it with or without them. This company was low on the list of startups I’d care to invest in, but I needed to speak with you, so here we are.”

Margo laughs manically, disbelief in her doe-eyed stare. “Normal people don’t buy companies to talk with their brother’s ex-girlfriends.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “It’s insulting that you think I’m normal. I’m far from normal, Margo. I’ll go to great lengths to get what I want.”

“And what you want is to have a conversation with me?”

My lips press into a thin line. “Not exactly.” *What I want is you. At least for the time being.*

Margo falls into her chair with a loud sigh. “You’re probably the vaguest person I know.”

My lip twitches. “I’m not vague on purpose. You keep interrupting me with questions, not letting me get to the point.”

“Say no more. I’ll keep my mouth shut until you make this make sense.” Being dramatic, she holds her thumb and index finger in front of her lips, miming zipping her lips and throwing the key over her shoulder.

She looks childish, her cheeks puffed out with her lips sealed shut. There’s a mischievous gleam to her eyes, making me question if this is a good idea or not.

“Like I said earlier, you’re getting promoted.”

She opens her mouth like she’s going to argue, making me raise my eyebrows. Her eyes roll as her mouth snaps shut. I can tell it’s taking everything in her not to interject with what is no doubt another one of her questions. I silently hold eye contact a few seconds longer, waiting to see if she’ll manage to keep her mouth closed or not.

Apparently she can. *Good girl.*

“Your days of doing graphic design for this place are over. Starting Monday, you’ll be my new assistant.”

Fire erupts in her eyes. “No way. I didn’t graduate with an art degree to become your little errand girl.”

“Stop being dramatic. You didn’t graduate top of your class at one of the best art programs in the country to do graphic design *here.*” Reaching to the middle of the table, I grab one of the pens that sit in a plastic cup. I hold it up, turning it in my hands. “Your art is better than this, Margo. This logo is terrible, and I know it isn’t because of you.” I keep inspecting the pen as I let the words marinate between us. I squint. “Has no one told Marty this face looks like a cock with balls?”

She chokes on her laugh, her eyes wide as she tries to bring air into her lungs. Eventually, she gains composure. Her fingers come up to wipe at the smudged mascara underneath her eyes, the tears from her laughter making black splotches underneath her eyes. “I think Marty almost fired me when I told him I thought the addition of the smiley face with a nose looked a little...*phallic.*”

I smirk. “A little? The eyes look like two rounded balls with a small cock in the middle.” Each time I say *cock*, I swear her cheeks get slightly more red.

Margo attempts to move a stray lock of hair from her face, but the piece is too short to stay behind her ear. She huffs, blowing her bangs away from

her face in defeat. “The logo is terrible, I get it. I didn’t have my choice. Marty threatened me if I didn’t create it the way he envisioned it. So I did it, because I’ve got to pay my bills.” She looks me up and down, her eyes halting at the watch on my wrist. “Not all of us were born with money.”

I bite my tongue. Now isn’t the time for us to get into an argument about money—*my* money. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life doing graphic design for an almost unlivable wage?”

“At least it’s some form of art,” she fires back. “Being your assistant wouldn’t allow me to have any kind of creativity.”

“False. I’ll make sure you have time for your art.”

“And what is my *art*, Beck? I doubt you know.”

“You like to draw, Violet. You done with your questions now?”

4

Margo

SO MANY WORDS fly through my head, none of them managing to leave my mouth. It doesn't happen often, but he's rendered me speechless.

Beck's smile is almost predatory. He knows his answer has taken me by surprise. I'm backed into a corner, unsure how to get myself out of it. I hadn't expected him to remember my favorite creative outlet. Especially since Carter always told people I painted, even though he'd never seen me with a paintbrush the entire duration of our relationship. I'd just assumed that's what Beck would've thought I did, too.

"Tell me what it means to be your assistant." I try to fold my arms across my midsection in a defensive position, but all it does is make the wire of my bra dig into my rib cage even further. My hands slide into my lap instead, my eyes still watching Beck carefully.

"Does it matter? You start Monday."

"I haven't even agreed to it yet."

"It'd be silly for you not to say yes. It's a significant pay bump, and you'll be out of this place." His finger loops in the air, bringing attention to the lackluster conference room we're in.

"I'm terrible at making coffee," I argue. "Ask Darla."

"There's more to it than that..." For a fraction of a second, Beck looks nervous. The look is erased almost as quickly as it first showed up. But as fast as it was, I still saw it.

"What is it?"

His cheeks hollow out, making his sharp cheekbones even more prominent. "I need you to not only become my assistant but also my

fiancée.”

The chair underneath me groans loudly as I lean forward, looking at him in shock. “What did you just say?”

“I’m in a bit of a”—he picks at a non-existent piece of lint on his sleeve—“*predicament*,” he finally finishes. “One I need your help with.”

“You need *me*?”

“I’ve made a mistake.” He keeps his voice level, but there’s the smallest bit of vulnerability in his eyes when he looks at me. “Recently, a gossip site ran an article on me that features numerous photos with me and multiple different women in the last month. Like, a good number of them...”

My eyebrows raise. Carter had mentioned Beck never did relationships. He’d meant it as a dig at his brother. Looking back, it seems Beck doesn’t make any fake promises. At least he’s up front about not wanting to commit to women, *very* unlike his brother. Carter will make the promise and just fuck it to shreds behind your back.

“And that involves me how?”

“My board is upset. They say it reflects poorly on the company.”

“Why? You’re allowed to have a personal life.”

He blinks, a slight grin on his lips. “It doesn’t quite work like that, Violet.”

I cross one leg over the other. “I’m still trying to figure out how I play into this.”

His fingers tap against the table, catching my attention. They’re long, slightly thicker around the knuckles. *I wonder how they’d feel inside me.* Blinking quickly, I shake my head. *Where the fuck did that come from?*

He’s completely unaware that my mind is only half listening, the other half wondering how many he could fit inside me and still feel pleasurable. Beck continues to talk as I try to rid my brain of the dirty thoughts of my new boss, AKA him. “I was told I need to maintain a stable relationship for at least a year, or they feared investors would become uneasy. No one wants to invest in a company whose face is plastered all over magazines being penned a playboy billionaire.”

I bite back a smile. “It’s kind of catchy.”

He does nothing to hide his grunt of disapproval. “I’ve never tried to hide the fact that I can’t stand most people. The thought of tolerating someone for a year makes my skin crawl. That is, a year with anyone except...*you*.”

My ass almost flies out of the chair. *Surely* I heard him wrong. I want to make some kind of witty remark, but the unreadable look on his face has me snapping my mouth shut. I hold back the comment, stunned by how he brazenly stares back at me.

“People wouldn’t believe it if we told them we all of a sudden started dating. But...they’d believe it if we went from working closely together with you as my assistant and it developed into more.”

“Now it’s starting to make sense...”

“I bought this company because I needed a reason you and I were brought back together—hence the reason I now own 8-bit Security. You work closely with me as my assistant and in a month or so we’ll tell people we’ve fallen in love.”

“That seems quick.”

When he smiles at me, I understand why so many women fall at his feet. It’s magnetic, bright but predatory. Enough to make my core clench because never did I expect it aimed at *me*. “When you know, you know.”

And then Beck Fucking Sinclair winks at me, and I swear to god in the moment, I’d do anything he asked me to. His hotness is a shock to my system, something I’m nowhere near equipped to deal with.

“The whole idea seems highly unnecessary. Don’t you own the company your board sits on or whatever? Tell them to go fuck themselves.”

He actually laughs at my comment. A loud, throaty laugh that for some reason, feeds my soul. I’d do anything to hear it again.

I made broody Beck Sinclair laugh. I want to do it over and over until his stomach hurts from laughter.

Beck shakes his head at me, his eyes lingering on my returned smile. His attention to my lips has me absent-mindedly licking them. “While I’ve thought about doing that a million times, it’s not something I can quite commit to. You see, I don’t hold all the power when it comes to my company. No matter how much I want to. I’ve got to clean it up or I’ll lose important investors. It’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

“What if I’m not willing to agree?”

His teeth dig into his lip as he bites back a smile. He attempts to wipe the smile from his face by running his hand over his mouth, but it doesn’t do much. When his hand falls back to his armrest, he still grins at me. “I can be very persuasive, Margo Moretti.”

Is Beckham Sinclair flirting with me?

Am I into it?

No. I *can't* be into it. I dated—*loved*—his brother for years.

Bad, Margo.

But god, with that grin on his face, it might feel *so* good to be *so* bad.

I'm silent, still wondering in the back of my mind if this is some sort of joke. Am I on some sort of reality TV show where they play an epic prank? That's totally something Emma would sign me up for as a cruel joke.

My eyes scan the office for any hints of hidden cameras.

"So, I become your assistant, then your fiancée, and then have to go back to normal with my tail between my legs when you end our engagement after the year is over? Have everyone think you grew tired of me? No thank you, Beck. It's a no from me."

"We could tell people you ended it. Whatever you want to say to them, I'll do it." The hurried way he gets out his words has me stopping to wonder why he seems so invested in getting me to agree to his ludicrous plan.

I'm quiet long enough, my foot tapping against the carpet as I think through his words, when he feels the need to fill the silence with more of an explanation. "I'll get you an interview with Camden Hunter."

My foot stops immediately. "How?"

"We went to boarding school together. He's one of my best friends."

I snort. "I'm shocked you have friends. You don't seem like the kind of person to form attachments."

His eyebrows pinch together on his perfectly wrinkle free forehead. "I form attachments just fine. I'm just picky about who I choose to form them with. Am I to assume your answer is that you don't want an interview with him?"

"You assume correctly. I don't want to be hired by Camden—owner of one of the most elite art galleries in New York—just because you know him. I don't want my dream job handed to me."

There he goes, making my heart flutter just from the sound of his laugh. It's deep and rumbly, a sound that is felt from my head to my toes. "It's cute you think I have that kind of power with Camden. He's charming but ruthless. It wouldn't matter if I begged him on my knees to hire you. While he'd find it hilarious, he'd never feature someone's art he didn't love. I'll get you the interview to show him your work, your ideas, but it'd be up to you and your talent to solidify the partnership."

Why is the thought of Beck on his knees making me feel hot and bothered? Do we have AC in here? It's got to be the lack of airflow and not the mental picture.

My eyes narrow to pinpricks as I mull over his offer. The picture he paints doesn't seem so bad. I'd pretty much sell my soul or *any* non-vital organ to even be in the same room as Camden Hunter. The son of two of the most world-renowned artists, it was only natural that the moment he opened his own gallery, it'd be the talk of the city. While Camden isn't known to be an artist himself, he's got the best eye there is. If he even looked at any of my drawings, I could die happy.

"I can't believe you know Camden Hunter," I comment, my voice full of wonder.

He runs his thumb over his lip, a gesture I'm learning he does often. "I can't believe you hero worship him. I knew him when he had acne and braces."

My mind tries to picture the not only brilliantly talented at spotting art, but a work of art himself Camden, with braces and acne. "I refuse to picture him like that."

Beck shrugs dismissively. "I'll deny I said this, but he could still get any girl he wanted back then—braces and all."

My nose scrunches. "That's more like it."

Beck's large hand rests on the table. For some reason, I keep focusing on his fingers. I'd never wanted to draw the veins on the back of a hand so bad. They're so freaking sexy, and I don't understand why. I itch to run my finger over them, to trace them all the way up his arm, even getting the luxury of feeling the skin that's hidden underneath his suit.

"So, what do you think?" His dark, strikingly blue eyes focus on me. "Are you open to hearing more about my offer?"

5

Beck

I'VE NEVER CARED to know what people are thinking. Other people's opinions on things have never really interested me. Until I laid eyes on the fiercely stubborn woman sitting across from me.

The moment she stuck her tiny little hand in mine at our summer house, the countless rings on her fingers scratching against my palms as we shook hands, I wanted to know what she thought of me. I was curious to know what she thought of her boyfriend's older brother. She'd barely told me her name and I had countless questions I wanted to ask her. I'd never wanted to know every detail about another human being until I met her.

Then I saw her draw in her sketchbook and the only thing I wanted to know more than how she viewed me was what she was drawing in that little book of hers.

We'd barely spoken the rest of the weekend. I'd tried to avoid her when possible.

Except one night that weekend. The night that is forever burned in my mind.

Just as badly, I wanted to know what she was thinking when she met me. I'm desperate to know what's going through her head.

Margo clears her throat, breaking me from my memories and bringing my attention back to her.

Has she already made up her mind to say no? I'd use every one of my breaths to get her to change her mind.

Is she considering it? I'll make sure it's worth her while.

Has she made the decision to say yes? I'll give her anything she wants and more.

Unfortunately for me, Margo doesn't let on to what direction her head is going in—at least not yet. “I need more details on how this is going to work before I agree to anything.”

“Done.” My answer is immediate. Standing up, I walk around the table until I'm standing right next to her. Reaching up, I undo the button of my suit jacket and let it fall open. I slide my hands into my pockets and sit on the edge of the table. If I scooted over an inch, her knee would brush up against my leg. I'm tempted to do it just to feel some sort of connection between the two of us. “What else do you want to know?”

“What does being your assistant mean? And what happens to your other one? Do you fire them?”

I scoff. “No. Polly still keeps her position, except she's going to stay more grounded in New York. You'll be based in New York with me, but you'll also travel with me when needed.”

It appears she just realized that to do this, she'd have to uproot her entire life and move across the country from California to New York. “I'm supposed to move?”

“We can't be engaged and live on opposite ends of the country.”

Her bottom lip juts out in a frown. “My friends are here, not in New York. We all moved out here together. I can't leave them.”

I bite back the urge to remind her that she also moved out here for Carter.

“I'll fly them out there. Or fly you here. You choose. I've got a jet with staff always on standby. We'll figure that out easily.”

“You have a jet? With people on standby?”

“Yes. It's waiting on a tarmac right now. I try to avoid California as much as I can. I much prefer the Northeast.”

She laughs. “Yeah, you totally have the New Yorker vibe. Rich, full of themselves, and grumpy.”

I ignore her comment. She probably thinks they're supposed to be insults, but those adjectives don't have power over me. I know who I am. She isn't wrong with her assessment.

New York and I fit together perfectly.

“What other reasons do you have to convince yourself this won't work?”

Margo rubs her lips together, her eyes seeming to focus on the small amount of air between our bodies. It wouldn't take much for us to be touching, just a slight movement from either of us and our bodies would connect. "Well, there's the obvious reason that it's totally fake. How do we expect people to believe us? My friends will know it isn't real..."

"We'll have to convince them it is. For this to work, we need everyone—including friends and family—to think that we're madly in love with one another. My board can't know that I'm deceiving them or it'll make things even worse."

It already bothers the hell out of the people on my board that I have the control I do of my own company—one that *I* created. When I sold it years ago at twenty-five, they'd expected me to take the money and give someone else the position of CEO. I hadn't created Sintech Cyber Security just to sell it and disappear. The only reason I sold it and created a board of directors was because I had visions of what I wanted Sintech to become. Now, every single relevant social media platform uses the company I created for data security. As much as it sucked to admit, I couldn't do it alone. To expand, I had to relinquish some control. But not all. If the board believed I settled down, that my "playboy" ways were behind me, they'd get off my back. The focus would come off me and my personal life and go back to where it *should* be—on the company. On how we're keeping consumer's data secure as social media becomes more prevalent in the average consumer's life each day.

Margo sits back in her chair. Her thighs clench together so tightly, I'm wondering the reason behind it. "What's your family going to say about us, Beck? Won't they be upset that you're engaged to your brother's ex?"

Scoffing, I shake my head. "They adored you. Both my mom and dad were upset when they heard what Carter did to you. They'd love to see you again and won't care if it's because you're now with me."

I'm amazing at reading people, at studying their body language, to know exactly what's going on in their head. My ability to read someone even though I hardly tolerate them ends with Margo. I can't determine the look on her face. It looks apprehensive, but by the way she rolls her lips together, I'm wondering if I'm breaking her down and slowly convincing her.

"I'm not trying to upset Carter."

My jaw clenches. I abruptly flip her chair around, her back now to the conference table. Her eyes are wide as saucers as she stares up at me in shock. Crowding her space, I lower my body until we're eye to eye. "Say his name again, and I'll bend you right over this table and fuck you until the only name you can say is mine. You'll be so full of me you won't even remember who you were thinking about before."

Her chest heaves up and down, her breasts brushing up against the lapels of my jacket. "I'm not trying to upset...*him*," she corrects. Her voice comes out forced, like it's taking everything in her to try to keep her tone level.

That makes two of us.

The leather armrests groan underneath my tight grip on them. My back is tense, and I know I should pull away. If someone were to open this door, they'd find Margo and I in a questionable position. Nothing inappropriate has happened between us here, but the words that just left my mouth were far from appropriate.

"I shouldn't have said that." My words are a complete contradiction to what I'm feeling. I want to kiss her lips and lick them until my brother's name never comes from them again.

"Beck," she breathes. Her tongue peeks out to lick her Cupid's bow. I have to rip myself away from her before I do something to ruin this plan I have for us before she even agrees to it.

"That was inappropriate. I apologize, Margo." My features mask into a look of indifference. I have to get my shit together. No one gets to me, and I need to remember to keep it that way. Even when it comes to her. "Let's just agree we don't need to say his name, okay? He's moved on. I'm fairly certain he has a new girlfriend he's no doubt already cheated on. He won't care."

For a moment, Margo looks sad. It hadn't ever occurred to me she may still have some lingering feelings toward my dickwad brother. That'll have to change. I make no move to comfort her. I stay firmly in place standing above her, a respectable few feet between us before I do something that'll have HR breathing down my neck.

"If we do this, we need rules, or terms, or I don't know the fancy word I'm supposed to use, but we need *something*. For me to even consider it, I need to know we're on the *exact* same page."

"Tell me your terms, Margo."

6

Margo

ON THE OUTSIDE, I hope I at least appear put together. With Beck no longer in my personal space, the spicy scent of his expensive cologne overtaking my senses, I'm attempting, yet horribly failing, to think straight. I'm at least *attempting* to appear normal. On the inside, I'm freaking the fuck out.

The only thing in my mind is a constant replay of Beck's words. The mental image of me bent over this table, wondering what it'd feel like to have him take me from behind. These are *absolutely* thoughts I shouldn't be having—especially about my new boss who is also my ex's hotter older brother. I'm apparently about to partake in a fake fiancée charade with him; plus, I'm now having dirty thoughts about the two of us and this table. It all equates to a *terrible* idea.

"I don't want to be embarrassed again, Beck," I say, my voice lowered as I try my best to keep it steady. The last thing I need is for my voice to give away the effect his words have on me. "Everyone looked at me like I was pitiful when it came out that Car—"

I almost slip up and say the forbidden name, but quickly correct myself—"your brother had cheated on me for years. If people are going to think we're engaged, you can't be seen with other women. I refuse to ever be embarrassed like that again—even if it's fake between us."

There's not a hint of deceit in his eyes when he says, "I wouldn't do that to you, Margo. No one will be seen with me but you."

My stomach unexplainably flutters from his words. It's *tragic*. Carter messed me up so much that I think it's romantic when my possible, soon-to-

be, fake fiancé promises not to be seen with another when we're fake engaged.

Men. They really can do a number on you and not even give a shit that they did so.

"I know that you have uh...*needs*," I start, fumbling with my words. I've now committed to this train wreck of a topic though, so I keep trekking even though I feel my cheeks begin to flush. Without even meaning to, my eyes flick down to the crotch of his suit pants, furthering the redness coating my cheeks. "So, I understand that you'll have to have those *met* with someone, but if we do this, I just don't want that to be public. I don't want anyone else to know of you, ya know, getting those needs met. I promise to do the same for any of my, you know...*needs*." I never thought the word needs could cause me to blush in embarrassment, yet here I am, red as a tomato.

Beck's nostrils flare. The angry look in his eyes has my gaze darting away from him in fear. Suddenly, two strong fingers are grabbing me by the chin and forcing my head to look up. His fingertips dig into my cheeks as his face hardens in anger. "Let another man even think about taking care of you when you're my fiancée and they're as good as dead." His voice is seething. I have no idea where all of that anger came from, but it does something to my insides.

My lips part and close again as I think of what to say to him in response. He keeps a strong grip on my jaw, his eyes narrowed as he watches my reaction carefully.

"Margo," Beck says through clenched teeth. There's a muscle in his jaw ticking away. Our closeness is the only reason I'm able to see it. I wonder if it always feathers like that, or if it only does when he's filled with rage.

I'll have to find out.

"Tell me you understand," he demands, his voice tense.

"Understand what?" I ask, my brain feeling like mush. Being this close to him has me at a loss for words. It's the scent of him, feeling the heat radiating off his body, really it's the overwhelming presence he exudes.

Ever so lightly, his thumb brushes over my cheekbone before he rips his hand away. His arms cross his chest in a defensive position. The movement has the fabric around his biceps bunching, the tailored suit almost *too* tailored to his bulging biceps. "If you agree to this, there will be no one else

in your life, Margo. For the year, or however long it takes to get the point across, you're mine."

I'm still half wondering if I'm having some sort of bad reaction to the wine we had last night. Or maybe I'm having some sort of fever dream? There has to be an explanation for what's happening right now. This can't be real life. Beckham Sinclair can't be asking me to be his fake fiancée. He can't really be forcing me into being exclusive—even if fake—with him. I'm living in an alternate reality. Hearing Beck say "you're mine" wasn't real...

But it was. It is. This is all very, very real.

This is every woman's dream, and I'm just waiting to find out what the catch is.

I straighten my body in the chair, crossing one leg over the other. "If I agree to that then you have to agree to it, too. It's not fair for you to expect me to not be with anyone else if you're going to be with other women."

His indigo eyes flash, but I can't pinpoint with *what*. I want to say it's desire, but the idea is absurd. Beck can easily get any woman he wants. There's no way he's looking at me with that kind of desire. "Just you, Margo. No one but you."

My heart pounds erratically in my chest. He isn't even as close as he'd been a few minutes ago, but I still feel his presence everywhere. I'm losing a grip on the situation, and I need to regain it before my heart does something stupid like wanting him. "I have another rule," I rush out, rising to my feet because it feels odd to be sitting down looking up at him.

Even standing in heels, I have to bend my neck to look up at him, and he's not even standing to his full height as he rests up against the conference table. "Enlighten me," he clips.

I point between us. "Nothing can happen between us. Lines can't get blurred. No kissing *or* anything else," I add as an afterthought.

His laugh takes me by surprise, making me jump. "Oh, Margo. We'll have to convince many people that the two of us are engaged. We'll most certainly have to kiss. As for the *anything else*"—he says it sarcastically, like the words are in quotations—"I can assure you that we won't be fucking unless you beg for it."

I don't know how Beck manages to make the word "*fucking*" so hot, but every time he says it, I find myself clenching my thighs tighter and tighter.

My eyes narrow. “I can promise you that won’t be happening, so we’re good there. It’s a maybe to the kissing.”

His smirk feels like a challenge. “I’m not worried about it. Sooner rather than later, we’ll be kissing. And trust me, you won’t want to do it just for show.”

I snort. “You’re so full of yourself. That won’t happen.” Even as I say the words, lacing conviction into every syllable, I find my gaze resting on his full lips. Without ever kissing him, I’m confident that kissing Beck Sinclair will feel like sleeping with him. His kiss would be sinful. It would do things to me no man has been able to achieve. I know all of this without ever being touched by him.

It’s the reason nothing can happen between us.

He clicks his tongue. “Never say never, Violet.”

“Never,” I respond immediately, drawing out the word to get the point across.

Beck crosses one leather shoe over the other, his feet now crossed at the ankles. “Now you’re making this a game. It’s making me far more interested in kissing you.”

I snap my fingers, cutting whatever the hell is happening between us right now short. “Back to the agreement, Beck.”

He runs a finger down the wood top of the conference table. Bringing the finger to his face, his lip upturns at the small amount of dust that coats his fingertip. “Is there anything else holding you back from saying yes?”

“Just about everything,” I retort.

Beck sighs, clueing me in that he’s annoyed with my reluctance. Or is it anger? Maybe it’s a bit of both. He raises his wrist, the movement pulling the sleeve of his suit back to show off his watch. He checks the time on it, his eyes widening slightly in alarm. “Look, Margo, I’ve missed one meeting and I’m about to miss another in the time we’ve been in here. What’s it going to take for you to say yes?”

Rubbing my lips together, I think about how I want to answer his question. If I’m being honest with myself, I’m far more eager to say yes than I thought I’d be. It may be because I’m entirely curious to see what it’d be like to be Beck’s fiancée, even fake. Deep down, maybe I’m bitter enough about what Carter did to me to want to say yes just to make him jealous. Although, he’d have to give a shit about me to be jealous, and I

don't know even if me showing up to a family function as Beck's fiancée would get any kind of emotion out of him.

The main things holding me back are leaving my friends and thinking of the aftermath of what happens when Beck and I end the fake engagement. To agree to his proposition, I'd have to trust him when he says we can handle it however I see fit.

"I'm really not a man that likes to wait."

My mind is muddled with all of the reasons I *should* be saying no to him. First and foremost, I'm still hurt by what his brother did. Moving all the way across the country with somebody else, even if fake, probably wouldn't be my best idea.

But I *love* New York.

My heart belongs there. I came out to California because it's where Emma and I got job offers. I've told myself I didn't move here because it's also where Carter took a job, but if I'm honest with myself, I wanted a job here because of him. Winnie followed along because it's Winnie. She can go anywhere—live anywhere—with all the money her family has.

I've always wondered what would've happened if I'd stayed in New York. I didn't regret moving out to California, but I'm not meant for the West Coast. Now I have my chance to move back there, but not only move back, to have the chance to show my art to Camden Hunter. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. I just have to pretend to be Beck's fiancée for a year to do it.

"If I agree, we're doing it on my terms, Beck. I'm sure new rules will come along, and I need to know you'll agree to them even if our charade has already begun."

He thinks my words through for a minute. I can tell it's killing him, to agree to relinquish some of the control he so desperately needs. He tucks his hands into his pockets while his gaze focuses on me. "Agreed."

"So then it's settled," I say, wondering if I'll come to regret this decision.

Rubbing his hands together, he stands to his full height. It only takes him two steps to close the distance between us. Looking down at me, his face is masked to all business once again. He reaches into the hidden pocket of his suit, pulling out a business card. The card is stuck between his pointer and middle fingers as he holds it out between us.

I look at it, confused. If he's about to be my fake fiancé, why am I getting a business card? It seems a little formal in my opinion.

"We'll be in touch," he demands, pushing the card up against my chest. He leaves me no choice but to take it.

And without any other parting words, no thank you or even a goodbye, Beck leaves me all alone in the conference room.

All I can manage to think is *what did I just agree to?*

7

Beck

IT'S BEEN two days since I met with Margo, and two days of staring at my phone waiting for her call.

She's supposed to start this coming Monday, and it's already Friday morning. I'd figured she'd at least want to know more details on what the next few days will look like.

I've come to the conclusion she must've misplaced my card. I purposefully make it difficult for anyone to find a way to contact me—not wanting my phone to be overloaded with calls or messages. The poor girl must be struggling to get ahold of me.

A long sigh escapes my lips as I finish up another virtual meeting. The last couple days have been filled with call after call in an effort to integrate the company Margo worked at into my own. I didn't expect quite so much extra work when I bought it, but that's mainly because we found ways it can actually be useful. There are specific proprietary algorithms 8-bit owns that Sintech should be able to use to improve some of our social platform data encryption. It'll take some overhaul of 8-bit to make it best serve us, starting with getting rid of that god-awful logo, but the acquisition hasn't been a *complete* waste.

Stretching in my chair, I take in the view from the penthouse suite of the hotel I'm staying at until Sunday morning. My moment of peace is quickly broken when the vibration of my phone rattles against the desk. Eagerly, I grab for it, expecting to see an unknown number on the screen—Margo's. Instead, I see my assistant's name glaring at me. Frowning, I answer it. "Yes?" I clip, not bothering with a greeting.

“Good morning,” Polly says, her tone cheery like usual. The woman is old enough to be my mother, in fact she’s older than my own mom, yet it doesn’t seem as if the world has hardened her over the years. I on the other hand, can feel my sanity slip away with each useless meeting. I don’t know how Polly has put up with me for years, but deep down, I’m grateful for it. She’s a wonderful assistant, always doing her job no matter what I ask. I’m just pissy this morning because Margo hasn’t contacted me yet.

“Hi,” I answer, trying to soften the gruffness in my tone slightly.

For the next fifteen minutes, Polly and I iron details we’d been needing to work through. The entire time, my mind travels elsewhere. I can’t stop thinking about Margo, even when discussing important topics at hand. Eventually, we get to a good stopping point. Polly is efficient. Even from New York, she’s able to keep a reign on things so that even when I’m out of the office, I can count on things running smoothly.

Before she hangs up, I get an idea. Standing up, I take the phone off speaker and hold it to my ear. My shoes click against the marble floor of the penthouse suite as I rush to my room. “Polly?”

“Yes, Mr. Sinclair?”

I grab the jacket off its hanger, the suit freshly steamed thanks to the hotel staff. I press the phone between my cheek and my shoulder as I slip my arms into the sleeves. “Clear my schedule for the rest of the day. Something’s come up.”

“What?” she asks, not hiding her shock.

Walking to my nightstand, I set my phone on it, putting the phone on speaker again. “Something’s come up today, Polly,” I explain, grabbing my silver cufflinks and working them through their slots. “Please reschedule any calls I had on the books. Or assign them to Brian; he can inform me of anything that needs my input or approval. If any of the meetings can be turned into an email, do that. It may be hard to reach me for most of the day.”

Polly has worked with me long enough to know not to ask any further questions. She sighs, bold enough to let me know she’s displeased with my abrupt change before saying, “I’ll get it done, Mr. Sinclair.”

“Thank you,” I say before hanging up.

Once I’m ready, I race to the elevator.

There’s somewhere I need to be. Someone I need to see.

Stepping into the lobby of 8-bit Security, I find the lone security guard paying closer attention to the game on his phone than who is walking in the building. My loud footsteps break him from whatever app he's playing. At the sight of me, he almost jumps out of his chair, then presses a hand to his chest while his shoulders move up and down with a deep breath.

"We weren't expecting you today, Mr. Sinclair," he exclaims, rushed. Now standing close to him, I find crumbs of whatever breakfast he had still stuck in his large mustache. A paper towel with a grease stain sits next to his wireless mouse, more crumbs scattered around it from whatever pastry he just ate. He fumbles with his keyboard, muttering under his breath for an excruciatingly long minute.

My patience wearing thin, I lean over the desk. "Look"—my eyes scan over his uniform until I find a name tag—"Barry, you and I both know that I have the highest security clearance there is here. I don't think we need to bother with printing me a guest pass, do we?"

Barry coughs, looking up at me, his eyes full of panic. "Uh, sir, is this a test?" he squeaks. "I'm not supposed to let anyone in without a pass." He looks back at his computer, typing a few more things. He reaches up and smacks the side of his computer tower. His eyes get large when he realizes I just watched him smack his computer.

Swallowing, I look at him. "Barry," I say tightly. "I own this fucking company. I'm going to go on up and not bother with getting cleared. You got it?"

He looks unsure as he nods. I don't give the guy much room to argue.

People give me odd looks as I step through the glass doors of the office. Darlene, or at least I *believe* it was Darlene, jumps from her seat when she sees me approaching the sea of cubicles. "Mr. Sinclair, we weren't expecting you today."

I barely spare her a second glance. "I wasn't aware I needed to announce each time I was going to stop by."

She follows closely behind me as I weave in and out of the cubicles, my eyes scanning over everyone working at their desks.

"You don't, sir, I just would've made sure—"

Turning abruptly, I stop in front of her. Her mouth hangs open as she looks up at me. Even when trying to smile up at me, her mouth still turns

down in a frown. “I don’t need you to follow me, Darlene. I’ll take it from here.” I dismiss her with a simple flick of my wrist.

At first, she doesn’t get the hint. It takes me making a shooing motion in the air for her to turn around, her shoulders tight as she makes her way back to her desk.

No longer having to deal with Darlene, I scan the large office space, my eyes searching for one person and one person only.

There she is.

Margo’s back is to me. Her long hair falls all the way down her back, the tendrils tamed stick straight. She’s engaged in conversation with somebody, her hip propped against a desk. The woman listening to her is engrossed with whatever she is saying. I stop, watching Margo for a few moments before either one of them notice that the office has gone quiet, all of them with their apprehensive eyes on me.

I get it. When the boss shows up, everyone loses their damn minds. It’s like they forget to work. Or maybe they’re just never great at working at all. Hopefully, for the sake of business, it’s the former. Lucky for them, I don’t plan on staying long. As long as Margo cooperates.

Which could go one or two ways with her.

Margo talks animatedly with her hands. Upon closer inspection, she grasps something. The bobblehead in her hand swings around in the air. At one point, her coworker has to step slightly to the left to avoid being smacked in the head with the item.

My lip twitches in amusement. It doesn’t take long for my feet to eat the distance between us. I come to a stop at Margo’s back. Her coworker notices me right away. She freezes, her hand stuck in the short blonde strands of her hair.

“Margo,” the coworker hisses, hastily finishing her task of clipping her hair back.

“I’m not done talking!” Margo chides, angrily setting the bobblehead on the cubicle shelf.

Is that Nash Pierce?

The blonde smiles playfully, raising her eyebrows. “Mar, I’d advise you to stop this conversation until we get home. Someone is standing behind you, and he looks pretty pissed.” The blonde—maybe also a roommate—doesn’t hide the amusement in her voice.

Margo spins on her heels immediately, her puffy lips parting when her eyes land on me. When she looks me up and down, I can't help but wonder if she likes what she sees.

"*Beck?*" she gasps. Her green eyes are wide as they travel over my features. It's like she's trying to figure out if I'm actually here or just a figment of her imagination.

"*This is Beck?*" The girl attempts to whisper, but it comes out more as a yell. "You didn't tell me our new boss looked like *that!*"

Margo aims a dirty look in the girl's direction. "Shut up, Emma. He's not that special to look at."

Someone busts out laughing from a few cubicles away. They quickly try to hide the laughter with a cough, but it's too late. Margo gives them a dirty look, muttering something incoherent under her breath.

"Stop lying to yourself," the coworker—Emma—mumbles. "That's the best looking man I've ever seen." She bites into an apple I just now notice she's holding. She chews on it loudly, not shy about looking me up and down.

"I think I hate you," Margo snaps, shoving what must be her friend from the cubicle space. Her friend fights her by digging her heels into the ground. Margo is smaller than Emma, but still manages to move her a few feet.

I reach out to tap the bobblehead she'd been swinging around minutes before. As the head bobbles up and down, I look at her with a bored expression. "Working hard?" I ask sarcastically.

She scoffs, looking over her shoulder to her computer screen. "Emma and I were going over a new design before you walked in."

"Is that so?"

"Yep," she answers confidently.

Emma smacks her palm to her forehead, groaning dramatically.

My eyes flick to the computer monitor, to the flashing login screen, the evidence clear as day that Margo hasn't even logged in for the morning, let alone looked over a design.

"You're not even logged in, Mar." Emma grabs Margo by the shoulders, turning her until she's face to face with the proof of her lie.

"Oh..." I can only see her profile, but her wince is obvious.

Margo tucks her hand into the back pocket of her jeans as she spins to face me again. "What are you doing here?"

“I’m just going to go get to work,” Emma mumbles. Her fingers wiggle with a goodbye as she rushes to her own desk.

“You’ve been ignoring me,” I state, pinning her with a scowl. This is the second time the woman has had the nerve to disregard me. It’s something that won’t happen again.

“To ignore someone, they first have to call.”

“I gave you my business card. Something I rarely hand out, might I add. You not calling is as good as ignoring me.” I let my eyes roam over her work space. For someone who’s worked here for some time, her space is pretty boring. It’s not like I can talk. The only things on the walls of my office are my framed diplomas. But that’s the way I like things—clean and simple.

Margo doesn’t strike me as the clean and simple type. She seems wild and chaotic, someone who likes things unhinged and messy. I’d imagined her desk being unkept, her artwork hung with mismatched thumbtacks. The only signs anyone works at the desk are the coffee mugs that are haphazardly placed.

She shrugs. “I figured if you wanted to talk, you’d call.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at her. She gets under my skin more than I care to admit. It shouldn’t bother me she didn’t call me, yet I’ve lost sleep wondering why my phone hasn’t rung with her voice on the other line.

Taking a deep breath, I point to the purse she has sitting underneath her desk. “Grab your things. We’re leaving.”

Her arms cross her chest as she tries to make herself look tough. It doesn’t work. If anything, she looks annoyingly adorable with the pose, her eyebrows pinched together in what’s supposed to look like a mean expression. “I have to work.”

One of my eyebrows raise. “You work for me now, remember, Miss Moretti?”

“I’m well aware,” she spits back.

I smile, taking a step closer to her. We’re still a healthy distance apart. Noticing all of the eyes that are focused on us, I lower my voice as I speak next to her ear. “As my new assistant, you have places to be.”

“It’s not Monday yet,” she aggravatingly points out.

My eyes turn into slits as I drink in the smug look on her face. “I changed my mind. You’re needed today. Right now.”

“I’m working.”

“Yes. For me. Now, I’m not a patient man, Margo. You have five minutes to grab your stuff and meet me in the lobby. Don’t make me wait.”

She wipes her face clean of the smug smile. Instead, her face screws together in anger. “What happens if I make you wait?”

The smile she gets is lethal. “I don’t think you want to find out.”

I leave before I do something in front of all these people I shouldn’t. On my way out the doors, the annoying secretary stands up, almost tripping over her hideous shoes as she chases after me. “When can we be expecting you again, Mr. Sinclair?”

If it were up to me—never.

“Darlene,” I begin, gritting my teeth. A minute has already ticked by. Margo better hurry, or she’s going to get more than she bargained for if she makes us late.

“It’s Darla, sir,” she corrects. Her voice is nasally. I wonder how anyone can stand listening to her speak for any length of time.

I don’t give a fuck what her name is. I just want her to leave me alone.

“Darla. You’re going to have to hire a new graphic designer. Margo’s been promoted.”

She’s left no time to argue or ask questions. My palms slam into the glass door as I make my way back to the lobby. Barry smiles nervously at me as I stop to stand off in a corner.

I glance at my watch.

She has three more minutes before she’s late.

8

Margo

I'M late by *over* five minutes.

In my defense, it's not really my fault. Emma takes four of those minutes by trying to get me to explain where I'm going with Beck. She doesn't believe me when I answer truthfully. I have no freaking clue what Beck has planned for the day, what his motives are for showing up on my last day of work at 8-bit. But damn, I might be a little excited to find out.

When I finally convince her that I'll give her updates the moment I know what's happening, it takes another four minutes for me to grab my things and check my appearance in the compact I keep in my handbag.

The last minute is spent rushing out. Darla attempts to fire questions at me on my way out, but all I do is give her a smile. "I'm going to miss you, Darla," I lie. Wrapping my arms around her, I give her one tight squeeze. I won't miss her in the slightest, but part of me will miss this place. Even though I hated what I did here, it was my first real job. I got to start with Emma, it's a bit bittersweet to leave it behind.

Who knows, maybe I'll be back whenever this thing with Beck ends. But I hope to never be back again.

Beck looks pissed when I step into the large lobby. He's got his phone pressed to his ear, clearly engaged in a conversation with someone else. The call seems civil. The look in his eyes is anything but.

I'm in trouble. The deep set of his brows tells me as much.

Why does the thought excite me a little?

He doesn't say a word when I come to a halt in front of him. He continues to speak with whoever is on the other line. Beck acknowledges

my presence by tilting his head toward the exit. Words aren't needed for me to catch on to what he wants.

His long legs make their way toward the exit. Beck doesn't even look over his shoulder to see if I follow. He doesn't have to. I'm too intrigued by why he showed up on my last day of work, leaving no room for arguing that I needed to leave with him.

Even though it's obvious he's upset by me being late, he holds the door open for me. Before I leave, I turn and give Barry my sweetest smile. "Goodbye, Barry! I'll miss you." I blow him a kiss, loving how Barry eats the attention up by pretending to catch the kiss and tuck it in his pocket.

When I turn back to leave, I find Beck has ended his call. His eyes are locked on me like magnets. I wish I knew what the look on his face meant. The anger is wiped away for the moment, but I can't quite put my finger on what's replaced it.

As soon as my feet hit the sidewalk, he's letting the door close behind him and guiding me toward a waiting black SUV. A guy dressed in a suit waits in front of the rear passenger door. As soon as we near the vehicle, he's plastering on a smile and pulling the door open.

My feet skid to a stop. I anxiously look over my shoulder, wondering if getting into this car is a good idea. I guess Beck is my boss—and soon-to-be fake fiancé—so I should trust him. But a part of me feels a bit apprehensive. It's probably the fact that the two of them are dressed like they're about to go to a formal event and I'm dressed in a pair of fraying Levi's.

I look between the guy holding the car door open and Beck. "I didn't get the memo to come wearing a gown. My apologies."

The man tries to hide a smile. His cheek twitches as he fights with all his might to keep a straight face.

Beck doesn't look quite as amused. He's now climbed into the back of the car, his arm outstretched like he's waiting to help me get into the car. My body feels tingly as he looks over my outfit. "I'm going to have to have a chat with HR on dress code," he clips, his eyes focusing on the large hole at my knee. My tan skin peeks out from the space.

I look down, taking in all the different holes on the pants. I shrug, completely unbothered by his comment. "Oh, it totally goes against the dress code. Darla wrote me a pink slip the moment I stepped into work this morning."

It's Beck's turn to fight a smile. He's much better at it than his driver, however. I mutter my thanks to him as I slide into the backseat of the SUV, completely ignoring Beck's outstretched hand. He doesn't say anything as it falls to his side. "So, you're breaking the rules right after you've been promoted?"

Beck's driver, I still need to get his name, softly shuts the door after me before he rounds the car and gets in.

I shake my head. "I've always followed the rules. But today being my last day and all, I figured I might as well wear something comfortable. If it were up to me, all companies would have casual Fridays."

"Noted." His eyes snap to my side. "Buckle your seat belt."

I bite my tongue, wanting to tell him that even if he's going to be my boss, he doesn't have to always tell me what to do.

He must disapprove of my silence. In one swift motion, he's reaching across the space, grabbing the seat belt and buckling me in.

"I'm not a child. I can do it myself."

Beck pins me with a glare. His face is dangerously close to mine. So close that his hot breath tickles my cheeks. His smell surrounds me. For a fraction of a second, his gaze focuses on my lips. He rips his sight away from my parted lips, his stormy eyes looking into mine. "Too late."

I tear my eyes from his, too caught up in the moment with him for my own good. I should be angry with him for catapulting into my life and changing everything so quickly, but I'm also thrilled at the possibilities of what's in store.

"Where are we going?" I question, looking out the window as the driver pulls the car away from the curb.

"Before we do anything, I need you to sign this." Beck pulls a packet from a briefcase and plops it between us.

I pick it up, my eyes roaming over a bunch of legal jargon that goes over my head.

"It's an NDA, Margo," he explains, watching me closely. "You're expected to sign it before we go through with this."

I frown, trying to understand what everything means. Flipping from one page to the next, I find highlighted sections where I'm supposed to sign my name. Watching reruns of Law and Order SVU hasn't given me enough knowledge of law terminology to even begin to understand a thing. I look at Beck with skepticism written on my face. "I don't understand any of this." I

wave the packet around in the air between us. “How do I know that I’m not signing away my first-born child to you?”

The driver spits out a laugh. I smirk, happy I got the calm and collected guy to finally break.

“Glad you find her hilarious, Ezra.” Beck gives the driver—Ezra, apparently—a dirty look through the rearview mirror. Ezra, however, only makes eye contact with Beck for a fleeting moment before he pins his eyes ahead of him, suddenly very focused on the road. “Sorry, sir.” He coughs. “It *was* kind of funny.”

I beam, looking at Beck with a satisfied look. “I like him already.”

“Thank you, Miss Moretti,” Ezra comments, his eyes still focused on the road ahead.

Beck sighs dismissively at the both of us. He looks at the packet I still hold between us. “I can assure you I’m not having you sign away anything. All of my staff sign NDAs. It’s standard protocol. Your *best friend*, Ezra, signed one as well.”

“Sure did. Hopefully, I didn’t sign away my first-born child,” he says sarcastically. “My future wife may not be happy to know that.”

Beck snorts, slightly leaning forward to get Ezra’s attention. “You don’t even have a girlfriend,” he responds dryly.

Ezra’s eyebrows raise to his hairline. “That you know of, sir.” He winks at me through the mirror.

The gesture manages to further annoy Beck. Angrily, he snatches the packet from my hand and places it on the leather seat between us. His fingers trace over some of the sentences as he begins to explain what everything means. My eyes travel over the words he reads out loud, so far confident that I’m not signing some kind of shady deal.

Once he makes it through three pages of the packet, he looks up at me through his thick eyelashes. “Need me to keep going or do you trust me enough to know that I’m a civilized human being that wouldn’t trap you into anything crooked?”

“I don’t know if *trust* is the correct term when it comes to you.”

Beck makes a face, making it seem like my response actually offended him. “Fine,” he bites, slipping his phone from his suit pocket. “I’ll call my lawyer to review it with you then, if that’s what it’ll take.”

His fingers are quick at typing something on his phone. Taking myself by surprise, I reach across the bench seat, placing my hand on his forearm.

“Wait,” I argue. Even the way the suit feels underneath my palm tells me it’s expensive. It’s soft, a light gray that looks great up against his pale skin tone.

Beck looks at where my hand rests on his arm. I pull it away, meeting his eyes. “Don’t call your lawyer. I’ll sign it.”

His eyes bore into mine. I try not to squirm in my seat. Half of me loves having his undivided attention like this. The other part of me wants him to look anywhere but me. I can’t handle having him watch me like he’s leaving so much unsaid. “But you don’t trust me.” It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to hear the disdain in his voice.

Rolling my eyes, I reach for the handbag at my feet. I rifle through it, searching for a pen.

“What are you doing?” Beck finally asks.

I pull random things out of the bag, wondering why I can’t find a single pen in here. Typically, this bag is like the one from Mary Poppins, full of unexpected treasures. Today, it’s full of random things except the one thing I need—a pen. “I’m looking for a pen,” I grumble, pulling out my makeup bag and moving it out of the way.

“Don’t bother,” Beck responds. He opens his briefcase and holds up a pen. “Use this.”

Snatching the pen from him, it feels heavier in my hand than I was expecting. Even this man’s pens feel expensive.

I set the packet in my lap, using my legs as a makeshift table as I sign on each dotted line.

9

Margo

“ARE you going to tell me where we’re going yet?” I prod, hoping he’ll finally answer my question. “We’re going to your apartment.”

“We’re what?” I shriek.

“We’re going to your apartment,” he repeats, slower this time, like I didn’t understand him the first time he said it. I understood him perfectly. I’m just in shock he knows where I live.

A sound of annoyance falls from my lips. “Not possible. You don’t know where I live.”

Ezra makes a sound from the front seat. The noise has Beck tossing him a threatening look immediately. “I know exactly where you live, Margo,” he declares, his voice level.

“I don’t believe you.”

He shakes his head at me. His pointer finger digs into his temple as he looks out the window, his eyes focused on the passing cars. “It’s cute you think I don’t know everything there is to know about you.”

Impossible. “You know nothing about me.” For starters, we barely uttered a few sentences to one another at his family’s vacation home.

Words weren’t really needed.

I shake the thought away as quickly as it came to be. The last thing I need on my mind is that memory. One thing I can count on is the fact I doubt Carter said much to Beck about me. I’m reminded of the fact that even though they’re brothers, Beck and Carter aren’t close. The last thing I imagine is the two of them sitting down and talking about me.

He looks from the window to me, a cocky smirk on his lips. “You forget I own the company you work at. Any knowledge they had on you, I now have right here”—he taps his temple—“and that includes your address.”

I let out a defeated sigh, slumping down in my seat and crossing my arms over my chest. “That’s creepy, you know.”

“It’s using the resources I have at my disposal.”

My phone vibrates. Giving Beck a dirty look, I unlock it and check the group chat with my roommates. My eyes track over the lengthy conversation they’d had in the time since Beck stole me from work.

EMMA

Winnie. You’ll never believe who showed up to whisk our very own Cinderella from work for the day.

WINNIE

Beckham Sinclair???

Oh my god. He showed up?

Don’t leave me on read. I need DETAILS!!

EMMA

Sorry. Darla just yelled at me for being on my phone.

YES!!!! He graced us with his beautiful presence. NO ONE TOLD ME HE WAS THAT HOT.

WINNIE

Why isn’t Margo responding? Margo...we need details. Like right now.

EMMA

She might be having hot car sex with her new boss. I would if my boss looked like that.

Well. I guess technically he is my boss. Too bad I didn’t get offered that assistant position. I’d assist him right to the bedroom.

WINNIE

Emma!! He’s your boss.

EMMA

I'm pissed I didn't know how hot he was. Margo didn't mention that.

WINNIE

I'm in a dumb group with girls from high school that send every picture of him posted on the internet. They all still hold out hope he'll give them an ounce of attention.

MARGO

He's not that good looking.

I smirk, my eyes bouncing to Beck who is also looking down at his phone. If he only knew the text I just fired off to my best friends. He'd probably say something cocky about how my reaction to his every move says otherwise.

EMMA

Shut up. Were you banging?

MARGO

No. He's taking me to our apartment.

EMMA

WHEN I'M NOT THERE?! What the hell, Margo. I could give him a tour of my bedroom.

I laugh, catching the attention of both Beck and Ezra. I mask my reaction immediately. I don't want to risk Beck reaching across the car and stealing the phone from my hands. It seems like something he'd do. I look back at my phone. Emma will lose her mind when I have to pretend that Beck and I have become fake engaged.

WINNIE

Why is he taking you there?

MARGO

I guess I'll find out.

I ignore the rest of the messages for now, despite feeling my phone vibrate countless times. Ezra turns onto a familiar street, cluing me in that Beck wasn't lying. He knows where I live and that's where we're going. "Care to tell me why we're going to my place?"

This actually does make him smile, except the smile is anything but friendly. It's devilish, making my stomach sink as I wonder the meaning behind it.

"We're getting you all packed. We fly back to New York tomorrow."

I swear this man is trying to send me into a tailspin. "I don't think I heard you correctly. We can't leave tomorrow."

"And why's that?"

"Because I have friends here. I need to pack. I need more time to move across the country."

There's a speck of humor in his eyes as he leans deeper into the hand that holds his head. "You would've had that if you called me. Sorry, but duty calls. I need to return to New York tomorrow. I'd much have preferred tonight, but I'm being generous and giving you the evening. But that's as far as my generosity goes. You'll be leaving with me tomorrow since you're supposed to be in the office with me Monday morning."

I anxiously pick at my cuticles. I normally take a week to pack for a long weekend. How the hell am I supposed to pack for uprooting my life and moving halfway across the country in one night?

My mind reels as a thought pops into my head. "If you had my address, then you had my number."

He shows off his perfectly straight white teeth when he grins. "This seems way more efficient."

My argument stays in my throat as Ezra pulls up to the apartment complex. Beck must've really done his research, because we even pull up to the correct building. Ezra puts the SUV in park as Beck and I have a silent

stare off. I refuse to look away from him. I may have signed away the next year of my life to him, but he doesn't just get to tell me at the last minute to pack all my things and move away tomorrow.

"I'm not leaving tomorrow."

"How else do you plan to get to New York by Monday morning?"

He's got a point. But I refuse to let him win this one. He's steamrolled into my life suddenly and taken control of everything. I want some of that control back, even if it's in the form of determining when I move to New York and begin this charade I'm going to take part in.

"I'll get a flight on my own," I answer confidently. It'll probably drain my entire bank account to do so, but I'm prepared to do it just to win this battle with him.

He grunts in disgust. "I'm not allowing you to fly coach." He says *coach* the way someone talks about bed bugs or lice. Like it's the most disgusting thing on the planet. I, for one, have found some coach flights quite delightful. A bag of pretzels *and* a cookie? That's pure luxury.

"Your entitlement is showing," I snap as Ezra gets out of the car. He clearly doesn't want to have to listen to Beck and I battle it out. *I wouldn't either if I were him.*

Beck clenches his jaw, something I'm learning he does a lot. It seems he's in a constant state of anger when he's with me. I'm not trying to push his buttons. I just don't want him to think he can show up at my job on my last day and then have the audacity to pack my things and force me to get on a jet with him tomorrow.

Unbuckling his seatbelt, he slides across the leather, moving the briefcase that acted as a barrier between us. He crowds me with his body, even as I try to scoot away from him. My back presses into the door. I have nowhere to go. I don't even have anywhere to look but into his dark, stormy, indigo eyes.

He presses his palm into the window by my head. Our thighs press against one another, no other parts of our bodies touching. "I'm not letting the woman who is about to be my fiancée fly coach when I own a private jet."

"Plenty of people fly it every day."

He grinds his teeth, fire in his eyes. "Plenty of people aren't you."

Fuck.

No.

The way Beck looks at me right now makes me want to agree to anything he says. There's concern, but also determination. I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is a battle I won't win. It doesn't matter anyway. Right now what I want to battle is my heart, because it liked him saying "plenty of people aren't you" *a little* too much.

"Go pack, Margo."

This close to him, I marvel at how his porcelain skin doesn't have a trace of any facial hair. I wonder if he freshly shaved this morning, or perhaps it doesn't show well because he has blond hair. In my head, I'm already creating a mental list of the things I need to pack and what I'll leave behind for my friends. But I don't want him to know that. Pushing his buttons, getting him riled up and seeing that muscle in his jaw tick is much more fun.

"No."

He smacks the glass next to my head, making me jump. Tearing himself away from me, he tosses his door open like it's the thing that's pissed him off. I don't have time to even gather my thoughts before he's ripping my car door open. His large hands catch me underneath my armpits, saving me from falling flat on my ass in front of both him and Ezra.

Even after I gain my footing Beck leaves one of his hands on me. It trails down a few inches until he's holding me by the bicep. I try to yank it free, but his fingers keep their firm grasp.

"Let go," I demand.

Instead of listening to me, he tightens his fingers, pulling me in the direction of my apartment building. "After you," he growls, completely calm and collected no matter how many times I try to pull my arm from him.

Finally, I yank hard enough to get my arm free. But looking at him from the corner of my eye, noting the smug look on his face, I wonder if he let go because he didn't want to deal with me fussing a second longer.

"You're not coming with me."

"I wasn't planning on it, but then you started acting like a child, so now I'll be coming in and helping you pack so you'll be ready to catch a flight. *Tomorrow.*"

His tone makes it obvious there's no reason for me to argue, but it doesn't stop me from trying one last time.

"You can't make me," I bite.

He bites his lip, quirking an eyebrow at me. “Margo, I can promise that you’re coming with me tomorrow one way or another. If it means I have to throw you over my shoulder to get you to New York, then I’ll do it. Even if you’re kicking and screaming.”

The two of us stare at one another, our chests heaving as we both refuse to back down. Finally, I break eye contact, my eyes searching for Ezra. I’m hoping that I’ve made a quick friend in him and that he’ll back me up, but I’m out of luck. He’s got his phone to his ear with a wide smile as he talks to somebody on the other line.

Letting out a loud groan, I stomp toward my apartment. I don’t have to turn around to know Beck is hot on my heels. His angry stare is like a brand on my neck, scorching and making me more annoyed with each step closer to my front door.

“I’m tired of you bossing me around,” I mumble, reaching into my pocket for my keys.

“Get used to it,” he clips.

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