



BILLIONAIRE

BOOK 3

DADS

Cocky

ROMANCE

NIA ARTHURS

COCKY ROMANCE

OceanofPDF.com

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Billionaire. CEO. My new evil overlord.

Max Stinton is the sinfully gorgeous villain whose company torpedoed my life eight years ago.

Arrogant. Charming. Steely eyed.

We meet again when I accidentally fix his car instead of trashing it (like I should have).

Do I get a thank you and a bouquet of flowers? Nope.

In return for my auto repair, Mr. Hotshot traps me in a draconian contract.

The terms are simple—become the face of Stinton Auto and my daughter remains a secret from his awful family.

Protecting my daughter is what I live for and loathing Stinton Group is the air I breathe.

So imagine my surprise when sparks start flying every time Max and I are in the same room.

He's stubborn, annoying and *there*. Whenever I have a problem, he magically shows up and solves it.

I can almost accuse of him caring. Which is ridiculous.

Blood-sucking vampires don't have a heart.

Even if my seven-year-old insists that Max is the best thing ever.

Can I keep my heart out of the paws of the Big Bad Wolf? And will I survive when news of what *really* happened eight years ago threatens everything I knew about Max Stinton?

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CHAPTER 1

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A MAN'S JOB

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DAWN

THE MECHANIC BAY is quieter than a grave.

My co-workers, dressed in over-alls and steel-toed boots, shuffle past with their heads tucked to their chests and their hands in their pockets. It's like a funeral procession, eyes vacant and lips wired shut in thought as they mourn the loss of something precious.

Dread's been building ever since the news came out that Stinton Group acquired the company and it's all coming to a head today, with the announcement that our manager is 'retiring' in a month.

Not the kind of news you want to hear in a bleak time like this. Especially when the Big Bad Bully—Stinton Group—is known to target weaknesses. That's about all we've got to serve up here at the Cross Roads Auto Shop thanks to steep competition with another auto brand just down the road.

New ownership means new regulations. New directions. New employees.

I just didn't expect that they'd hit our leader first.

My fingers curl into fists and I whack the nut with my wrench a little too stiffly.

Stinton Group.

Carnivorous. Ugly. Run by a pack of wolves who think morality is some kind of flexi-ruler. My last run-in with their kind nearly destroyed my life. I'm not surprised that the minute their toxic waste cloud descended on our shop, it started tearing us up by the roots.

"Banner." Clint gestures behind the glass pane of his office. He bends thick, oil-stained fingers, beckoning me firmly.

I frown, set my wrench back in the toolbox and march into his office. It's a small, cramped space. No windows except for the glass pane that looks out into the mechanic bay. Picture frames of his family litter the desk that's piled high with paperwork.

"Close the door." Clint rubs his whiskered chin and leans against his desk as if all the wind's been knocked out of his body.

I slam the door shut with a bang and whirl on him. “What did they do to you?”

“Who?”

“Stinton Group. Did they threaten your family?”

“What?” He squints at me as if I’m not speaking English.

“Did they beat you up?” My eyes dart between his. “You can tell me. We’ll fight them together. Doesn’t matter how big Stinton Group is, we can’t allow them to walk all over people like that. There are laws for—”

“Dawn, what on earth are you talking about?”

I’m seeing red, but when I blink and focus on Clint, I realize that he’s not sharing in my restlessness. He watches me with concern.

Me.

As if I’m the whack job.

Clint sighs. “Stinton Group didn’t pressure me into retiring.”

“But—”

“I don’t know what those boys have been discussing,” he juts his chin at the bay where the other mechanics are gathered in a circle—probably whispering about who’ll be next on the chopping block, “but I came to this decision on my own.”

“Blink twice if this room is bugged, Clint.”

He frowns at me. “Banner.”

I can’t deny that I’m a little disappointed. Stinton Group’s reputation is currently in the toilet and the public is finally starting to see what I’ve known all along. Now would be the perfect time to hit them with a lawsuit.

“Can we move on from the Stinton Group topic now? There’s something I need to discuss with you.”

“Give me a second.” I wipe a hand over my face and try to calm the justice rush that sent my adrenaline spiking. “Okay. Now I’m ready.”

“I know you’re planning on leaving the shop. I’d like to convince you to stay... and become the manager.”

My eyebrow jumps. “Not a chance.”

“You’re the only one capable of leading this operation.”

“The day Stinton Group acquired the company was the day I could no longer work here. Besides, half those guys barely tolerate my presence. The other half thinks it’s ‘amusing’ that I’m a female mechanic. They barely accept me as a colleague. Why do you think they’d accept me as their leader?”

“You can’t argue with results.”

That’s massively untrue, but I don’t expect him to understand what it’s like being a woman in a male-dominated industry.

“You’re the one who helps me with all this when I hit a snag.” He points to the files on his desk that look like a paper mill gave birth to a tower. “You don’t run away from problems. You’re smart and methodical. And you’re the best damn worker in this shop.”

I lift a hand. Flattery will get Clint everything he wants. Especially with me. I can’t let him get to my head. “Find someone else. I’m not doing it.”

“Banner.”

“I’ve got work to do, Clint.” I take a step back. “And congratulations on your retirement.”

He shakes his head in disappointment, but it doesn’t move me.

I throw the door open and stomp out of his office. The moment I’m in the mechanic bay, Willis and the other guys crowd me like pigeons swooping in on a crusty piece of bread.

“What did Clint say?” Willis asks. He’s an older man with greying whiskers, pudgy cheeks and a paunch. The careless way his over-alls drapes only one shoulder and sags at the back fits the ‘slovenly mechanic’ stereotype.

It bothers me seeing that. People take Willis seriously just because he’s got the man parts to go with his wrench, but I always have to be neat and perfect just to get half of the respect he does.

“Nothing.” I stalk over to the bucket and mop. One of the company rules is to always keep our bay clean. Since auto mechanic work is a dirty job, we dust and mop the place about three times a day to keep it looking fresh for customers.

“Didn’t seem like nothing to me.” Willis follows me like one of those annoying men in the club who thinks ‘no’ means ‘try harder’. It’s why I stopped going clubbing. That and the fact that I met Beth’s father in a club.

“What it seems like to you is none of my business,” I growl.

Willis scowls at me. The air turns chilly. I can feel the tension spiking and my grip on the broom tightens.

Put me in a room with a misbehaving car and my gender doesn’t matter. I can fix that baby up with gusto. But just because I *work* in a male-dominated field doesn’t mean I *am* a male. And my five-foot two, one hundred twenty pounds of weight can attest to that.

What I've been through made me strong. Most of the time, I feel like I'm ten-feet tall, but reality has another story to tell. I'm a *tiny* woman. Part of surviving in this world is recognizing my weaknesses and that means being hyper-vigilant to the change in the air that spells trouble.

"Everything okay out here?" Clint's voice breaks up the tension.

I push past Willis, sending him a dark eye of warning. "We were just having a conversation." My voice remains steady and firm. Men can sense weakness and so I make sure that I never appear to be intimidated. I nod to Clint. "Where are you going?"

Clint gives Willis a hard look before he answers me. "I've got an errand to run. I'll be back soon." He tilts his chin. "Banner, I really hope you consider what we discussed."

I rub the back of my neck. *Thanks a lot for bringing that up now, Clint.*

"Did all the considering I needed to. My answer won't change."

He chuckles the way I did when my daughter was a baby and she tried to 'fix' her toy truck when she saw me working on a cement mixer.

Clint leaves and silence descends on the mechanic bay.

Willis eyes me. "You gonna stick with your story?"

I wave Willis off and return to my broom. Clint talking nonsense about me taking over has everyone's panties in a bunch, but Willis has nothing to worry about. My position is only temporary. In a few days, I'm outta here.

Willis backs off when I ignore him, retreating to the employee lounge. He and the guys will probably start playing video games to pass the time. There's not much else to do.

I finish sweeping the dirt into a dustpan and start mopping my bay when I hear footsteps pattering. A guy in a fancy suit, oil-slicked hair and beady eyes stomps into the bay.

He sees me, dark fingers clamped around a mop, and flutters his hand. "Miss, can you call one of the mechanics? It's an emergency."

"I'm a mechanic. How can I help you?" I set the mop against the wall and approach him.

His bushy eyebrows tighten. "Look, I don't have time to mess around. My boss needs his car back pronto. The tow truck's waiting outside as we speak. I need someone to work on it."

"And I told you I'd do it."

His gaze slides over my frame. "Not sure what you're trying to play at here, but I need an *actual* mechanic. This car is expensive. It has to be

someone who knows what they're doing."

I give him a head-to-toe scan. Shiny black shoes. Black trousers. A thin white shirt under a jacket and a scraggly tie. The office worker who's so addicted to the rat race that he can't see his hand from his own behind.

"Tell them to pull the rig in here." I nod to my bay.

His shiny shoes remain rooted to the ground.

Scowling, I march past him, whistle to get the tow truck driver's attention and confidently wave him forward. He pauses for a moment as if he's trying to figure out whether to listen to me or not.

I increase the pace of my wave until it's a frantic back and forth motion. He seems to pick up my urgency. Either that or the bullish office worker already read him the 'my boss needs his fancy car back pronto' riot act.

The tow delivers the car into my mechanic bay. I've got no love for the client who brought it in, but I can appreciate a beauty when I see one. The vehicle's sleek and all-black, like a panther in motion, just itching to get back on the road. I want to pat its hood and coo, '*what's wrong, baby?*'. A beast like this isn't meant to be tripped up in a mechanic shop.

Unfortunately, I have to restrain myself because Douche Bag is eyeing me like a hawk. Oh, and he's multiplied. Now there are two identical skinny-tie-wearing employees flanking him on either side.

Douche Bag Number One clearly feels more powerful with his back-up. His chin raises to an acute angle and he looks down his nose at me.

I try to ignore him and take a few steps toward the vehicle.

He slides into my path, his tone oily and dismissive. "What do you think you're doing?"

I stop short and fold my arms over my chest. "What were the symptoms?"

"Didn't I ask you to get a real mechanic?"

"Since it had to be towed, I'm assuming it's not starting?"

"Listen, princess, I'm all for female empowerment, but not when it involves something this expensive. You're not touching my boss's car. You can't imagine how much this thing costs and saying sorry won't fix a damn thing if you go and mess up—"

"You." I look past him and point to Douche Bag Lite.

"Me?" The kid pokes a finger in his chest.

Douche Bag Prime arches both eyebrows in surprise.

I nod at the younger guy. “What happened? How is the car giving trouble?”

He glances at his boss.

Douche Bag Prime shakes his head.

I step forward. “Spit it out.”

“The vehicle can start, but it can’t run.”

“Jefferson.” Douche Bag Prime hisses.

“Ignore him.” I gesture to Jefferson since he seems like the weakest link. “Tell me more.”

“The minute you put it in gear or try to stomp on the gas, it stalls. The problem is recurring. Every time the weather reaches this temp, it does the same thing.”

“Hm.” I drum my fingers on top of my arm. My mind is already sorting through the symptoms.

“That’s enough, Jefferson.” Douche Bag Prime frowns at me. He’s got a sharp face and cheekbones like knives. His dark scowl tells me he’s not used to being dismissed. I can’t imagine what a monster his boss is if he relies on someone this egotistical.

I turn my hard stare on Douche Bag Prime. “Why’d you bring the car here?”

“It was the closest to where we broke down. However, I’m starting to think that choice was a mistake. If *you’re* all this place has to offer, it’s no wonder it’s empty.”

I grit my teeth and fight to remain civil. We don’t have enough customers for me to justify punching this guy in the face. I wouldn’t mind taking the chance since I’m leaving anyway, but I can’t ruin Clint’s record as manager just before his retirement.

“I’ve heard enough. Why don’t you wait in the coffee room while I get a *real* mechanic to handle your car?” Pasting on a fake smile, I gesture to the lounge.

Like Clint’s office, the customer lounge has a giant glass pane that overlooks the mechanic bay. It also has a coffee machine, paper cups and a few couches with the latest automotive magazines on a table.

“Thank you.” Douche Bag Prime dips his chin like he’s relieved I’ve finally seen the light.

I keep the tight-lipped smile on my face and lead them all into the room. As soon as they’re inside, I haul the door shut and lock it.

Douche Bag Prime's shocked face is a work of pure art.

He bangs on the window. "What the hell? Did you just lock us in here?"

I give him my back and glide toward my station. More thumping explodes from the door. I don't have to turn around to realize that Tweedle-Dumb One and Two are joining in the fight to escape.

Calmly, I pop my ear buds in and pull out my phone. The music that Sunny shared with me starts playing through the speakers.

Sunny's from the Caribbean, specifically Belize, and her music taste reflects this. The music is fast-paced and exciting. I can't help but bop my head.

"Hey! Do you hear me? This is illegal! This is a crime!"

I can still hear Douche Bag Prime faintly. Pressing my finger against the volume button, I turn the music up and approach the car. The make and model are imprinted under the dash, not that I needed to confirm it. I recognized the brand on sight.

Mentally, I pace through the symptoms that Skinny Tie outlined.

Starts but can't run.

Dies when you press the gas.

Happens every time the weather reaches this temp.

I've heard of this problem somewhere. I reach for my phone and log into the high-tech IATN group. With my other hand, I pluck a lollipop from the dozens I keep in a cup near my bay and pop one into my mouth. My eyes scroll through the vehicle diagnostic site. Ah. There it is. I check the information. Seems like these issues are a sickness with this type of vehicle.

Satisfied that I'm on the right track, I glance at the customers again. One of them is still trying to test the door. I can tell by the way the doorknob is rattling. Jefferson has given up. He's sitting in the couch, pouring himself some coffee and picking up one of the magazines. *Knew I liked him.*

Douche Bag Prime is on the phone. His face is red and a vein is busting out of his neck. His gaze switches to me and he starts mouthing a threat. Or it could be a marriage proposal. Not like I can hear it. But I doubt anyone would be saying sweet words with an 'I could kill you' expression.

I peer closer at his mouth because I'm curious. It seems like he's saying 'you're going to jail'.

Huh.

With a shrug, I pop the hood open. The air around me shifts and I glance over my shoulder to find Douche Bag slamming his fists against the glass pane. Someone could choke on such thick outrage.

I restrain the eye roll and pluck my lollipop out of my mouth while I bend over the engine. Most women look into the belly of a vehicle and get an instant headache. I look at the inside of a vehicle and get a sugar rush.

My fingers grip either side of the hood as I find my balance. Then I reach inside. The pounding on the glass gets louder, but I can barely hear it because the Belizean artist is encouraging me to wave my flag and ‘*go ahn bad*’.

I purse my lips as I do the inspection. My suspicion is the vehicle has a short on a five-volt reference circuit. It would explain the trouble Jefferson outlined and why it gets worse in colder temperatures.

Even though I have a hunch, I’m not hauling at circuits yet. I believe in diagnosing and testing three times before I move. It’s why I’m so confident when I work. The moment I go after a problem in a car, it’s because I’ve already solved it.

The music changes, which means three minutes have passed. I wheel my tool trolley closer. It has everything I need to repair this car. Heat gun. Multi-meter. Wire repair tools. Crimpers.

I put the lollipop back in my mouth and bob it up and down as I disconnect the wiring.

“*Banner!*”

I don’t jump when I hear that bellow. I’m working and my hands are precise. Waiting until I’ve finished wrapping the wires, I glance over my shoulder and spot Willis charging out of the employee lounge.

His eyes ping-pong from the men in the lounge to me and back to the men. His stomach swishes as he tries to increase his pace from frantic walking to a full-on jog. “What the hell is going on?”

“I’m working,” I say in an *isn’t that obvious* tone.

“Hey!” Douche Bag Prime waves his arms at Willis. “Hey, let us out!”

“Did you lock them in there?” Willis asks, flying past me to the men and trying the door.

“No.” I inspect my work one more time. “They don’t know there’s another door around the corner that leads outside.”

Willis curses under his breath and takes off. While he’s gone, I tuck the wires where they belong, shut the hood and slide into the car so I can turn

the key. The chair melts around my shoulders like butter.

Ah, the rich really live differently.

The beautiful sound of the engine purring fills my ears. It's sweeter than a full-on orchestra in the throes of a passionate climax. I drive the car outside, leave it there and climb out. Stretching my arms over my head, I look around for Willis and the other guys, but I don't see them.

Assuming they're back inside, I head that way. Before I can get two steps in, the suits storm into my line of sight, followed closely by Willis.

I gesture to the vehicle that's still running. "You shouldn't have a problem now."

"How *dare* you." Douche Bag Prime gasps at me like he's an extra in a B-rate play. "Do you think you can get away with pranks like this?"

"Pranks?"

"Locking customers in rooms and messing with their expensive vehicles is a crime."

"Don't think it is," I respond calmly.

"Are you insane?" He sticks a finger in my direction. "You must be insane."

I stare him down without blinking. "I didn't lock you in the room."

His eyes widen as if he can't believe I'm denying the truth.

"I locked you out of my mechanic bay." My tone remains calm and clipped. "Which is perfectly within my right."

"We couldn't get out!"

"There was a door leading out of the customer lounge. Not my fault if you don't know how to use it."

Jefferson snorts.

Douche Bag Prime slants him a dark look and he sucks the chuckle back into his mouth.

I take slow, determined steps forward. "I promised you a real mechanic and I delivered. Your car is working perfectly now. You're welcome."

"You'll be hearing about this. I'm calling my boss—*your* boss—and letting him know about your atrocious behavior."

I want to roll my eyes and call him a tattletale but I, wisely, hold my tongue.

"*Banner?*"

That's Clint's voice.

Shoot. Why is he back so early?

Clint draws near to us and his eyes widen when he sees Douche Bag Prime. “Mr. Hills.”

I hook a thumb at the suit. “You know this guy?”

“He’s an executive assistant for Stinton Group,” Clint mumbles. “*The* executive assistant.”

A slow, unnerving horror balloons in my chest. Hills watches my expression and misinterprets it. His chin cranks all the way up again. He puffs out his chest. Cocks his lips in a smirk.

I whip back to the beautiful car. If Hills is here on behalf of his boss then that car belongs to...

My fingers curl into fists.

Stinton.

The boiling irritation gets worse when Hills paces the workshop like a pompous villain about to unveil his evil plan. “I can see now why this place is going down the toilet. You have crazy women taking the helm.”

Who is he calling crazy?

Clint places a calming hand on my shoulder. “Mr. Hills, why don’t we discuss this in my office...”

“No need. We’ve got things to do.” His eyes swerve to me. “But you’ll be hearing from us soon.”

Clint keeps that hand on my shoulder until the suits get into the car and drive out of sight.

I brush him off and stalk toward my bay.

“Banner, where are you going?” Clint calls to my back.

“To pick up my daughter,” I grind out. “School’s out.”

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel when I drive to Beth’s middle school. As traffic slows to a crawl, my mind drifts to that awful day eight years ago. Men in suits. Pens and contracts shoved in my face. A silky lawyer’s voice telling me to take the money.

Monsters.

All of them.

I clench and unclench my hands, pushing that nightmare far from my mind.

Beth opens the door when I park in front of her school. Bright hazel eyes land on mine as she hauls herself up by propelling her legs on the running board. Though both of us are small in stature, we’ve gotten used to hauling ourselves into big cars.

Beth slams the door shut and glances over at me. Her lips tighten.
“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re angry.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You leave fingermarks on the steering wheel when you’re angry.”

Damn it. “Someone tried to cut me off in traffic.” I cough out a laugh.
“How was school?”

“Fine.”

I prod her until she starts chatting about her best friend Bailey and their class pet. When she falls silent again, I ask more questions and keep her distracted for the rest of the drive.

As I pull the truck into the parking lot of the auto shop, my phone rings.

I nod at Beth. “Go ahead and get started on your homework.”

She nods and gracefully climbs down, striking out over the lawn. There’s a tiny corner of Clint’s office where she does her homework in peace. I love that Clint allows me to keep an eye on her in the afternoons. It’s one of the many reasons I find it hard to say no to him.

Sending my attention back to my phone, I frown at the unknown number.

Hesitantly, I answer. “Hello?”

A deep and masculine voice scratches my ears. “Ms. Banner.”

“Yes?”

“This is Max Stinton.”

My eyes widen. I haul the phone away and hang up before he can get another word in.

Max Stinton?

This day just keeps getting worse and worse. I’ve managed to avoid the Stintons for seven years and yet in one day, I can’t take a step without getting tangled up with them.

Huffing, I stalk into the mechanic bay and notice Clint waving me forward.

“What?” I ask, folding my arms over my chest.

“Phone for you.”

“Me?”

He nods and shoves the landline at me.

I accept the phone and hold it to my ear.

Max Stinton's gritty drawl slips through my body. "That wasn't very nice, Ms. Banner."

I haul the phone away.

"Ah-ah." His voice is faint but firm. "Hang up on me again and I'll have to show up in person."

The thought makes me cringe. I put the phone back to my face. "I have nothing to do with Stinton Group. Don't contact me again."

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to honor that request." He pauses. "I'd like to see you in my office. Tomorrow. Eight sharp."

"I don't care what you'd like and I definitely don't want to see you."

"Then I'll come and find you."

My nostrils flare. It's a threat and it's potent. I glance at my daughter who's pulling out her homework book.

Gritting my teeth, I spit out, "Fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

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CHAPTER 2

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THE FACE

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MAX

SUNSET PAINTS the sky in fire and light, turning what was once a calm blue into a red-orange blaze. The moon is already up and fighting for dominance, reflecting silver on skyscrapers that brighten in anticipation.

It's been a long day.

A slew of press tours and talk shows.

Most of the commentators had only one question—how will Stinton Group recover from this giant blow?

I drum my fingers on the desk, restless, watching the night devour the city while traffic thickens on the road. The chains are falling off the ankles of nine-to-five employees. Honest, hardworking folks leaving their desks and cubicles behind to live their own lives. Lives that aren't controlled by people like me, who sit in my big office scrutinizing the sunset.

They're going home, but my day is far from over. Weary or no, an exhaustive to-do list tells me I'm not even close to being able to relax.

Running an enterprise like Stinton Group demands a machine-like focus. It's a constant war with vendors, suppliers, and new accounts as well as walking a delicate tight rope called 'getting the approval of the board'.

My father's co-founders are like animals smelling blood. As much as they prop me up and applaud me for the work I've put into Stinton Group, they're just as eager to see me fall. It'll be sweeter if they can prove that the eldest son of George Stinton was a failure like his mother's side of the family.

I take a deep, calming breath and turn away from the window, just as my assistant marches into the room. The door bangs shut behind him and I get an instant headache.

"Hills, how many times have I told you not to slam the door like that?"

Wrenching his tie, Hills flounces into the fancy sofa opposite my desk. "Max, you're gonna fire her tomorrow, right?"

"What are you talking about?" I open my laptop and tap out my password.

"That mechanic lady. You called her over to fire her, right?"

I peer at Hills. He's tall and lean with a penchant for skinny ties and an ambition that got him out of a trailer park and into one of the finest colleges in the country. It's that uncontrollable greed that makes him both an asset and a loose cannon.

In that way, he reminds me of my brother.

Which is one of the reasons I can't seem to fire him.

That and he's been my best friend since those wild days in university. He followed me to Stinton Group where he's been my assistant ever since I took over from my father.

I've been getting more and more complaints about him lately. Any other person and he would have gotten his walking papers months ago. But having someone I trust by my side means more to me than ability right now. Especially when the board is looking at me to fix all that my brother broke and has an axe ready to fall on my head if I don't.

"I don't see what my plans with her have to do with you," I mumble, looking over the report the marketing director sent to my inbox.

A quick skim makes my stomach tighten. Their ideas to revitalize and rebrand the chain of Cross Roads Auto Shops is laughable. Why the hell do I pay them to regurgitate the same old ideas?

This problem needs a fresh solution. A new take. I need something raw and eye-catching. But I also need something with a soft core. Something that'll connect with the heart of the nation.

Stinton Group didn't just lose funds when Trevor ran off with all of Stinton Investment's money. If the mess my brother left behind were that simple, I'd have solved it by now. Money comes easily to a Stinton.

But money doesn't build trust.

To gain it back in a way that won't explode in our faces, we need to strike the right chord—somewhere between approachable and aspiring. *That's* the response I need from the general populace. Not a way to scrub our group's bad name from the public eye but a way to get them to sympathize with us, to root for us even.

How I'm going to do that...

I have no idea.

That's why I'm not going home tonight until I figure this out.

My mind is churning and I don't realize Hills is staring at me until he clears his throat. I shoot a hard glance at him.

He frowns. "You're doing that thing again when you space out and completely ignore what I asked."

If he didn't know all my secrets, I would have fired him for that tone alone. Because we're friends, Hills walks that really fine line between professional and out of order.

"What were you saying?" I rub the bridge of my nose.

He shoots to a sitting position, legs apart and elbow to his thigh. Tilting his head slightly, he scowls. "That mechanic girl. She's a maniac. What she did today should get her sued."

My lips quirk up.

"You think this is funny?" His eyes nearly bulge out of his head.

I shrug. Hills is used to women fawning over him and delights in the attention. It's my first time seeing anyone knock him down a peg and it's oddly satisfying.

"There was nothing funny about it." He traces the shape of a circle against his ear. "I mean, she's bonkers. What kind of person locks you up in a room so she can work on your car? And then," he throws out an arm, "and then she has the nerve to act like *I'm* the bad guy? She basically high jacked your car and expected my gratitude."

"You should have given it," I say simply.

Hills sputters. "Why the hell would I?"

"She fixed it. The car runs like new. I plan to thank her for it."

"Thank her? After what she did?"

I nod and tap my pen on the desk, recalling Ms. Banner's tense conversation with me over the phone. She hung up on me twice. Twice. That was new. I look forward to meeting her.

"You're being sentimental, Stinton. It doesn't suit you."

"She got results."

"And?"

"And I respect that."

Black Beauty, my car, belonged to my mother. I bought it for her when I got promoted in the company. She refused to drive it at first. Said she didn't want anything that I bought with *that* money, but I begged her and, once she got behind the wheel, it was over. She used to zip around the city in that car, smiling with the wind in her hair and the radio at full blast.

My chest tightens. She would have hated to see the machine I've become. She would have hated how entrenched I am in this group. Mom

was always trying to get me as far away from my dad as possible.

I shake memories of my mother out of my head. “I took that car to the dealership. They couldn’t fix it. Took it all over the city and it came back with the same problem. No one made it run like that.”

“That doesn’t mean her work is great. The car might break down again.”

He’s right.

“Why are you taking up for her?”

Another good question.

I mull it over. Maybe it’s because hearing what Ms. Banner did to Hills made me burst out laughing in my office when I thought real, sincere laughter was no longer in the cards for me. Or maybe I’m just tired and on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“Either way, her customer service was atrocious.” Hills throws his hands up. “You’d think a female mechanic would be gentle. She is a *woman* after all. I mean, you wouldn’t be able to tell under the baggy overalls, but it’s pretty clear by her face. Why waste all that pretty on such a bad attitude?”

My eyebrow jumps. “She’s pretty?”

Hills shrugs like he doesn’t want to admit it with words.

“Hm.” I rub my chin.

“Doesn’t matter what she looks like. She’s in the wrong profession. I wouldn’t trust her with your mother’s car. I wouldn’t trust her with any car.”

My mind snags on the word ‘trust’ and an idea flies right at me.

Trust.

Trust.

The franchise we acquired lost money the moment it was associated with Stinton Group. The franchise needs a shot in the arm. A total revamp of the brand.

My fingers flick my pen in a circle. The press would take a female mechanic and run with it. Feminist magazines, the ones that were throwing hate at Stinton Group, would be the first to line up and shake our hands.

We can get the ball rolling from there...

Hills stops pacing. “I know that look. You just thought of something.”

“Yes, I did.” I pounce out of my chair. “I’m going to need the marketing director.”

“Now?” Hills glances at his watch.

“Yes, now.” My eyebrows cinch together.

“Max, everyone’s at home. Work’s over.”

“Not for us.”

“By definition, it’s over for everyone. You’re the only crazy person who works until midnight every day.”

“Stinton Group is in a state of emergency. The marketing team is going to play a vital role in getting us out. There is no such thing as the work being over until we solve this crisis.”

He rolls his eyes. “So damn dramatic.”

I stalk past him, throw the door open and head to the elevator.

Hills hustles behind me, a phone to his ear and a stack of files pinned to his side with his elbow. “Yeah,” he’s saying on the phone, “yeah, he wants you in now. I don’t know why. Just get here.”

I shove the button for the elevator. Hills settles in beside me and cuts the phone. “You want to explain what this is all about?”

My jaw clenches and unclenches.

A female mechanic as the face of Stinton Group’s Auto Franchise.

The headline practically writes itself. I imagine the articles. The online buzz. The public chiming in with their opinions and shifting the focus away from Trevor’s sins to the shiny new queen of Stinton Group.

My heart is banging so loudly against my ribs it might as well be beating a drum.

Hills makes a dramatic moan. “Great. You’re doing it again.”

I turn swiftly to him. “Give me a report on the manager of that shop and all the employees. Specifically, that female employee who fixed my car. I want to know as much information as you can gather.”

His mouth tightens in disapproval.

“What?”

“So you’re not firing her?”

“No, I’m not.”

“But I told you—”

“I don’t care what you think about her. Just do it.”

Damn. When did I have to tiptoe around my executive assistant like this? When was the last time I gave an instruction and it was just followed?

Annoyed, I stomp out of the elevator.

“Where are you going?” Hills remains inside.

“Out. I’ll be back by the time the PR team gets here.” I level him a hard stare so he doesn’t think I’m kidding. “I better have all the information on

her by the time I get back.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He waves me away and the elevator closes around him.

I stalk past the security guard who greets me with a smile. “Mr. Stinton.”

I double back and give him a tight-lipped nod. “Mr. Kavinsky. How’s your wife?”

“Good. Good. Sorry to stop you. You look like you’re in a rush.”

I am, but I’m not going to tell him. He’s obviously got something to say.

Ruddy cheeks turning a little redder, he squirms. “I wanted to thank you. My wife appreciates the signed cookbooks you sent her. She’s a huge fan of Vanya Scott. Ever since her surgery, she hasn’t been able to eat the same things and it’s been hard on her. That cookbook made her eat again. Made her smile again.”

“I’m glad.”

His eyes twinkle as he leans closer. “By the way, you wouldn’t happen to have seen her, would you? Vanya Scott’s the only celebrity chef who doesn’t put her face out there. My wife’s dying to know.”

“Sorry.” My tone is clipped, but my smile is polite. “Can’t help you there.”

“Oh. Well...”

“Goodnight.”

“Night, Mr. Stinton.”

His stare lingers on my back as I walk away. Kavinsky’s wife was suffering from the same illness as my mother. The difference is, his wife survived.

I make a mental note to call Vanya sometime next week and get another cookbook from her. She cranks those best sellers out in record time and I know Kavinsky’s wife would appreciate it.

The parking lot is mostly empty when I arrive. My car is waiting right next to the door. I slip into the front seat. Try to imagine a female mechanic tinkering around in the hood. Smile when I picture the filming crew and the interviews.

You’re getting ahead of yourself, Stinton.

The car starts without a problem. Hauling on the stick shift, I tear out of the parking lot and take Black Beauty for a spin, keeping an eye out for any problems. There aren’t any. One female mechanic fixed a vehicle that the technicians at the dealership couldn’t.

My hands are shaking by the time I've returned to the company. I bound up the stairs and Hills is there in the lobby.

His eyes slide over my face. "I have bad news."

"No." I stalk past him and he gets into line behind me. Swiping my hand through the air, I tell him, "No bad news. I have a plan."

"Dawn Banner seems familiar."

"Hills, I have a plan."

"I think she's one of Trevor's women."

That stops me in my tracks. I turn slowly and eye him. My voice is a steely whisper when I say, "What?"

"Here." He hands me a file. "I looked her up online and didn't see much. When I dug deeper, I realized this woman is a ghost. No social media. No online presence. She doesn't even have a profile on the auto company website. So I went looking through our database to find her employee information. I wanted to at least verify that she exists." Nodding at the file, Hills frowns. "During my search, I found this."

I flip the binder over. Dread fills me when I see what's inside. It's a handwritten note. My crab-like scrawl. A form that I fill out for all the personal matters involved with Stinton Group.

My jaw drops. "I don't remember her."

"I do. She's the only one who threw the money back in our face."

The dread turns to a pounding horror. "She didn't accept?"

"You don't remember by now?"

"The details are fuzzy. I can't keep up with all of Trevor's dalliances. There hasn't been a problem before."

"There still isn't. She wasn't a problem. After she rejected the money, she didn't approach Stinton Group again."

"What about the pregnancy? Do you know if she decided—"

"No, she disappeared. Went off grid."

"And you didn't tell me?" My eyes are hard.

"Your instructions. You said we wouldn't bother her as long as she didn't bother us."

A pulse starts beating in my head. The fact that I might have a niece slaps me across the chest and flings clouds of doubt around my next steps.

Hills pats my back. "I hope your plan didn't involve that girl because there's a hundred percent chance she wants Stinton Group to crumble."

“Didn’t ask for your opinion,” I bite out. My headache worsens. Who knew Trevor could ruin Stinton Group without even being around to cause havoc?

The weight of my responsibility feels like it’s dragging my feet into the ground. I snap the folder closed. “We’ll proceed with the plan.”

“I don’t know what the plan is, but I’m telling you it won’t work with this woman.”

“It’ll work,” I snap.

He stops and stares at me.

“Find out if she had the child.”

Hills’s eyes widen. “You’re not going there, are you?”

I stare blankly at him.

“You’re not going to do what I think you’re going to do.”

Damn.

If even Hills is reeling back like a grandma clutching her pearls, then I know I’m crossing a line into morally bankrupt territory.

My best friend and I have a stare-off.

“Mr. Stinton.” The head of the marketing department steps out of the conference room and glances at me.

With a deep breath, I move forward. Over my shoulder, I command Hills, “Let me know when you have more information. We’ll proceed either way.”

“Stinton.” He drills a hole into my back.

I enter the conference room and take my place at the head of the table. Stinton Group is the reason I breathe. The reason I wake up in the morning. The reason I’ve put one foot in front of the other since mom died.

She wouldn’t be proud of you for this.

I ignore that voice and steeple my fingers. Glancing at each of my team members, I bark, “I have a plan. Let’s get to work.”

* * *

MORNING COMES FAR TOO EARLY.

Especially when you fall asleep just before dawn.

I get ready for the day, dressing in a crisp white shirt and tailored slacks. Nerves tighten in my stomach and I chase it away with too-hot coffee and a

glance at the daily news, carefully avoiding anything that mentions Stinton Group's plummeting stock prices or the latest in the police's hunt for Trevor.

My phone rings in the quiet of my kitchen.

Dad.

Ice slides down my back like the cold tip of a spear. I clear my throat before answering. "Sir."

"I heard you gathered the marketing team last night."

At this point, I'm no longer surprised that dad's so well-informed. He's technically still CEO, although he's no longer active in the company. He's got his loyal spies everywhere.

"Yes, we're taking a plan of action."

"About time. Trevor's name has been in the news too long. You should have taken care of it before now."

I scowl, but I don't respond. Dad isn't asking for feedback and he wouldn't want to hear my opinions anyway.

"Any word from him yet?" There's a worried tinge in dad's voice.

"No."

"Try harder."

"We're doing everything we can. Trevor must have planned this long in advance. We can't find a trace of him."

"I can't believe this." Dad's voice drops to a low hiss. "He didn't tell you anything?"

I inhale a deep breath and let it out through my mouth. "Trevor did this all by himself."

"If you were watching him more closely, it wouldn't have gotten like this. How many times do I have to tell you that you're responsible for your brother?"

My phone rings with another incoming call.

I frown. "Dad, I have to go."

"I'm telling you, Max. You better find your brother before anyone else does. I don't want the police getting their hands on him."

"I know, dad. I'm worried too."

It's true. Whether he believes it or not. Trevor and I might have had two different experiences growing up in the Stinton family, but he's still my brother. He's blood. And, since mom died, I'm running out of the people I care about.

“Don’t disappoint me anymore, Max.”

I hang up on him and answer the other call, my voice tight. “This is Stinton.”

“Mr. Stinton, this is Peter Clint. I’m the manager of the Cross Road’s Auto Shop—”

“Mr. Clint.” I throw my coffee away and swipe my keys off the table.

“I’m calling to discuss what happened yesterday. I understand that you’ve arranged a meeting with Ms. Banner this morning.”

“Yes.” My tone has a distinct *get to the point* timbre.

“I don’t want to seem disrespectful, but if you have a problem with her, then I’d rather you go through me.”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“Banner’s my best mechanic and without her, I quit.”

I pause on my way to my car.

“Mr. Stinton?”

“I’m here.”

“I only have a month left before I retire, but I’m holding on because I want to encourage Banner to take up the leadership role.”

“Is that what she wants?”

“Well...”

“What about the other employees?”

He clears his throat. “She’s the best for the job. I’ve never met anyone more passionate about auto mechanics. She spends her lunch breaks reading manuals and technical forums. She cares about the people who walk through the doors. No one else will do.”

“What’s your point, Mr. Clint?” I throw my briefcase in the car and climb in.

“I’m... well, I’ve heard of your reputation and I’m hoping you can have mercy just this once. She has a young daughter to take care of, you understand. I really don’t want to see her out in the cold.”

There it is. That twinge of guilt. It flashed through me last night when Hills sent over the information about Dawn Banner and her daughter—my niece—Elizabeth.

“I have no plans of firing Ms. Banner.”

“Oh... you don’t?”

“No. I won’t be firing anyone unless there’s just cause.” Stinton Group is already in hot water with the public. Massive layoffs would sink our

ship faster. I'm not trying to antagonize anyone else right now. "If that's all, Mr. Clint, I'm very busy."

I hang up and drive to the office.

Hills isn't there. Typical.

But there's someone in the lobby. She's dressed in baggy grey over-alls and work boots. Her short hair is poofing up in an afro. Small and daintily built, the over-alls isn't doing her any favors.

Could that be Dawn Banner?

I give her another critical sweep and start to doubt Hills's eye for attractive women.

Until she turns around.

My breath hitches when I see her. Fine cheekbones press against skin gleaming like brown sugar and walnuts under warm and generous sunlight. The artful sweep of her brow arches perfectly over coffee-brown eyes that are lowered to half-mast in a kind of sultry, model squint. Her over-alls are open to show off the graceful curve of her neck, tempting my tongue to trace the line of her clavicle.

And her mouth—

Damn everything—her lips are a dream. A freaking focal point to a priceless work of art that gets more and more beautiful the longer you stare at it. My eyes are glued to the natural brown hues in her top lip and the pink of her bottom.

I don't know if I haven't noticed or if I just haven't cared, but she's the first woman I've seen with such luscious, dual-toned lips.

No. I'm not expecting *this* creature to be the mother of my niece. The woman my brother used and discarded. The woman who will save Stinton Group.

Dawn Banner marches right up to me, parts those dangerously overripe lips that could send a man to his grave early and hisses, "You have five minutes, Stinton. This better be good."

I blink slowly. Then I get control of myself and slide a calm, lazy gaze over her. The over-alls convey exactly who she is and that she's not ashamed of it. Intelligence sparks from her cutting brown eyes, eyes that swirl with anger and disgust for me.

Lord help me.

She's stunning. She's perfect.

I repress the urge to speak those words out loud and sweep my gaze to the elevator. “Why don’t we talk in my office?”

“Four minutes.”

“Dawn.”

“Ms. Banner.” Her eyes squint even farther.

It would be intimidating if she wasn’t such a tiny thing.

“This isn’t something we can discuss in public.” Stinton Group employees are filling in through the front door. They’re all staring at us.

I’m sure the rumor mill is already whipping up a story about Dawn and me. I bet they’ll paint me as the monster who screwed over the poor, helpless mechanic.

My horrible reputation doesn’t faze me at all. In fact, it comes in handy. Especially when I’m playing hardball with a company on the brink of a merger.

I turn sideways and speak in a low voice. “Or we can stay here and discuss the legal ramifications of what you did yesterday.”

“I did nothing—”

“Locking my assistant in a room and tampering with private property can at least get your license revoked.”

If she had lighter skin, it would probably be blotchy with stains of anger. As it stands, Ms. Banner pins me with a look so deadly that, had it been possible to kill with glares, I would be sprawled on the floor, choking on my own blood.

She purses her lips and looks up at me with that stunningly beautiful face. “Three minutes,” she murmurs. Then she stomps in the direction of the elevators.

In three giant strides, I’m beside her. Looking down at her afro, I can’t help my amusement. Tiny woman with so much anger. She shoots out waves of crackling fury the way atomic bombs fling uranium.

I know why she’s angry.

I also know that *I’m* why she’s angry. Or at least I’m a big part of it.

I shouldn’t be getting into close spaces with her. I shouldn’t be fighting back a smile. It’s the absolute worst response to this complex situation. But something about being beside her, being around all that raw, explosive energy makes my chest tighten in a strange way.

In the elevator, Dawn brushes her hair back and fiddles with her earring. It’s a giant comb with the words ‘AFRICA’ printed on the handle.

She catches me staring at her and scowls. “You know you’re almost out of time.”

“I don’t believe in rushing good things, Ms. Banner.”

She folds her arms over her chest. Taps her boots twice. Squirms as she tries to figure out what I meant by that.

My eyes snag on her shoes. They’re quite industrial. The yellowish-brown color is stylish, but the square shape reminds me of cement blocks. Hm. Should I keep the shoes for the photoshoot or put her in something more dainty?

The elevator opens and I step out.

Ms. Banner doesn’t.

Who knew she’d make this so entertaining?

“Your time is up.” She slams her dark fist against the button and the elevator doors start closing.

Unperturbed, I slide into the elevator with her just before the doors slam shut. Since she’s being difficult, it’s time to get creative. I hold her gaze, pull my phone out of my pocket and call the maintenance office.

“This is Max Stinton,” I say calmly, “I’m in elevator four. I’m going to hit the emergency stop button and I’d like you to ignore the alarm until I’m ready to move again.”

Dawn jumps and whirls on me with horrified eyes. “What are you doing?”

Turning in a fluid motion, I press my palm on the emergency stop button. The elevator jolts and the lights go dim for a moment before it slams to a stop.

Dawn stumbles and I grip her elbow, keeping her upright while the elevator settles. She brushes me off and storms to the other side of the elevator. It’s not that far. I can still smell the hint of her flowery perfume.

“I hope you’re not claustrophobic.” I arch an eyebrow. “Though, if you work underneath cars for a living, I’m assuming you’re not.”

“And I assumed you weren’t this big of a jerk,” she spits. “I guess that’s why we shouldn’t make assumptions.”

I smile because she means that insult with all her heart and it’s been a long time since I’ve been around anyone who wears their disdain on their sleeve. It’s refreshing.

She glares at me. “Let me out right now!”

“The elevator’s broken. It might take a while for them to fix it.”

Her nostrils flare and I expect her to run into me like a bull. Instead, she digs her fingers into the rails bracketed on either side of the elevator and squeezes tight. “What do you want, Stinton?”

“First, I’d like to thank you.”

Her eyes shoot to mine and shock overtakes the anger for a moment.

“That’s why I called yesterday.”

“*This* is how you show your appreciation? By locking people in elevators?”

“Isn’t that in line with locking people in customer lounges?” I tilt my head. “Should you of all people be throwing stones?”

She huffs and glances away.

“I give you permission to hate me.”

Her mouth hangs open. “Did you just say... you’re *giving* me permission? Who the hell do you think you are?”

“On paper, your boss.”

She snorts.

“I don’t need you to like me if we’re going to work together.”

“Holy crap. It’s like you *want* me to slap you.”

I pull my lips in. My entire body feels hot with... what is this strange form of exhilaration?

She barks out a humorless laugh. “I will never work with you.”

“On the contrary, you don’t have a choice.”

“Typical of a Stinton. You really think you’re a god, don’t you?”

I open my mouth.

“Let me make this as clear as possible. I quit. Right now. I’m not working with you. For you. Under you.”

An image of Dawn Banner under me in bed flashes through my mind and sends a jolt straight to my pants.

What the hell?

“Now that that’s settled. Let me out.”

“I’m not finished yet.”

“Yes, this is done. I quit. You’re not the boss anymore. This is now a hostage kidnapping.”

The laughter is quick to bubble up in my chest. “I still have something to discuss with you.”

“And I have a long and blissful habit of not giving a damn. So open this door and let’s never see each other again.”

“I can’t do that.”

She folds her arms over her chest.

The little spitfire.

I’ve never seen someone so small burn with so much animosity.

She glares. “Why? Why do you suddenly want to bother me?”

“Because Stinton Group just took over the Cross Road Auto franchise...”

“That has nothing to do with me and frankly—”

“... And I want you to be the face of it.”

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CHAPTER 3

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ELEVATOR THREATS

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DAWN

I'M ABOUT to commit murder in an elevator.

Seriously. I don't think I've ever wanted to choke someone this much in my entire *life*.

And that is saying something because I've encountered every type of misogyny that the male species can inflict. Being talked over during strategy meetings. Ignored when I give a car diagnosis. Sexually harassed by idiots who lack restraint.

Before I joined Clint's team, I was screwed over by a male counterpart simply because my boobs made me less viable for the promotion.

I managed to keep myself from crossing the line every time. How? By focusing on the bigger picture. Giving Beth a better life. Accomplishing the dreams I've had since I was little. Doing what I love because it makes me happy.

But none of those things are keeping me in check today.

Not a single one.

Just *staring* at Max Stinton's smug face is making my fists itch.

He's obviously amused by me, but this chilly brown-eyed stare of mine? It's a death warrant.

"I feel like now would be a good time to remind you that those cameras work." He points a thick finger upward, indicating a camera with a red, blinking light beneath it. "Security will be watching us closely, waiting for my signal to start the elevator again."

I grit my teeth. Maybe I'll just give it all up for one punch to the throat. A little physical assault charge won't send me to prison for life. What will it be? Five? Six months?

I can leave Beth with Sunny and Darrel. Or maybe even Kenya and Alistair—my daughter and Belle get along great. A couple months in the slammer would be worth it. I'll tell Beth I'm going overseas for work. She won't know any better.

Stinton moves closer to me because, obviously, he has no fear of death. "Ms. Banner, unclench your fists."

I catch my breath.

It's not the words that make me jump in my skin.

It's that *voice*.

Deep and smoky, like simmering flames licking at coal. The type of voice that's better suited for dark rooms and a lone spotlight. An accompanying piano with fingers dragging over white keys while a singer moans into the mike, wrenching emotions out of your soul without your permission.

A flicker of awareness thrums through my body, but I'm a single mother and a female mechanic. The one thing I've got in *spades* is putting on a hard face even when I don't feel particularly powerful.

I tilt my chin up, daring him to utter another instruction. The corner of his lips curl. It's not a full-on smile—something tells me Max Stinton doesn't hand out many of those—but it's no less impactful.

He takes another step toward me, crowding my space. If I were another woman, a dainty woman who hadn't grown up with a single father, surrounded by rough and tumble mechanics for most of her life, I would have trembled.

Max Stinton is a tall, elegantly built threat. His clothes hug his powerful frame in a way that communicates both his status in the top tiers of society and his indifference towards that position. Impressive muscles strain against a sleek button-down. Dark grey trousers make long legs seem even longer. And his leather shoes are the kind that scream wealth without being ostentatious.

Careless and cocky.

Dangerous and restrained.

I can't help but compare him to his lackey Hills. Hills wore the same outfit yesterday, but it didn't sit that perfectly on his frame. It didn't carry the same threat. It didn't have the same polish. Or maybe that has more to do with Stinton than it does the clothes.

The maniac bends over and wraps his hand around mine. I flinch and try to pull my hand back, but he holds fast. Slipping his finger under my thumb, he pries until I'm no longer forming a fist.

"Can we have a decent discussion now?" His hair tumbles over his forehead. It suits him—that slightly disheveled look. Suits him way more than the sleek and proper businessman act.

He might look like a prince from afar but, up close, he's all rogue. All sharp edges and square jaw and tension coiling beneath broad shoulders.

I hiss at him. “Are you off in the head?”

“Some would like to think that.” He doesn’t stop until he’s unclenched both my fists. Still bent over, he glances up. His crystal blue eyes are half-lidded and—oh yes, he’s definitely a rogue. The most dangerous kind. The kind without a heart. “But generally, what people think doesn’t bother me.”

“I’m not working with Stinton Group. Should I say it in another language?”

“Can you?” His eyes flicker over my lips. Then he backs off. Walks all the way across the elevator. He leans against the wall and crosses one leg over the other.

Although he gives the appearance of a careless and laidback prince, those eyes give him away. They’re a piercing blue. Priceless gemstones, polished to perfection. Constantly assessing, calculating and drawing conclusions. The cutting edge to them can’t be hidden by his mask of arrogance. There’s something dark and dangerous swirling in their depths.

He twirls his fingers as if he’s playing with an imaginary pen. “Would be perfect if you were bilingual. You’d appeal to a broader demographic.”

He’s talking about me like I’m a product.

“You’re disgusting.”

“You’re still not answering my question.”

I give him the evil eye. “I gave you an answer. Don’t pretend that I didn’t just because it’s not the answer you want to hear.”

He folds his arms over his chest. He’s still leaning against the wall, long legs firm on the ground, head cocked. He taps a finger against his elbow in a steady beat. Languid and lounging, but only in appearance. Like a mountain lion preparing to spring on a mouse, a split-second of rest before he pounces.

“We’re prepared to pay. Name your price.”

Of course he thinks money will solve this.

My body tenses. A memory of that day eight years ago dances through my head. *We’re prepared to pay for everything. Just sign here.*

Bile rises in my throat and the bitterness spews out of me in a toxic gush. “You might be able to buy every building in this city, you jerk. But the one thing you won’t ever be able to buy is *me*.”

“Everyone has a price.”

“The fact that you think people have price tags is why I would never work with you.”

“Then I’ll put someone else in charge of the project, so you don’t have to work directly with me. Is that better?”

“You just don’t give up, do you?”

He lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Since you’re still here, I figure negotiations are on the table.”

“I’m still here because you locked me in a freaking elevator!” I jut a finger at the door.

He rubs his chin. Nods. “You make a good point.”

I’m going to throttle him.

“On top of the signing bonus, I’ll put you in charge of the shop. Put your name on the franchise contract. Get you an army of mechanics under your thumb.”

My patience is running thin. “Enough of this. I don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

“Terrorists?”

“Emotional terrorists.”

Those blue eyes charge toward me. The rough gaze gives me a full-body shiver and I fight off a feeling that isn’t quite disgust.

More like fear and a reluctant dose of regret.

I hate that one look from him can make me catch my breath—and immediately shoot my eyes to the wall above his head.

No way.

I’m not going to feel sorry for *another* Stinton for crying out loud.

Look how well that worked out the last time.

Silence swirls between us, thick and pulsing.

Stinton breaks it first. “Since you already think so gravely of me, Ms. Banner, should I show you how much lower I can go?”

I don’t dare to look at him. I don’t dare to breathe, knowing that if I stare at him now, he’s going to destroy me. And he’s not going to be sorry about it either.

My fingers curl into fists again. My heart is pounding, moving, climbing from the protection of my ribs and into my throat. Maybe if I stand completely still, this all goes away. Maybe I can turn back time so I never met Max Stinton. So I never caught his eye.

“How is my niece?” His voice is softer. Softer than the click of a silencer just before the gun spits out a bullet.

Pursing my lips, I push myself forward and face him. I'm on the balls of my feet, every muscle coiled to fight. "Don't you dare."

"My family doesn't know she exists..."

Oxygen. I need oxygen if I'm going to survive this moment. The one moment I've dreaded for seven years.

"... Yet."

My hand is moving. Flying mid-air and gaining speed as it propels straight toward his face.

Stinton wraps pale fingers around my wrist, grinding my hand to a halt. "Ms. Banner."

"She does not belong to Stinton Group," I spit.

"The blood in her veins would say different."

I can feel my face turning hot. "Keep her out of this."

"I'll do whatever you want." Stinton's blank expression stops me cold. "If you agree to become the face of Stinton Auto."

He's pure evil. If I cut him open, I bet black sludge would come pouring out of his veins. Not even blood-sucking vampires are this heartless.

"Well, Ms. Banner?"

I try to think of a way out of this. Some way that'll keep Beth far away from Stinton Group's grimy hands. Nothing comes to mind. He's got me pinned in a corner.

"Okay." He plucks out his phone. "Let me just call her granddad."

"Don't. You. Dare."

He puts the phone on speaker and I listen to it ring.

And ring.

"Stop."

The line connects. An old man croaks, "*Hello?*"

My heart flees my chest. I leap forward and grab his phone, slamming my thumb on the end button.

"I'll take that." Max Stinton grabs his phone back. "What will it be, Banner? I don't have all day."

My eyes lift to his. The man across from me lacks all human decency. I should have expected that from a Stinton, the family that believes they own the world. Everyone around them is a pawn in their twisted game.

Stinton is facing forward, feet planted firmly on the ground, hands clasped behind his back. He's not looking at me, but he doesn't have to. The

seeds he's planted have already begun to bloom, spreading their trails of poison ivy all over my body.

Scum. Pure scum.

I swallow hard. There's no other option and we both know it.

"What do you want me to do?" I croak.

"Say yes."

Monster.

My chest rises and falls on a tortured breath. I can't pull in air fast enough. I can't get a grip on a world that's turning in a crazy direction.

Stinton doesn't utter another word to me. He puts his phone to his ear and speaks in a clipped voice. "Turn the elevator on."

The gears start with a jolt. I shake on my feet, and I'm glad when Stinton doesn't turn around to help me keep my balance. If he lays one finger on me, I'm not responsible for what I do next.

We ignore each other until the elevator arrives at the right floor. The moment the doors open, Stinton's assistant appears, looking in.

Hills scowls when he sees me.

I scowl in return and stalk out of the elevator like it's a death trap.

"Hills, get the contract. Ms. Banner, my office."

I stop as abruptly as a dog tugged on a leash. My feet burn into the carpet and I debate whether I should run anyway. Get as far away from Stinton and this grim and dark world as possible.

And go where? He's Beth's uncle. He's running a bajillion-dollar company. If he and his family start raising a stink about my daughter, their fancy lawyers can take her away from me.

My nostrils flare.

I turn around, but Stinton is already marching down the hallway, hand in his pocket. His shoulders are ramrod straight and I swear I can see the flames sparking with every step. Why the heck is he so angry? He's not the one who was just blackmailed into doing his bidding.

"Ms. Banner."

"Who are you again?"

Hills narrows his eyes in my direction. "We met yesterday."

"Then I guess we don't need an introduction." With a scoff, I stomp past him and follow Stinton.

He opens the door of a corner office. The room is bigger than my entire living room and kitchen. Dark woods everywhere. A bookshelf filled to the

brim. A large desk full of binders, organizers and a fancy computer monitor.

Hills follows us into the room and locks the door.

Stinton takes the chair and pins me with his ice-cold eyes. "Sit down."

"What do you want from me?" I clasp my hands together and raise my chin.

"Ms. Banner."

"Spit it out so I can leave." My lips fall into a thin line. "Unless I need your permission for that too."

His eyes flicker to the left. Why does he keep pretending to have a conscience? It's infuriating.

"Considering the rather drastic measures I had to take," he beckons his assistant, "I thought it would be better to outline everything on paper."

How benevolent of him.

"Here." Hills shoves a file at me.

I stare at the contract. So many words. I force myself to slow down and take it piece by piece the way I would study the manual of my favorite diagnostic scanner.

"In summary, you'll be signing on as the brand representative of Stinton Group's subsidiary—Stinton Auto. You'll participate in interviews, photoshoots, and act as a spokesperson for the franchise."

I'm not looking at him.

I refuse.

But I listen keenly because, by signing this contract, I'm giving in to my sworn enemy. I'm letting Stinton Group do with my face, my life, and my privacy whatever they'd like.

"We will never mention your daughter." He pauses. Swallows. "Trevor's daughter. Not to the press. Not to my family."

It's there.

Printed in black and white.

That attempt he made in the elevator to woo me with money and my own auto shop—he already knew it would flop. He came *prepared* to hold my daughter for ransom.

A seething rage makes me crumple the paper. "How many lives have you shattered like this?"

Stinton's jaw tightens, highlighting the angles of his chin.

"You made this personal." I reach behind me without looking at Hills. "Let's not waste time acting like I have a choice. Give me something so I

can sign.”

“You have a choice, Ms. Banner.”

I flap my hand. “Give me a pen.”

“I’d like if you read the contract carefully—”

“Give me a damn pen!”

His eyes narrow.

My blood goes molten. I don’t want him to try that ‘we’re on the same side’ act now. *When someone shows you who they are, believe them.* Dad used to say that. He always gave the best advice.

I made stupid, ridiculous mistakes when I lost him. Having a one-night stand with a Stinton was one of them. It gave me my daughter, so I’m not going to complain about it. But if I had dad, he would have known what to do with this contract. He would have kept me away from this glamorous on the outside, rotten on the inside family.

There’s a heaviness—weighty and grim—in Stinton’s voice when he says, “Hills.”

His assistant juts a pen at me, his face turned away as if he doesn’t want to see this train wreck happen.

I snap it from him, march toward Stinton’s desk and slam the contract on the surface. Flipping to the end, I scribble my name over the dotted line.

Stinton’s lips flatten. “I’ve already opened a college fund for Elizabeth as well as deposited remuneration for her care—”

“Keep your freaking money.” I whirl around, intending to stalk out. I can’t take another second in his presence or I just might explode.

“Ms. Banner.” Stinton rises to his feet.

I stop and turn.

We both stare at each other. A clash of gazes and emotions and things that we could never say in church pass in the space between us.

“You raised your daughter on your own, but you didn’t conceive her on your own. It was Trevor’s responsibility to take care of her and now it’s mine. Whatever you do with the money isn’t my concern, but it belongs to you and Elizabeth.”

I point a jagged finger at him. “After you get what you want from me, I never want to see you or anyone from this company again.”

“The moment we’ve accomplished our goal, I’ll be out of your hair but until then—”

“I’ll do your dog and pony show. Got it.” I feel the weight of that contract shifting over my shoulders. It’s suffocating. “Are we done here?”

“I’ll arrange for someone to pick you up tomorrow. We start with a photoshoot and an in-house interview.”

“Fine.” I wrap my fingers around my purse and stalk past Hills. He’s smart enough to move out of my way before getting trampled.

As I tear down the road in my truck, I consider what just happened. The contract. Stinton’s threat. The noose around my neck.

I walked into Stinton Group a free woman and now I’m walking out as a company asset.

Sure, Beth now has a college fund and my bank account’s probably seeing more zeroes than it ever has before, but if I was all about money, I would have taken it the first time they offered.

Stinton is trying to assuage his guilt by flinging cash at the damage he and his company leave in their wake, but I can’t give him the satisfaction. That money is tainted because it came from him. From *them*.

Should I withdraw all the money and shred it? Should I...

Think about Beth.

I squeeze the steering wheel tighter. My problems with Stinton Group shouldn’t negatively affect my daughter. I’m not doing anything illegal, so it’s not like the cash is dirty. Now, Elizabeth can go to whatever college she wants.

At least that’s a good thing, right?

Still it burns.

Burns so bad that I call Clint and ask for the afternoon off.

“What did Stinton do to you?” Clint’s worried tinge would make me smile if I hadn’t just wrestled with the devil himself. “Do you need me to send the cops?”

“No.” I blow out a breath.

“Banner.”

“I’m fine, Clint. I just need to calm down for a bit.”

“Okay. Sure. Take all the time you need.”

I drive home and back my car into the apartment garage. I think about popping open the bottle of wine Kenya dropped off the other night. I think about going online, making an anonymous avatar and blasting Stinton Group to the world. I think of bawling into my comforter until my eyes are puffy and my nose is stuffed.

In the end, I choose the only path that will bring me comfort—working on a car.

My hands are elbow-deep in oil when I get the call from Sunny's mom. I have to tap my ear buds with my shoulder to accept the call.

"Dawn, baby." Mama Moira's musical Belizean accent is more soothing than warm chicken soup. "I told Bailey to invite you and Beth over for taco night, but I realize it would have been better to contact you personally."

"Oh."

"Mother-to-mother, you know? It's more respectful that way." She keeps talking without taking a breath.

Another thing that reminds me of my dad. He loved chatting too. He could turn a five-minute recount into a sprawling conversation that takes multiple detours.

I grab a rag and clean my fingers. "Tacos sound great."

"So is that a yes? Are you coming tonight? I need to know so I can buy the right amount of tortillas. Nothing worse than running out of food."

I almost laugh. Ms. Moira—or Mama Moira as she asked to be called—always has tons of leftovers after a meal. She has a real and visceral fear of not having enough food at a party.

Darrel will be paying through his nose for the catering at his and Sunny's wedding. Not that he'll mind. He loves Sunny and he can afford it.

"That's a yes."

"Perfect! Oh, Bailey will be so excited. He just adores your daughter."

I want to say it's mutual, but Beth doesn't really 'adore' anyone. She's quiet and reserved and a little closed off. Dad would say she gets that from me.

I sigh heavily.

"Is everything okay, baby?" Mama Moira is the only one who calls me baby and doesn't make it feel like an insult. I've been frail and petite all my life, so any insinuation that I'm 'cute' or 'cuddly' used to bring out my wild side.

With Mama Moira, it just makes me feel loved.

"Yeah. Yeah. Everything's fine."

"You must be under so much pressure at work. I heard Darrel talking about the Stinton Group companies losing money after everything that's been happening. I figured your auto shop wouldn't be doing too well either."

“We took a hit, yeah. Stinton Group seems to ruin everything it touches.”

“It’s a hard thing. I was so mad at that group when Trevor Stinton stole from my Sunny. But I do feel sorry for the older brother. It seems like it’s all falling on his shoulders now. Everyone’s pointing fingers at him. Blaming him. Expecting him to fix it. He must be exhausted.”

My shoulders stiffen.

The last thing I want to hear is any sympathy for the scourge of the earth known as Max Stinton.

“*Hear what,*” Mama says, her beautiful accent thickening, “I’ll ask Sunny and Darrel to pick up Beth along with the boys.”

“Oh, no. It’s fine.”

“Don’t worry about it. You just call the school so they can inform Beth. We’ll watch her over here at the farmhouse, so you can have some mommy alone time.”

“Mama—”

“You work such a demanding job. Always getting nicked and scraped by those machines. And then you have to come home and be a single mother. It’s exhausting. I’m exhausted just thinking about it. So much responsibility on your tiny shoulders.”

Tears prick the back of my eyes. It’s appalling that I’m on the verge of crying right now. I’ve endured far worse than a kind pep talk from my friend’s mother.

Toughen up, Dawn.

I blink rapidly and suck the tears back as best as I can. “Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t thank me. Just show up with an appetite later this evening.”

I hang up and turn my attention back to my car. Warmth is rushing through my body and I don’t lift a finger, letting my mind wander.

Every time Sunny complains about how nosy her mom is, I’ve always felt this little twitch in my chest, but I’ve never been able to place it before.

Now I can.

It’s jealousy.

Sunny can complain about her mom because she has one. For someone like me, who grew up with a father who barely knew how to comb my hair, dress me in frills and bows or soothe me when puberty hit with all kinds of emotions, it’s different.

Just talking to Mama Moira made a weight lift off my chest. Made the skies clear and the world feel a little brighter.

I smile when I reach for my scanner and read the wavelengths. Smile when I tinker around with the pressure sensor and smile even harder when it gives me the results I want.

By the time I've tweaked my engine to give me the best readings, the noose Max Stinton put around my neck doesn't seem as tight. Hope builds in my chest, tingling from my fingers all the way to the top of my head.

I can keep myself from drowning in those choppy blue eyes of his. I can keep from choking on the grip he has on me.

I'll be his puppet, but I won't give in all the way.

I'm going to fight him.

Every.

Step.

Because Stinton Group might have been able to back me into a corner, but they will never own me.

I don't care what that contract says—*I am not for sale*.

And Max Stinton is going to regret ever messing with Dawn Banner.

* * *

THE WAR AGAINST MAX STINTON STARTS TODAY.

I just have to take a little detour to my daughter's bedroom to wake her up for school first.

"Beth."

"Mom." My daughter moans. "Five more minutes. I'm stuffed from taco night."

"Five more minutes? That's not going to work today, honey. I have an appointment."

She cracks one eye open. "So you're not taking me to school?"

"So I'm taking you to school early." I shake her shoulders. The gold-toned bonnet on her hair shimmers in the sunlight. "Elizabeth."

"No. I'd rather stay home." She throws a scrawny arm over her face. The hem of her blue pajamas rides up to show off her outie bellybutton.

"I thought you liked school?"

"It's boring. And I hate homework."

I laugh. “Now you sound like Bailey.” Her best friend constantly bemoans the amount of homework he’s assigned. “Get up, turbo.”

“Mfff.” She burrows deeper under the covers.

“Elizabeth.”

“Five more minutes, mom.”

“I—”

The doorbell rings.

I jump and whip my head around. *Who could that be?* I check my watch. Stinton said he would send a car, but he wouldn’t show up this early, would he? I know he’s a terror, but expecting me to crawl into work-mode this early in the morning is next-level evil overlord behavior.

I push off my daughter’s bed and pat her foot. “You better be out of this bed by the time I get back in here.”

She moans and kicks her legs like a diver fluttering up to the surface.

With a roll of my eyes, I leave Elizabeth’s bedroom and trod to the front door. The knock sounds again. I check the peephole. Stinton isn’t standing on the other side. Which is good for him because I would probably karate chop him in the chest for daring to step foot in my home.

However, I don’t recognize the man on the other side either.

I also don’t understand why he’s wearing a chef’s hat.

And why he’s carrying a trolley burdened with stainless steel pans. Or why the smell of the food inside those pans is delicious enough to pass through walls and tickle my nose like a feather.

Blinking rapidly, I yell through the door. “Sir, you have the wrong apartment. I think you meant to deliver that to someone on the north side. Just keep going until you start seeing the mansions and hundred-thousand dollar condos.”

Pulling my robe tighter, I start to walk away from the door when the mysterious old chef croaks, “Ms. Banner?”

I freeze.

“Ms. Banner, I have a delivery for you.”

“Delivery?” My daughter prances through the hallway. Her hazel eyes fix on me and then the door. In fluid movements, she hops on the arm of the couch and pulls one pajama-clad leg under the other. “Since when did you have breakfast delivered?”

“I…”

“Ms. Banner?”

Puzzled, I yank the door open and gasp when the chef zips past me, dragging the trolley behind him. I'd scream and try to fight him out, but that smell... oh, it's glorious.

"Good day," he says in a crisp voice, "I'm Chef Aimsley."

"What are you doing in my house?" I fold my arms over my chest. "What is all this?"

"You've won a lifetime supply of..." He pauses and rolls his eyes up as he tries to recall whatever script was fed to him, "a lifetime supply of meals from my catering company."

"Whoa!" Beth hops off the couch and patters over. "We actually won something."

"No, we didn't." This ridiculous attempt at an olive branch has the Stinton stink all over it. "This must be some mistake."

Beth bounces on her feet. "Mom, we never win anything. We're, like, the unluckiest people ever. I can't believe we won a lifetime supply of catering."

"I told you, Beth, this has to be a mistake." I'm going to pop Stinton in the nose for this.

"How can it be a mistake?" My daughter gives me an *are you insane* look. "The chef's right here."

"Precisely. I—"

"You. Shush." I stick a finger at him and then grab my daughter's shoulders. I can't have her getting dazzled by Stinton Group's underhanded tactics. If Max Stinton thinks I'll forget he put chains on me just because those chains are pretty and stylish, he has another thing coming.

"Beth, get ready for school. I'll deal with this."

"But... mom."

"Go." I use my no-nonsense voice.

Shoulders slumped, my daughter plods down the hall.

Chef Aimsley juts a finger to his chest. "I won't always be the one making deliveries; however, I've come to make introductions and to receive a list of allergies, food preferences. Things like that."

"Look, I'm sure you're a great chef and your food is amazing." My belly growls, underlining the truth of that statement. "But we don't accept anything from—" I lower my voice, "Stinton Group in this family. So I'd like you to see yourself and your little trolley out."

“Ah, but...” He squirms when I plant my hands on his back and push him to the door.

“Goodbye.”

“Before I go, Mr. Stinton said to give you this.” He hands me a card. It’s one of those fancy ones that look like wedding invitations. Some words are scribbled in the ugliest handwriting I’ve ever seen and it takes me a minute to make it out.

Accepting breakfast is a part of your contract. Any violation of the terms will result in your secrets getting out.

I grit my teeth.

Stinton.

“Is there still a problem, Ms. Banner?”

“No.” I grab the food. “We’ll keep it.”

“Yay!” My daughter, who should have been in her bedroom but was actually hiding out in the hallway like a little eavesdropper, skids toward me. “Whoa.” She pulls the lid on the pans back and smoke comes billowing out. “This looks delicious!”

Chef Aimsley beams.

I scowl.

My fingers tighten on the note.

Stinton came out with guns blazing. I have no idea what he’s thinking, but I get the feeling that he intends to take on his brother’s responsibilities. All of them.

Now that he knows Beth exists, he’s going to treat her like a Stinton.

Whether I like it or not.

CHAPTER 4

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TOUCH MY HAIR

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MAX

I'm ready for Ms. Banner's barbed tongue to fly.

And she doesn't disappoint.

"Just when I think you can't get lower than scum, you go and prove me wrong." The door to my office bursts open, and a petite spitfire wearing a silk scarf over her hair and baggy over-alls shrouding her petite figure flies into the room.

Hills rushes behind her, out of breath. "Sorry, Stinton. I couldn't stop her."

I lift a hand in a silent *it's okay* gesture.

He nods, shoots Ms. Banner a sharp look and then slams the door shut.

I lean back in my chair, enjoying the sight of her.

Intriguing.

I expected her to be disgruntled, but this show of rage takes me by surprise. When she signed the contract yesterday, it seemed like a part of her had been tamed. Considering the glare she's currently shooting from her dark brown eyes, Ms. Banner is still as wild and willful as ever.

Interesting. And I'm not just referring to her temper. She's scratching at a fire in my chest. The blaze of a competition. A challenge to see who'll bend first.

"Ms. Banner, I told you I would send a car."

"Don't 'Ms. Banner' me." She stalks toward my desk with the grace of a panther, all restrained power and explosive energy. "I thought we had a deal. You don't go near my daughter. You keep her away from Stinton Group. That's the only reason I agreed to this."

"I'd like you to point out where I reneged on that promise."

"Don't play dumb."

Oh, a man could choke on that biting tone. "I assure you that I'm incapable of such a thing."

Ms. Banner scoffs and rolls her eyes.

She's twice as fiery as she was yesterday.

In the elevator, she was a stiff upper lip and a head tilted back in pride. She was fingers curling into fists and a hand ready to slap my face.

Today, she's the kind of dangerous that will shove a knife into my back when I'm not looking.

The wild cat became a cunning wolverine overnight.

I rake my gaze over her baggy over-alls. The industrial steel-toed boots. No earrings today and I find I miss the cheerful Africa combs. Beautiful dark skin glimmers with undertones of gold and honey.

My assessment shifts from professional to... something else. I wonder what her curves are like beneath that ridiculous oversized jumper. Would she wear something bold and feminine? Or would her undergarment of choice be as utilitarian as her over-alls?

My body hardens at the thought.

She frowns, flattening that luscious mouth of hers. "A celebrity chef? Really? You sent a meal that probably costs more than my car payments for breakfast."

"Was it not to your liking?"

The scowl deepens.

I flip open a file and scan it in order to stop from staring at her stunning face. "I called Vanya Scott and asked her to send her team first, but she has a very busy schedule. She couldn't fit me in." It was my first time asking Vanya for anything and she made such a fuss over it that I instantly regretted considering her. "Chef Aimsley is well-regarded—"

"Stop that." She squeezes her eyes shut.

I arch an eyebrow, still not seeing the problem. All of Trevor's women were heavily compensated for their involvement with my brother's... reproductive organs.

Ms. Banner didn't get a penny and yet she's the woman who *actually* gave birth to someone with Stinton blood. Half blood—like me. Which endears Beth even more to me.

I can't let random women that Trevor discarded be treated better than my niece and her mother.

Ms. Banner releases a shuddering breath. "What game are you playing?"

"This is not a game. The fate of Stinton Group is riding on our campaign."

"I meant," she opens her eyes and hits me with a hard look, "what are you doing with Beth?"

I stand and draw near to her. Close enough that I can convey my sincerity. “Did my niece enjoy the meal?”

Ms. Banner tilts her head back, staring at me and saying nothing.

“Feel free to tell Chef Aimsley everything you liked and didn’t. He’s not the stuffy type. He has a real passion for food and cares about the experience.”

She flares her nostrils. Pulls her fingers into fists. Seems to contemplate whether she should throw the punch. “If you keep pulling off stunts like that, my daughter will get suspicious.”

“Didn’t Chef Aimsley announce that you’d won a lifetime—”

“Beth’s seven. She’s not an idiot.”

“Huh.” I rub my chin. “You have a point. I’ll be less grand next time.”

“Next time? No, there won’t be a next time. My daughter doesn’t need anything from Stinton Group.” She slashes her hand through the air.

I catch it. Wrap my fingers around her wrist until I can feel her pulse beating against mine. Her skin is softer than silk. I unconsciously brush my thumb against her veins.

“What are you doing?” She jerks her hand back.

“Sorry. Habit. I thought you were going to slap me.”

Her eyes narrow to slits.

Yes, she’s definitely a wolverine today.

She’s not here to damage me in ways that I’ll expect, fangs out and claws slashing.

Ms. Banner’s come to find somewhere that hurts.

I turn and walk back toward my desk although I don’t take my chair. “I understand your feelings about Stinton Group.”

“I don’t care what you understand. I care that you’re breaking the contract.”

“My family still has no idea she exists.”

“But *she’ll* know if you keep sending celebrity chefs to our door.”

“For seven years, I didn’t know Trevor had a daughter. You can’t expect —”

“I expect you to continue with your life and pretend you never found out.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

She crosses her arms and the movement flattens her over-alls against her body, hinting at a thin waist and a generous chest.

Damn this woman.

She's distracting me in ways I've never experienced before.

"Screw you, Stinton." Her natural brown-pink lips form such hateful words.

I stare at her far longer than is decent.

It's not just the yearning in my pants that's inspiring the assessment.

I'm trying to figure her out.

She prances around in over-alls and oil-stained hands, navigates in a male-dominated industry and still manages to keep a cloak of femininity about her. It's almost as if she's learned to straddle two worlds and has an eye on conquering both.

The longer I stare, the more she squirms. Her glare crumples like wet sand. Her frown droops, turning into a pensive frown.

"Don't you blink?" She quickly averts her eyes.

It's the first time she's seemed nervous since she flew into my office.

My lips curl up. I can't help myself.

Dawn Banner is a strange creature.

And maybe I wouldn't mind playing this game with her.

"Sit down."

"No."

"Now."

"Do you ever ask?" She tilts her head, a hand to her hips. Her guard's back up. All the way up. "Do you ever say please? Do you ever act like a normal human being with proper home training? Even my baby knows basic manners."

"I don't have time for manners." I stalk around the desk and reach for the day's itinerary.

"Right. Because when you say jump, we're all supposed to ask, 'which cliff'?"

I hide my smile behind the folder. "Do you have any experience in front of a camera?"

"Do I look like I have experience in front of a camera?" Her tone is sarcastic.

I drop the folder to my desk and eagerly pick up on that invitation to watch her again, inscribing every detail into my brain. The slope of her nose. The shape of her lips. The delicate bob of her throat.

"I'm assuming no."

“You paid for a puppet. Not a fashion model.”

I sigh and lean forward. This much animosity can get old quickly. I don't mind it here, in my office, but out there we'll need to work together. “I'm not out to get you, Ms. Banner.”

“Really? You didn't seem all that benevolent when you were hurling threats yesterday.”

These barbs are coming one after the other.

“You're not a victim. You agreed to sign the contract of your own volition.”

“When someone's twisting your arm, does it still count as free will?” She scowls at me. “You made sure you're the only one with power here, Stinton.”

“On the contrary, you have your own cards to play.” Why am I pointing it out to her? Why do I always want to play these games in hard mode? “You are going to be the public face of Stinton Group's subsidiary. Everything you do and say will reflect on us.”

Her eyes spark as if she's just realizing the truth. Good. I'm laying it out in bold colors. She can run her mouth on TV and cause our stocks to crash. Not to mention I'd be in serious hot water with the board. I'm running this idea without consulting them. The consequences could reach further and be more damaging than she can imagine.

“We need to trust each other. That's the only way we get what we want.”

There's a knock on the door. The receptionist enters with a tray. Normally, I'd expect my assistant to deliver coffee, but the task has been turned over to her because Hills decided he no longer wanted to be my 'coffee boy'.

One of the many reasons he's been exhausting me lately.

“Coffee?” I gesture to the cup.

Ms. Banner lifts a hand. “No.”

“Would you like something else?”

She narrows her eyes. “Tell me what the other card is.”

I arch an eyebrow.

“You said I had cards. Plural. What's the other one?”

I smirk into the rim of my cup and take a sip. Motioning the secretary out, I wait until she's gone before I set the cup on the china plate.

“Why should I tell you that? I’d be giving you an unnecessary advantage.”

“You started this topic. I’m assuming you didn’t bring it up just to hear yourself talk.”

That wit of hers is sharp enough to draw blood.

I can’t believe I’m enjoying myself so much. “It’s Elizabeth.”

She turns tense again.

“None of Trevor’s dalliances have resulted in a child, and I don’t have any kids either.” Not that the Reckless College Me didn’t try. “Elizabeth is a Stinton and we’re a family that treasures bloodlines.” I should know better than anyone. “She’s the one who’ll inherit all this,” I gesture to the building, “when the next generation is gone.”

Ms. Banner bristles. “I’m not using my daughter to get what I want.”

“Unlike me, right?” I take another sip.

“Well, if the horns and pitchfork fit...”

I can’t help myself. I burst out laughing.

She wrinkles her nose.

Hills bursts into the room. “What is that sound?” His wide-eyed stare lands on me and he doesn’t blink for thirty seconds straight. “Stinton?”

“Hills, tell Jefferson to meet me downstairs. I’d like him to drive us to the photoshoot.”

“Sure.” He gives me another dubious look and disappears.

Ms. Banner gets up stiffly.

I arch an eyebrow. “Where are you going?”

“The bathroom.” She frowns at me. “Or do I have to update you every time nature calls?”

I wave her away. “Don’t run. I’ll find you.”

“Yes, my liege.”

My lips quirk again.

She’s freaking hilarious.

Hills hustles back into the room when Ms. Banner is gone and flings himself at my desk.

“What?” I grumble, collecting the files I’ll take with me. I’ve been to photoshoots before, mostly to oversee marketing assets for Stinton Group’s many companies.

Hair and makeup can take forever. Also, as Ms. Banner rightly pointed out, she has no modeling experience. We’ll be there a while.

Hills keeps staring at me and doesn't move an inch.

I sigh. "Say what you have to say. I need to leave soon."

"Since when do you laugh?"

"Everyone laughs."

"Not you. I haven't heard you laugh since college."

"Stop exaggerating."

"I'm serious. You stopped laughing after your mom..."

My hand freezes over the laptop. Then I grab it and shove it into the case. "I'll need you to attend the Stinton Investment meeting for me. I'll be busy all morning."

"Are you sure about this?"

"About what?"

"Using that female mechanic."

"The contract's already signed," I inform him gruffly.

"Stinton, I don't like it. This woman is dangerous. You can't let your guard down."

"Stop worrying."

"I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about me. No one here likes me. If you go, I'm as good as sacked."

I plant a hand on his shoulder. "Then work harder so you'll be able to stand on your own."

He scowls at me.

I leave the office and spot Dawn in the lobby. She's talking with the receptionist. Her slender hands are moving back and forth.

"Really?" The receptionist gasps in awe. "I don't mean to bother you, but can you tell my mechanic that?"

"Sure."

The receptionist dials a number and then hands the phone over to Dawn.

She wipes her hands against her over-alls and grips the phone confidently. "Yeah, she explained the problem. Did you check the API rating in the manual before you bought the oil for the car? It's a newer model and uses a special oil." She tilts her head to the side. Listens. Sticks her tongue into her cheek. "No, that won't work. You gotta read up on these new models." She stops. Laughs loudly. My heart bucks against my chest when I hear it. "No," she continues, "check the container of oil you bought. You might need to drain that oil. The vehicle can't go out until you put in the proper kind."

Ms. Banner spots me from the corner of her eye and the sparkle in her gaze goes out like a puff of wind over a candle.

“No problem. No problem. Okay, bye.” She hands the phone back to my receptionist. “Here.”

“Thank you so much.”

Ms. Banner turns to face me. In a flat voice, she asks, “Ready?”

I nod and gesture to the elevator.

The silence carries a hint of awkwardness.

I want to start a conversation. I want to ask how she got into auto repair and why she loves it so much. I want to hear how she managed to earn those certificates while taking care of a young daughter all by herself. I want to say something that’ll make her laugh or tease her and watch her eyes turn sharp with fury.

And it bothers me.

She bothers me.

I don’t like the way my eyes keep straying to her face just so I can catch another glimpse of those cheekbones and that delectable mouth. I don’t like the displeasure that sails through me when the elevator opens and she hustles to get away from me.

She’s playing with my mind.

Dangerous woman.

I need to find a way to gain control again. The game can’t be over before it begins.

Jefferson straightens like an arrow when he sees us coming. The breeze ruffles his curly hair and blows at that ridiculous skinny tie that he must have bought on Hills’s direction.

“Ms. Banner.” Jefferson smiles warmly at Dawn.

She breaks out into a grin.

Annoyance breaks out in my chest for reasons I can’t identify.

“I didn’t expect to see you again,” Jefferson says. “I wanted to tell you... you were cool yesterday.” He hefts a thumbs-up in her direction. “Really cool.”

She laughs and pats his shoulder. He’s so much taller than her that she has to rise on her tiptoes to do it, but she doesn’t seem to mind. “Aren’t you cute?”

I scowl. “We’re late.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, Mr. Stinton.” Jefferson opens the car door for Ms. Banner and catches her eye as he bows low. “Ma’am.”

“Isn’t that sweet?”

I motion Jefferson out of the way. “I’ve got this.”

Jefferson gives me a bewildered look.

“Go.” I jut my chin at the driver’s side.

Ms. Banner stops halfway into the car and then backpedals. Feet planted on the ground, she glares at me. “What is your problem? Why are you barking at him?”

“I’m not barking. I’m getting your door.”

She yanks on the handle and the door goes flying out of my hand. “I’ll get my own door, thank you very much.”

“Ms. Banner.”

She slams the door in my face, making me flinch.

I let out an exasperated bark of laughter and then stomp around to the other side of the car. Climbing in, I turn to look at Dawn. She’s on her phone, studiously ignoring me.

“Are you ready to go, sir?” Jefferson asks.

“Yes.”

We pull into traffic. The scenery changes outside my window, but the one in the car remains the same. Ms. Banner—body turned as far away from me as possible, eyes on her phone, lips in a frown.

I rub the back of my neck, feeling especially foolish. Why did I respond that way when I saw her getting along with Jefferson? What is wrong with me?

Eager to distance myself from her, I flip through the files I brought and focus on work until Jefferson slows the car in front of the warehouse.

“Report back to the office,” I tell him. “I’ll call you when we’re finished.”

“Yes, sir.” He nods to me.

“Wish me luck, Jefferson,” Ms. Banner mumbles, giving him a nervous look.

He pumps his fist in encouragement. “You got this.”

She smiles.

I seethe.

Gesturing toward the warehouse, I bite out, “Let’s head inside.”

Dawn drops her grin and gives me her usual scowl.

I return it in full.

We walk stiffly into the giant room that's brimming with activity. Clothes racks skid across the floor, pushed along by fast-walking stylists. Assistants set up lights against a white backdrop and a short man is calling out instructions from the director's chair.

I stop Dawn with an outstretched hand. "Let me introduce you to the director."

She blinks once. Twice.

"Ms. Banner?"

"Huh?" Her eyes shoot to me. They look... terrified. Where's the indestructible wolverine who told me off this morning?

"Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay," she snaps.

"Then why are you sweating?" I brush my thumb against the liquid dotting her dark forehead.

"It's hot."

The weather's cooler than usual today.

"Come on." I press my hand to the small of her back and nudge her toward the director.

"Mr. Stinton." He takes my hand and shakes it warmly. He reaches out to do the same to Dawn, but his arm falls limp when he sees her face. "My goodness. Look at those cheekbones." He reaches for her chin. Then stops himself. "May I?"

She purses her lips but gives her agreement.

"My word." He tilts her head from side to side. "These angles. The way the light will hit your face... oh. Have you done face modeling?"

"Um..."

"If you weren't so short, you could be the next Naomi. Poor thing. Those little legs though..."

I step in front of her. "Director, she's not here to model professionally. You read the content sheet. This is her introduction to the world as the face of Stinton Auto. I want fierce but approachable."

"Right. Of course. Of course."

I turn to Ms. Banner. "You'll do hair and makeup now."

"Hair?" Her eyes widen and she touches the wrap over her head.

"Don't worry. I brought in a renowned salon. The stylist should know how to handle..." I stumble over the words 'black hair' and wonder if she'd

be offended. “*Your* specific type of hair.” I don’t want to antagonize her or scare her any more than she already is. “Think of it as a spa day.”

She glances at the photoshoot again and her teeth chatter. “Spa day. Right.”

“I’ll be right there.” I point to the seat beside the director’s chair. “If you have any questions, come find me.”

Somehow, I doubt she heard me. Her neck is tense and her eyes look like she’s trying out for an extra in a zombie movie.

One of the aids grabs her and carries her out of sight. When she’s gone, I take my seat and work on my tablet.

A few minutes later, someone rushes up to me. “Mr. Stinton.”

I glance up.

The aide pulls at her frazzled hair. “There’s a problem.”

“What problem?”

“Ms. Banner and the hair stylist are fighting.”

“WHAT?” I shove the tablet away and move briskly behind her.

The moment I step inside the makeup room, my eyes search for Dawn. I find her staring a scrawny man down. She’s wearing a black cape over her chest and her hair is poofing around her face. It’s also dripping wet and has several broken combs sticking out of it.

The stylist has a scarf tied around his neck and his gaze is burning with annoyance.

Ms. Banner sticks a finger out at him. “If you knew *anything* about black hair, you would know that trying to clear it out while it’s wet and un-moisturized is extremely damaging. You’d also know that you can’t use a tiny comb like that to untangle hair this thick. And you’d also know that calling my hair ‘ratty’ to my face is extremely offensive.”

His cheeks turn pink.

I move forward and everyone in the room turns to watch me. “What happened here?”

Dawn glances away and clamps her mouth shut.

The hairstylist pounces on me. “Mr. Stinton, this... *girl* thinks she knows more about hair than I do.” He rolls his eyes. “Which is ridiculous. I’ve styled many black celebrities. None of them behaved like this.”

“Which black celebrities have you styled with natural hair?” Dawn growls at him. “Name them.”

The hairstylist opens his mouth and then slams it shut.

Dawn taps her foot on the ground, waiting.

When he realizes that he can't answer the question, he whirls on me and whines, "Do you see? She's so loud and angry. If she would be quiet and let me do my job—"

"You be quiet," I growl.

His condescending smirk fades and his face goes pale. "What?"

"You. Be. Quiet." I point at Ms. Banner. "She's telling you she's uncomfortable with what you're doing with her hair. What part of that do you not comprehend?"

"But... but—"

I shift away from him and speak to Dawn. "I told Hills to find a salon that was knowledgeable in black hair and we obviously fumbled the ball. Give me a moment to find someone else."

Her jaw drops.

I gesture to one of the aides. "Please escort this man out."

The stylist turns red. "How dare you! I'll have you know that I won hair awards all over the country. I know what I'm doing!"

"Hurry. He's loud and angry." I stare him down. "The very traits he seems to detest."

"Sir." The aide clamps the stylist's arm.

He brushes her off and stalks out on his own.

I walk behind them.

"Stinton."

I stop. Turn. Face Dawn.

She clears her throat. Rubs the back of her neck. "If it's too much trouble to get another stylist in time, I can try to do my hair on my own."

"No," I bark, still annoyed about that hairstylist. "I'll handle it."

Her soft expression turns hard again. "Fine. Do what you want."

I charge out of the room and dial Vanya. She answers on the first ring, something I'm always amazed at given how busy her schedule is.

"Max. Wow. You're calling me twice in one week? Should I assume the world is about to end?"

"I need a black hairstylist. Stat."

"What?"

"You wear your hair out when you're not modeling, right? You should know someone. Or at least you can point me in the right direction."

"By 'out', do you mean natural?"

“Yeah.”

“Of course I know someone. But why are you asking me? Don’t you normally have lackeys to do this kind of thing?”

“Just get me the info, Vanya.”

“What did I tell you about growling at me, Max?”

I roll my eyes.

“If it wasn’t for your mom, I wouldn’t put up with half of your crap.”

I rub the bridge of my nose. “It’s an emergency, Vanya.”

“Fine. Send me your location. I’ve worked with all the best hairstylists. I’ll have one there in fifteen minutes.”

“That soon?”

“You know why I’m so successful, don’t you? It’s because my time is money.”

“Then I guess I owe you one.”

“You owe me more than one, but I’ll settle with you when I’m in town.”

I hang up and return to Dawn. She’s sitting in the chair, her slender fingers picking at one of the combs that tangled in her hair. Teeth gritted in frustration, she tugs and finagles, but the comb seems to become more entrenched.

“You need me to cut it?” I ask grumpily.

She jumps and sees me in the mirror. Her shoulders shoot up. “Bring scissors anywhere near my hair and I’ll cut you with it.”

I restrain a chuckle. Striding toward her, I reach out. “Let me do it.”

“I’ve got it.”

I swat her hand away because we have no time for arguments that we both know she’ll lose.

Dawn settles down while I carefully pick at the strands of her hair. It’s my first time touching a black woman’s hair. I marvel at the way it defies gravity. Soft and springy. It looks so thick yet it feels so delicate.

“Any progress?” Dawn mumbles.

It’s difficult to get the strands to cooperate when they’re wet, but I finally manage to loosen them up. “There.”

“I’ve got it now.” She pushes me away, setting her hand over the broken comb.

I clear my throat and watch her in the mirror. Her eyes are narrowed in concentration and her fingers move nimbly through her hair. Curiously, I note how water turned her afro into tightly-coiled curls. I watch her stretch

those curls until they're almost to her waist. I watch her until she watches me back.

"You keep staring at me."

"You should have told me you were having a problem with the stylist."

"I didn't need your help."

"This isn't about help. You are an asset of Stinton Group. If anyone messes with you, they're messing with the entire company."

She laughs and rolls her eyes. "That's a little dramatic." Then she pauses. "Wait, did you just call me an 'asset'?"

A knock sounds at the door, ending what I'm sure would have been a fight before it can begin. A man breezes into the room. It's the hairstylist Vanya sent. He has dreadlocks, sharp eyes and is wearing a white shirt open at the collar.

He takes one look at Dawn and declares in a dry tone. "Well, aren't you a beautiful black woman."

She ducks her head shyly.

I leave her to his capable hands and retreat outside. When I'm back in my chair, I put the tips of my fingers to my nose. Smells like coconut oil and cocoa butter.

It's a strange and intoxicating blend.

As I work, I constantly bring my hands to my nose so I can inhale. I wonder if they sell air fresheners that smell like this. That smell like Dawn.

"She's ready." The director startles me from my thoughts.

I look ahead and spot Dawn shuffling in front of the camera. My jaw drops when I see her elegant hairstyle. The front is braided down and the back is an explosion of thick black curls that flow down her back. She's wearing a more form-fitting pair of over-alls and sharp white tennis shoes.

My heart thumps so fast I'm sure the director can hear.

"Wow. Look at that." He fawns over her and points to the monitor. "Even when she looks like a scared Bambi, the camera loves her."

It really does. Her cheekbones gather and dispense light. Her lips are full and tempting. The sun must be hidden in her brown skin because she's glistening like an ancient goddess.

I try hard to swallow and realize that I can't.

"Let's begin," I choke out.

The director yells for Dawn to get into position. She does great with the close-ups but when props are introduced, she falters. Hard.

“No, no, no!” The director yells. “You look too stiff, Dawn. Loosen up. Loosen up.”

“I’m trying,” she growls back.

The photographer takes more shots and the director huffs. “Stop!” Then to me, he mumbles, “This is ridiculous. She’s so pretty, but it doesn’t matter if her body’s locked up like that.”

“Let me try,” I say.

He huffs and flops back into his seat. “Let’s take five.”

Dawn wraps her arms around her body and shuffles from one foot to the next when I approach her.

“I know what you’re going to say, and I’m not intentionally sabotaging the shoot. I don’t want to look ridiculous either.”

“You don’t look ridiculous.”

She gives me a side eye.

I glance aside. “Okay, fine. You do. But that’s only because you’re overthinking this.”

“I’m not a sexy model. I can’t... I can’t do that.”

“You’re sexy when you’re confident.”

Her eyes flit to mine.

I realize what I’ve said and try to walk it back. “All women are. There’s nothing more attractive than confidence.” I brush a hand over her collar to flatten it. “What did you talk about with the mechanic on the phone this morning?”

“What?”

“At my secretary’s desk. What did you talk about?”

“He put the wrong oil in her car.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of the symptoms.”

“You’re that sure?” I arch an eyebrow. “You haven’t even seen her car.”

“I don’t need to see a car to figure out what’s wrong with it.” She sharpens her gaze.

My fingers settle on her shoulder. “That. That’s where you’re confident, Dawn. Get the idea of a sexy female mechanic out of your head. Being sexy has nothing to do with how much skin you’re showing or how much of your butt is poking out.”

She snorts and then laughs.

I nod at the car. “Pretend you’re fixing this thing. Ignore the camera. Just do what you do best.”

“Okay.” She juts her chin down.

I gesture to the director.

He calls everyone to order and the photographer starts snapping pictures.

This time, Dawn’s much looser as she poses. She opens the hood of the truck and her eyes get glinty and determined.

The director goes quiet. Everyone in the room just stops and stares, held spell-bound by the woman who knows cars like the back of her hand.

I watch her shift to another pose. She’s beautiful and intelligent and it shows. The early jitters are gone, her passion ringing through every movement.

My eyes swerve to the monitor and I’m startled by what I see.

A stunning, sexy woman.

The kind of woman who could ruin a man if he wasn’t careful.

Why do I feel like she’s already on the way to ruining me?

CHAPTER 5

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SPANNER WARS

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DAWN

KEEP BREATHING.

Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. Inhale—

Crap.

Doing the breathing exercises I learned from Darrel isn't working. I have to call the therapist again. Find another way to calm down.

At least I can have my meltdown in the privacy of the makeup room rather than in front of the director who likes to yell 'cut', the photographer hurling instructions I don't understand, and Max Stinton's chilly blue-eyed stare.

The gorgeous fiend.

He completely took me by surprise today.

Most of the time, he glares at me with cold contempt. It feels like he'd rather scrape my dignity off the floor than try to treat me like an equal. But he didn't hesitate to take my side when the crazy hairstylist attacked my hair, and he was something close to sweet when he gave that pep talk during the photoshoot.

I almost wondered if he'd turned into a human being.

Almost.

But one glance at his scowling face when he returned to his seat beside the director and I knew the Ice King had returned.

I don't get him.

Not that I *want* to get him.

It's just...

Urgh.

Thinking about Max is not helping my anxiety whatsoever.

And rest assured, I need to be calm in front of the camera. Because we're not just taking photos now. Every word I say, every gesture of my hand, every part of my face and body is about to be recorded and sent out to the world.

I feel anything but ready.

My eyes skid to the mirror as I behold the results of a five-man makeup and wardrobe team. I had no idea stylists were so... ferocious. The

whirlwind of activity that descended on me for the interview nearly knocked the breath out of my lungs.

Makeup brushes and powder whipped particles in the air; the hairstylist raked my hair with conditioner and Eco-styler gel; a frantic aide went on and on about interview etiquette.

I didn't hear a word of it.

This isn't my world.

All I want is a misbehaving car and some tools.

Instead, I have a face that doesn't look like mine and heartburn.

My fingers tremble as I reach out to the mirror.

Shimmer on my eyelids. Lashes that curl way longer and thicker than mine ever could. Red on my lips. Gold on my cheekbones.

This isn't who I am.

I'm not...

This.

Glamorous.

It's why I fought to keep wearing my over-alls when the stylist tried to stick me in a dress. I'm only sacrificing so much of who I am for the spotlight. I'm not ready to leave the comfort of a jumper yet.

My hands flutter over the shiny white top. The wardrobe director had a mini-breakdown when I refused to wear her gown. I almost had a flying fit when she tried to force me into a mini-skirt.

We reached a compromise.

I'm wearing a 'trendy' top with my jumper as trousers. The sleeves of the over-alls are tied around my waist. I don't mind. I've worn my jumper like this before. Especially when it's hot. Auto shops can turn into a boiler room every summer.

I'm glad she agreed to work with me.

Although I wonder if she would have been so accommodating if not for Stinton throwing out the first hairstylist. His actions said a whole lot to the wardrobe and makeup artists. They've been tiptoeing around me ever since.

Why am I thinking about Stinton again?

I haven't forgotten my promise to defy him.

He's still a Stinton. He's still the grump-hole who's holding my daughter's wellbeing as ransom.

Besides, it's not like he's treating me semi-decently because he has a heart somewhere in that gas chamber of a body. It's because, like he's

mentioned a million times, I'm a company asset.

From today onward, I'm not only representing Stinton Auto but, by extension, all of Stinton Group. If I screw up, he does too.

That's all it is. No need to get all soft and lose my objectivity.

My phone buzzes from my purse.

I leap out of my seat and reach for it, frowning when I see an unknown number. Since I don't have a habit of picking up strange calls, I let it die out.

A second later, my phone buzzes with a text.

Stinton.

It's like he can sense how nervous I am and his 'jerk' sensors went berserk.

STINTON: Pick up when I call you.

I stare at his message and annoyance claws at my chest. If I thought he was abrupt and bossy in person, his texts are ten times more uncivil.

Should I ignore it or send him a virtual slap upside the head?

With a sigh, I choose neither.

ME: What do you want?

STINTON: I have an emergency to take care of. I won't be there for the interview.

ME: Perfect. I won't have to stare at your scowling face the entire time.

STINTON: Very funny. This is important. Don't screw up.

ME: By screw up do you mean mention that the head honcho of Stinton Group has a penchant for hurling threats at innocent women in elevators?

STINTON: You have a way of making reality sound far more dramatic than it is. Curb that. It won't translate well on TV.

I dig my fingers into the phone.

Scum.

Handsome scum but still...

I picture him sitting rigid and regal in his expensive car, looking out over the city like a brooding Batman. He's twirling his fingers the way he did in the elevator—that hint of a smile on his lips and his eyes narrowed like they always are, like he knows he's better than everyone else and he couldn't be bothered.

ME: It's not like you'll be here to stop me.

STINTON: Just assume I'm always watching you, Banner.

I stare at the message.

Then I swallow hard and glance over my shoulders.

There's no one there.

ME: Stalker alert.

STINTON: For the next few months, you are Stinton Group's property. Watching you is in my job description.

ME: I'm no one's property, Stinton.

STINTON: Bring that confidence to the interview. Don't wimp out on me, Banner.

I throw a punch at my phone screen, pretending it's his obnoxiously gorgeous face. Somewhere beneath my belligerence, I can tell that Stinton is intentionally provoking me. He wants to distract me from my nerves. Or maybe I'm giving him too much credit. Maybe he just delights in ticking me off.

The door cracks open and a confused-looking crew member tells me it's time for the interview.

"I'll be right there."

She nods and closes the door, probably wondering if I've completely lost my mind.

Maybe I have, lady.

Never in a million years did I think I'd be in front of the camera. I used to run from things like this growing up. I wasn't *that girl*. The one with the long flowing hair, the perfect smile, the penchant for dressing up.

I didn't even have the body for it. While the other girls in school were developing curves, I was stuck trying to figure out where my back stopped and my butt began.

It didn't help that my wardrobe was heavily inspired by my dad's 'grab anything clean and nearby' style of clothing. Soon, it became very clear to me that it was better to stay as far away from the limelight—and people—as possible.

Now, I'm about to offer myself up to the jerks who never grew past high school. I'll expose myself to the cesspool that is the social media comment section, facing keyboard warriors who will have no problem tearing me apart from the comfort of their parents' basement.

"I can do this. I'll be fine." Taking another breath, I stomp out of the room and almost trip.

Heat floods my face and I glance down at the heels. They're like stilts strapped to my feet and so damn uncomfortable. Why do other women

subject themselves to this?

Legs shaking like a newborn deer, I make my way slowly to the front of the warehouse. The background's been transformed. Now, there's a couch, greenery and a giant bookshelf. The lights and cameras are closer too.

My heart slams against my ribs.

I can do this. I can do this.

The interviewer is a chirpy brunette in a sharp blue pantsuit. She senses my nerves and pats my hand. "It's okay." Her smile is practiced and her teeth are so white, they're almost blinding. "I won't ask you too many hard questions. Today, it's all about getting to know you."

"Know me. Right," I mumble.

"Can I get makeup? She's sweating!"

Someone rushes up, dabs my forehead with a brush and then scurries out of sight.

"Action!"

The interviewer turns up the charm on a dime, speaking to the camera like it's an old friend. I dig my fingers into the arm of the chair and hope I don't look as panicked as I feel.

She drones on and on.

I have no idea what she's saying.

Finally, she turns to me. "So Dawn—can I call you Dawn?"

"Y-yes."

She laughs and the sound peals against the rafters of the warehouse. "Did you know that female mechanics make up less than five percent of the industry? What made you choose to don these adorable overalls—" she cracks her mouth open to release another headache-inducing laugh, "and fix cars for a living?"

A sarcastic comment leaps to the edge of my tongue. Who is she calling 'adorable'? I suck the words back in, compose myself and answer as neatly as I can, "Cars have always fascinated me. I knew I wanted to do something with them when I grew up."

"But you didn't just wake up one morning and decide on this path. How did that decision come about?"

I glance at the camera. Back to her. "My father was a mechanic."

"Oh." She leans her elbows on the chair and rests her chin on her fist in a classic *tell me more* pose.

I lick my lips. "He taught me everything I know."

“I’m sure he’s proud of you for all your accomplishments. What does he think of you becoming the face of Stinton Auto?”

Dad wouldn’t have let Stinton Group get close to me in the first place. “He, uh, died about eight years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She pouts. “It must be hard.”

Her sympathy feels fake. It makes it difficult to be sincere with her.

“I bet you dedicate every car you fix to him.” She bats her thick eyelashes.

“Well...”

“I just love,” she reaches over and clasps my hands, “the way you’re defying all the odds as a female mechanic. It’s hard enough to make your mark in an industry that’s *dominated* by men. But to know that you’re doing it for your late father,” she presses her lips together and shakes her head, “that just makes it even more heartwarming.”

“Thanks?”

She looks at me like I’m an orphan who needs a family for Christmas. “I, for one, applaud you, Dawn. And I know that this great nation is ready to get behind the woman leading the charge for ladies in the industrial field. Ladies who are defeating the odds. Ladies everywhere.”

“I really wouldn’t say that I’m *leading* anything—”

“*Cut! That was great.*” The director applauds.

The interviewer drops my hand like it’s a hot potato and swishes her fingers together. Giving me a condescending smile, she mumbles, “Your hands are so rough, dear. You *must* let me recommend my salon.”

My jaw drops in shock.

Did she just... insult me?

Her assistant jogs toward her and hands her a bottle of sparkling water. She uncaps it, takes a sip and then smiles at me. “You should also do something about your nails. I know it must be hard to clean them, but you’re still a woman, dear. And now you’re the face of Stinton Group. There are standards to uphold.”

My nostrils flare. “Excuse me?”

“A little nail polish will get rid of that stain real quick.”

Before I can launch to my feet and show her what these oil-stained hands can do to her nose job, the director approaches us and whisks her away, chatting about some upcoming project that he wants her to star in.

The stage crew whirls around me, clicking off lights, disconnecting wires and dismantling the backdrop. The lights shut off, flooding my 'stage' in darkness and shadows.

Voices volley back and forth, shouting instructions as they continue to deconstruct my surroundings. No one says a word to me. No one even looks at me.

For a split second, I was the center of their universe.

Now, I'm just another prop.

Property of Stinton Group.

I curl my fingers into fists. Sure, I signed up to be Stinton's little puppet, but I didn't realize how demoralizing it would feel. Nothing like being set on a pedestal, pumped for all the value you offer and then thrown aside like a busted-up fruit basket.

I renew my vow to never let Beth anywhere near this filth.

The world the Stintons own is fake and heartless.

No wonder Max Stinton is so comfortable here.

"Hey."

I turn and nearly explode with relief when I see Jefferson's face. The young driver looks vastly out of place in his blazer, skinny tie and long trousers amidst a blur of creatives in scarves and berets.

He lifts a hand in a self-conscious wave. "Looks like filming's over. Ready to go?"

"Hell yes." I smile.

He returns it and gestures to the door.

I walk out of the warehouse and into the sunshine. Lifting my head to the warmth of the real world, I take a deep breath and remember who I am.

Dawn Banner.

A *true* mechanic.

Not a gimmick.

Not an asset.

Just a regular woman who loves fixing things that break.

When I straighten, I catch Jefferson looking at me intently. "Was it that tough?"

"Unbelievably." I rub the back of my neck. "I hate the cameras."

"Come on. You're... I mean... you're gorgeous. You must be used to all this attention."

"That's not attention. That's a circus." I hook a finger over my shoulder.

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

“Not really. It reminded me of why I haven’t taken a picture since... since I graduated technical college.”

“When was that? Last year?”

“You sweet boy.” I motion to him as if I’m pinching his cheeks. “Not even close, but that’s nice of you to make me feel younger.”

“You can’t be that much older than me,” he mumbles, a red flush spreading over his cheeks.

I laugh. “The fact that you’re blushing right now tells me exactly how much older I am.”

He scrubs his cheek. “I’m not blushing.”

“I’m in the bracket where most folks have experienced too much to blush anymore. So there you go.”

“Just because you *feel* old doesn’t mean you are.” He opens the back door for me.

I shake my head. “Since He Who Shall Not Be Named isn’t here, I’d rather not stand on ceremony.” Gesturing to the passenger door, I ask, “Is it okay if I ride up here? I don’t want to feel like I’m catching a cab.”

“Sure.” He slams the back door and moves to open the other one, but I beat him to the punch and slide into the seat that feels like butter.

I wait for Jefferson to join me before I ask, “Where did Mr. Perfect run off to earlier?”

He wraps his hands on the wheel and stares straight ahead. “The police station. I think it might have had something to do with his brother.”

“Trevor?” I stiffen.

Jefferson nods.

I wait for the usual disgust and annoyance that hits whenever I think of Elizabeth’s father.

It doesn’t come.

Instead, I start thinking about cobalt eyes darkening with worry. I think about firm pink lips disappearing into an anxious mouth. I think of a loosening tie and a perfect jaw line covered in stubble.

Oh, *hell* no. I shouldn’t be giving any concern to what a Stinton might be feeling.

I’m almost certain than Max Stinton *has* no feelings. He’s just a walking-talking chasm wrapped in a face hand-hewn by the gods.

He doesn’t have emotions.

Even if he does, I shouldn't give a rat's behind about them.

"He's been like that since Trevor Stinton went missing." Jefferson flicks the indicator. "One tip about his brother and he drops whatever he's doing to pursue it to the end."

"Any tip? From anyone?"

"Yup. Reliable or not." Jefferson sighs heavily. "I almost feel sorry for him. He's been nothing but disappointed every time, but he still treats every tip like there's a real possibility. Then he puts his all into the search."

"He has to," I say stiffly. *Do not feel sorry for him. Do not feel sorry for him.* "He can't really redeem Stinton Group until his brother apologizes for what he did."

"I don't think he's doing it for Stinton Group." Jefferson rubs his clean-shaven chin.

"What makes you so sure?"

"He follows those tips personally."

I snort. "That's it?"

His eyes flicker to me and then back to the road. "Mr. Stinton has a million things to do every day. He's always on the phone or planning Stinton Group's next steps. Just watching him while I drive makes me tired." His quiet laughter tightens the knots in my stomach. "You know when he cares about something because he doesn't hand it off to his team. He drops everything and does it personally." Jefferson juts his chin down like a wise old man. "That's how I know."

The weird ache in my stomach climbs all the way up to my chest.

I bat at my curly ponytail. "Can I turn on the radio?"

"Sure."

The talk about Max Stinton drifts to nothing.

Music is the only sound in the car while Jefferson drives me to the garage. I stare at the auto shop and feel a piece of me that went missing return.

"Thanks for the ride, Jefferson." I open my door.

"Rumor is that we'll be seeing you a lot more now that you're working with Stinton Group."

"That's true."

"I look forward to it." He gives me another smile and waves.

Isn't that cute?

* * *

THE SMELL OF CAR OIL HITS ME SQUARE IN THE NOSE WHEN I ENTER THE workshop. I stand. Close my eyes. Inhale deeply. Just let the smells and the sounds of car engines rumbling fill my senses.

This morning has been such chaos. I need this.

“Banner, are you wearing makeup?” Willis swaggers toward me, his hand on his paunch and his eyes glittering like a rat.

My calm evaporates and a potent annoyance takes its place. “Shut up, Willis.”

“You were gone yesterday afternoon and again all this morning. Looks like something’s going on.”

“You’re keeping tabs on me, Willis? I didn’t know you cared so much. I’m touched.” I make sure to dip those words in sarcasm.

“Care?” He snorts. “What I care about is the rumors I’ve been hearing.”

I bite his bait. “What rumors?”

“That you’re taking over this place.”

I freeze. “Who told you that?”

“Word gets around in this industry, Banner. Plus, I heard you were at Stinton Group yesterday. What else would you be there to do?”

Signing away my face to Stinton Group, obviously.

“None of your business.” I try to stalk past him.

He lifts a hand so I can’t pass.

Alarm bells clang in my head. Willis has been grumbling about me for a long time. Mostly because Clint favors me and tends to give me the more technical jobs—which also happen to be the more expensive jobs.

I know I’ve been trampling on his fragile male pride ever since I started working here, but it’s the first time he’s shown such outward aggression.

“What are you doing?” I spit. “Get out of my way.”

“You and me, we’re gonna have ourselves a little talk.”

I hold my ground even though everything inside me wants to step back. Clenching my teeth, I warn him, “You better get the hell out of my face.”

“Or what? You gonna cry to Clint?”

My eyes dart to Clint’s office and a pang of fear swirls in my stomach when I realize it’s empty. Damn it. He’s probably at the bank. Clint’s old-fashioned that way. He still makes his deposits himself. He loves standing in line and chatting with the cashiers.

Willis hovers over me, his eyes narrowed and his grizzly cheeks sucked in. "See, this is what I don't like about you girls trying to take over the world. You can't do it on your own. You always want the world to bend and twist for you. Problem is, you can't have it both ways. Either you're one of the guys or you're a woman. But no, we gotta coddle you and pretend your feelings are fragile, and then we gotta give over our jobs to you just because you're a woman. Is that fair?"

"Back the hell up!" My voice squeaks at the end. *Crap.*

Willis laughs.

I take a step back. Look around for something to defend myself with. If Willis gets physical, it's game over. I'm not stupid enough to think that my sheer will can block a punch from a man his size.

"Come on, Willis." Marco, one of the newer hires who'd been watching the whole thing, grabs Willis's shoulder. "That's enough ragging, man. Banner does good work. Same as the rest of us."

"Then you're part of the problem." He shoves Marco off roughly.

While Willis is distracted, I keep backing up. My tool trolley is just a couple steps away. If I can get to it, I can find something that'll knock Willis out if he gets crazy.

"You're the reason she thinks she can prance around in here and take over." Spit flies from Willis's lips. "What if she turns this place into an all-female mechanic haven, huh? What'chu gonna do when she puts you out of a job?"

"Willis, you have no idea what you're talking about," Marco snaps.

"Don't I? Tell him, Banner." Willis spins and notices my frantic search for a weapon. His eyes take on a crazy gleam and he sprints toward me.

Panic surges through my body. I whirl around, not bothering to hide what I'm doing. In frantic movements, I dig through the tool trolley.

My fingers lock around a spanner just as Willis's hand clamps hard on my shoulder. I spin and bring the spanner down, intending to whack him over the shoulder, but a hand appears out of nowhere.

I hear the clang of metal slamming against flesh.

Then everything goes still.

Eyes widening, I slowly shift my gaze away from Willis's chin to the expensive watch and the gold cufflinks beneath a thick jacket sleeve. I keep going. Past the broad shoulders. The thick neck. The square jaw and straight

nose. To the pure cobalt eyes that watch Willis with an arrogance that has to be inherent. It can't be learned. It can't be taught. It just... is.

My shoulders stiffen.

"Ms. Banner, our contract states that you are not to get involved in any altercations for the duration of your tenure with Stinton Group."

Shock loosens my grip.

Stinton pries the spanner from my fingers, his eyes never leaving Willis.

I jump back when I realize this isn't my imagination.

Max Stinton is here.

In the flesh.

"However," Stinton's hawk-like gaze causes Willis to shirk back, "I signed no such contract." He smirks and lifts the wrench over his head. "So I can..."

"Ah!" Willis recoils and covers his face.

Stinton stops the wrench an inch away from Willis's nose. He chuckles, but it's a sound as cold and dangerous as the mob bosses in my favorite black-and-white movies.

Dragging the wrench softly over Willis's face, Stinton whispers, "Who taught you to put your hands on women like that?"

Willis trembles and says nothing.

Anger burns under my skin as I watch him fall apart in front of Max. Willis was so tough when it was me. When it was just a tiny and helpless woman. He could rant and rave about how much damage I was doing to the world of auto mechanics. Words seemed to be bubbling out of him.

Where is it now?

Where's the victim-whining gone?

Rage builds and builds inside me.

I want to snatch the spanner from Stinton and teach Willis a lesson. I want him to fight back and talk smack again. I want him to face me and give me respect, not because the owner of the company is here but because I deserve it. I earned it.

"Ah ah." Stinton's blue eyes swerve to me as if he can read my mind. "Calm down, wolverine."

I scowl at him.

He gives me a pointed look.

Jerk.

I take a step back even though it kills me and I let him play the hero.

“Does anyone else want to share their disapproval with having a lady lead the shop?” Stinton swings the spanner. The fingers wrapped around the tool are long and elegant. Relaxed. Yet there’s a control to his movements that give him a scary finesse.

The other mechanics enter the mechanic bay, probably drawn by all the shouting. They look at Willis, me and Stinton casually holding a spanner like a gun.

“What’s going on here?”

Marco shakes his head as if to say ‘don’t ask’.

Willis starts laughing.

My head whips around and my eyes narrow. What does he think is so funny?

Willis smacks his knees with a flat hand and bends over as if he’s stumbled on the world’s best joke.

Swinging to face the other mechanics, Willis points at Stinton. “I’ll tell you what’s happening. Banner remembered she’s a woman long enough to get her promotion the good old fashion way.”

My heart pounds hard and fast. A grim anger hardens inside me, bringing ugly feelings to the surface.

I’ve heard these accusations before.

Whenever I do well, my enemies always fall back to this.

“What way is that?” Stinton asks in a cold, deadly voice.

Willis must have figured he’s already screwed because he opens his mouth in a wild grin and whispers, “You should know that better than me, Mr. Boss Man.”

Stinton’s lips curl up at the corners, but it’s nothing like the amused smirk that he wears around me. This one is tinged in poison. Something so dark and sharp, it makes me shiver.

Without warning, his fist flies forward and connects with Willis’s jaw. It’s so quick that the other man is knocked out on the floor before I can blink.

My inhale is sharp and stunned.

Stinton calmly hands the spanner back to me, ignoring the man writhing on the ground. “As of today, this man is fired. I’ll have his severance package arranged right away, although giving him anything would be generous of me.”

Willis groans and picks himself off the floor. His angry eyes are intent on Stinton's back and he seems to be contemplating whether he should rush him.

I jump forward and swing my spanner like a bat. "I suggest you get out of here before we call the cops."

Willis spits out blood. "Go ahead and call them. He's the one who punched me because I said what was on everyone's mind."

"Speak for yourself," Marco says.

I whip my head around to stare at him in shock.

"You don't speak for us," Marco adds.

Willis reels back, his gaze darting to Marco. Then he starts laughing again. "Marco? You hit that too? Was it in the employee lounge or back behind the lift?"

Marco scoffs and rolls his eyes.

Stinton's chuckle is a vibrating threat. He takes the spanner from me and stomps forward. "It looks like we need to have another conversation."

I launch my arm out to stop him from going at Willis again. I don't need him to rescue me. My work speaks for itself. My conduct and character can't be torn down this easily. The boys have this.

Willis throws his head back and laughs. "Go ahead. Hit me again. It'll just line my pockets with more money when I sue you."

Marco turns his face to the side. "Sue him? For what?"

"He punched me!" Willis shrieks. Sticking a finger at the bruise starting to form on his jaw, he croaks, "You all saw it!"

"Saw what?" Henricks smacks his lips together.

Fuentes scowls. "Yeah, I didn't see nothing."

"Willis, you sure you didn't knock into a door or something? You gotta be more careful in the workshop."

Laughter bubbles in my chest. I don't try to hide my amusement and let it sing through my voice when I gesture to the door. "I suggest you leave now before you're escorted out, Willis."

He curses up a storm and disappears. I hear his engine starting a moment later. His tires spit gravel as he tears out of the parking lot and drives out of the gravel path that leads to the street.

Silence falls on the shop.

No one moves.

Willis was one of the boys. Even if they stuck up for me, I'm sure they're going to feel that loss. I glance at each man and try to find the right words to convey my gratitude. Before I can, Stinton and his big mouth steps in.

"If anyone else has a problem with Ms. Banner's leadership, there's the door." He gives them all equal glares and stomps toward Clint's office.

I scowl at him. Did he really think that was the best time to say nonsense like that? After what just happened?

I let out a deep breath and face the other mechanics. "Thanks, guys."

"Anytime." Marco looks me up and down. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"I meant with him." He points to where Stinton is rummaging through Clint's desk. "I can handle Willis-types all day, but the suits... they're sneaky."

"Don't worry. I can handle Stinton."

"Then we'll let you get to it." Marco grins and nods. "Boss."

Something warm fills my chest. I dip my chin and then seek out the bane of my existence who also happens to be the *real* boss and the man I just can't figure out.

CHAPTER 6

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COLD AND HEARTLESS

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MAX

FURIOUS CANNOT even begin to describe the sensations roaring through my chest.

Dawn—*Miss Banner*—was almost assaulted by a buffoon.

What would she have done when he wrenched that spanner from her, his temper ignited and his rage blinding him? Tiny woman. What if he'd hurt her? Sent her flying into a lift or had her head slamming into the many sharp objects littering the mechanic shop?

I almost choke on my frustration.

Worry is such a prissy little worm.

I can't seem to jar my brain out of the what-ifs. Can't unsee the moment when I found some idiot grabbing her roughly while she desperately reached for a way to defend herself.

My blood burns in my veins.

I grit my teeth.

What if something like this happens again?

I set Ms. Banner as the leader of this shop, not only because it'll look good in Stinton Auto write-ups but because I believed the world had evolved to a place where she would be safe there.

There at the top.

There as the leader.

She's certainly earned the chance. I've seen the reports. Yes, I didn't just pluck her out of her ordinary circumstances to become the face of Stinton Auto because she's beautiful.

If stunning was all I sought, I could have hired a professional model and sent them to do a few weeks of mechanic training.

No, I checked Ms. Banner's stats.

She has good reports from every shop she's ever worked in.

How can I—someone completely blind to this world of automotive repair—recognize her abilities, and someone like that buffoon couldn't?

At the very least, he shouldn't have insinuated that her achievements were due to a sexual relationship between us.

Damn it.

I should have clobbered his face for that.

The worst part—if I'll admit it—is that he was on to something.

The more time I spend with Dawn, the more I want to strip her out of those over-alls and fling her into my bed. I want to run my tongue down her dark and silky skin until I find all the ways she can scream. I want that delectable mouth growling more than just insults at me. And I want to dive so deep into her that I can scrape my name into her insides.

It's infuriating.

It's flabbergasting.

I've never lost my cool like this.

Ever.

And what the absolute *worst* woman to start getting confused about.

She's the mother of my niece.

She's more Trevor's woman than she can ever be mine.

And why the hell would I want her to be mine?

She's brash and rude and stubborn. Everything is a fight with her and—damn.

"Get it together, Stinton," I snarl at myself.

My hand is killing me. I need to find something to wrap it up. This is a mechanic garage. There must be a first aid kit somewhere.

I snag my fingers around the edge of Clint's desk, squeezing my eyes shut and letting a deep breath untangle all the knots in my chest.

"You okay, Stinton?" A soft, throaty voice drifts from the doorway.

I stiffen on impact. "Fine."

"Barking that word at me doesn't make me believe you. Just in case you were wondering."

"What do you want, Banner?"

"To talk."

"Later." My hand is killing me. My head feels like it's about to split in two and my heart...

That dusty thing is starting to beat again. I'm thinking of grabbing the spanner Dawn wanted to use on the mechanic and turning it on the idiot in my chest.

"Sit down," she orders me.

"Huh. Is that how I sound?"

"Exactly like that."

I make the mistake of glancing up. Make the mistake of looking at her.

A strange weight falls on my body. Then it sinks in. Past skin and bone. Past my veins. Goes somewhere I wouldn't be able to reach it and pry it out if I tried.

Dawn sashays toward me, her hips swaying lightly—a motion I can see now that her overalls are tied around her waist and exposing a bit more of her shape.

The closer she gets, the more prickles start dancing over my skin. No, it's more powerful than that. It's like an electric shock. It's like some part of me that never saw light before is getting blasted with a full ray of sunshine.

And dammit, it *hurts*.

I press my lips together and steer my eyes away from her.

Dawn Banner presses dark hands flat against my chest, against the heart that's starting to beat double time just because she's so close to it, and pushes. I stumble into the rolling chair and skid across the room.

Never would have happened if it were anyone else.

I would have stayed on my feet.

I would have told them where they could take their orders.

Damn her for making me falter.

Damn her for giving me thoughts I shouldn't have.

She walks up to a cabinet in the corner. Her formfitting top has sparkles all over it. The sleeveless design shows off her trim arms. Delicate gold bangles adorn her wrist and the way they reflect off her skin tells me she was *born* to be covered in jewelry.

Her magenta-toned mouth purses in irritation as she swipes her hand over the top of the cabinet, realizes she can't reach and foists herself to the tip of her toes to grab the kit. She puckers her lips harder. A jolt of desire flows through me when I imagine sucking and owning that mouth until all that lipstick rubs off.

The things I would do to her if this arrangement wasn't so complicated—it sets me on edge.

Her eyes light up when she finally pushes the kit close enough for her fingers to latch on. There's something shimmering on her lids. Something on her cheekbones too.

Then there's all those curls—she foists them over one shoulder and they swing back and forth like a pendulum before finally settling over her back in jet-black coils.

She tilts her head to the side, glaring at me through narrowed eyes before she steps closer. "You're staring again."

For the first time in a while, I don't have a comeback.

She stretches her hand out to me.

I stare at it.

She sighs and snatches my wrist. I hiss and her touch instantly gentles.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be so rough."

There's something in her voice, something that almost feels like genuine care. Paired with the heavy silence around us and the glass pane revealing every movement we make to the rest of the shop, I feel both cocooned in our own world and painfully on display.

She's messing with my head.

I need to stop letting this woman tear me up inside.

Roughly, I move my hand away from her, silencing her protests with a dark look. "I came to discuss something with you."

"Take a minute, Stinton. You stopped a spanner in motion with your bare hands."

"I'm fine," I say coldly.

"Then I guess you really are a robot." She pushes away from the desk and closes the first aid kit. Her steps are fierce and determined, almost angry. Her lips look more tempting than ever, even as she flattens them into a scowl. "Whatever. You don't have to get patched up by me, but you should at least go to the hospital."

My eyes spear her. "I'll take care of my own matters."

"What is your problem? Do you practice being that unlikeable?"

My eyebrows hike.

She pulls out her phone. "I'm calling Jefferson. You're going to the hospital."

A scowl crawls over my face. Why does she have Jefferson's number?

"I'm not going to the hospital."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to," I growl.

Her eyes flicker over me and then she laughs.

I frown at her. "I don't see what's funny."

"You. You're funny."

Crazy woman.

“You’re just like my dad. He used to run from the hospital too.” She shakes her head. “He acted invincible. Never let anyone see him break down. It was ridiculous when he did it too.” The emotion in her voice is thick. There’s a tremble in the words. A hint of exhaustion.

I almost feel bad for snarling at her.

Almost.

She glances past me to the view of the workshop, her eyes narrowing. “I know what you’re thinking.”

If Dawn Banner knew what I was thinking, she’d probably get a restraining order against me.

“Willis has... strong opinions, but they’re not shared by the group.”

“Men like that don’t act out at random. He was spewing that kind of talk for a long time to his buddies. To his coworkers. He was *encouraged*. I believe there are still men here who share his sentiments.”

“I don’t.”

“Doesn’t really matter what you think. It won’t change reality.”

“You’re being jaded.”

“And you’re being foolishly optimistic.”

She slams her hands against her hips. “What a cold, cruel world you live in. Is that what Stinton Group taught you?”

I ignore the dig about my family. “What if I hadn’t shown up? You’re assuming someone else would have stepped in, but there’s a possibility they wouldn’t. What then?”

“People like Willis aren’t the majority. They’re just louder.”

“And?” I growl.

“And I’m not going to think you’re a decent human being all of a sudden. You’re still the man holding Beth for ransom.” She points at my arm. “Me taking care of your hand doesn’t mean we’re on the same side. So if you’re worried I’ll start feeling sorry for you, don’t. *Boss*. I’ll always remember who’s holding the strings.”

“I don’t need your help,” I growl.

“Stinton.”

“Forget my hand. We need to talk about your next act as Stinton Auto ___”

“Talk while I work.” She grabs my hand again, although she’s much gentler about it this time and opens it flat on the table.

Her fingers press into my palm and I hiss.

“That hurt?”

“No.”

She sighs and shakes her head. “What do you need from me?”

“The marketing team pitched an idea. We want to record you working on a celebrity’s car.”

“For real?” Excitement sparks in her eyes.

“Actually, no. Not for real. The celebrity’s regular mechanic will be brought in to fix it. All we need from you is a diagnosis.”

Her lips flatten into a thin line and her grip on my hand tightens. “That’s a fancy way of saying you trust me to find what’s wrong, but not to correct the problem.”

“Don’t think so deeply. It’s all for show anyway.”

She straightens, her eyes shooting daggers at me. “How can I not consider this a problem when you’re telling me you don’t trust my professional skills?”

“It’s not about that. It’s about doing what’s best for the client.”

“If I diagnose the car and the other mechanic doesn’t listen to me, who’ll look like the idiot?”

“The celebrity wants you to work together with her mechanic.”

“And you were happy to accommodate that, weren’t you?”

“Dawn.”

“You didn’t even think of pointing out that I can fix her car on my own. No, because that would mean that you actually believe I can do it.”

“Sharing the responsibility with another mechanic isn’t a bad thing. It takes the pressure off Stinton Group while still enabling a collaboration with Mila Dubois.” My head starts to hurt again. I rub the bridge of my nose. “If you don’t want to do it, just say so.”

“I can fix the car. It doesn’t need a second opinion.”

“No.”

“Then I’m not interested.” She folds her arms over her chest.

“Weren’t you the one who said you wouldn’t forget who’s holding the strings?” I bite out.

She goes stiff. Her eyes burn with flames and her nostrils flare.

Regret hits me hard and fast.

It’s too late.

She turns sharply and stalks out in a cloud of willful pride and tart disgust.

In the silence, I flinch and reach for the first aid kit. My hand is really starting to ache now and my head is tightening like a metal clamp is trying to squeeze my brain out the way kids squeeze play dough.

The pain started at the police station when, once again, I hit a dead end. The tip about Trevor's whereabouts turned out to be someone chasing fast cash.

My brother's still missing and the longer we take to find him, the more worried I am that something really went wrong.

Trevor's used to every problem being wiped away for him. He's never had to face the world without the family. Without me. On his own, he could make mistakes, get involved with the wrong people, and things could turn dangerous.

My phone buzzes.

HILLS: The board is calling an emergency meeting. They're not happy about your female mechanic, Max.

The pain multiplies and I grit my teeth.

I just need a minute.

One minute and I'll go tackle the most pressing problems first. I'll go down the list one at a time. There's no one else to do it but me.

To my surprise, the door slams open again.

Dawn stomps back into the room.

She's carrying an ice pack.

At first, I think she's going to hurl it at me, but she stops an inch away. "Open your hand."

Eyebrows shooting to the top of my head, I stretch my fingers out slowly.

The ice pack descends and hits my skin with a hiss of pain and a flood of relief.

Her eyes focus away from me and she taps her foot on the ground.

"Dawn."

"I'm not doing this because I agree with you. You got hurt because of me." Her words are sharp, but her touch is gentle.

"I don't—"

"Be quiet." Her eyes narrow. "You're not the only one who knows how to take responsibility, Stinton."

It's more than just her kindness that has me fighting back reluctant admiration.

When was the last time someone looked after me?

What I know is blind obedience and, at times, forced obedience. What I know is people scurrying to do what I want because I pay them to do so or because they need something from Stinton Group.

Dawn doesn't want anything from me. Hell, she'd prefer if I kept my distance from her. She's not swayed by money and she couldn't care less about my status in the company.

What would it be like to have her true care and respect?

I only realize I'm staring again when I feel her frowning at me. She cocks her head to the side.

I quickly avert my eyes. "The film crew wants to set up tomorrow morning."

"Fine."

"It'll be the same hair and makeup team. We'll send out a notice so people are aware the shop is closed during that time."

"Whatever." She moves the ice pack to another part of my hand and I hiss.

She doesn't even look at me.

"I'll make sure he takes your diagnosis into consideration."

"You can't force him to do that. Mechanics are a proud bunch. If we have two different opinions, he'll go with his."

"Then I won't let it happen on camera."

"You think I care about the camera?" she asks sharply.

"Then what do you care about?"

Dawn stares at the desk. Her eyes turn midnight black when she's passionate, from dark brown to shining obsidian.

"I care about the customer taking their car out into traffic or on a late-night road and trusting that it won't give out on them. I want my work to be associated with excellence and integrity. This isn't just one job on the line. It's my reputation." Her voice is steely with resolve. "But I get it. Things like a good reputation and integrity don't matter much to Stinton Group."

"I—"

"Since you paid for a puppet, I'll perform my role tomorrow. You don't have to worry about it."

"Dawn."

"Take a pain pill if your hand starts hurting later. And if you can't handle it, go to the hospital. Don't try to act tough because you're not

fooling anybody.”

Her anger is silent but as heavy as a whip, singeing the air between us. She marches out of the room once again and slams the door with a finality that tells me she’s not coming back.

* * *

SLEEP IS NOT A FRIEND OF MINE.

On a good day, I’ll work until I can’t anymore and fall into bed where I doze for a few hours before getting up early to go to the gym.

But tonight, sleep is a lost cause and it’s all because of her.

My eyes are closed, but Dawn is painted on the back of my eyelids.

That look of crushed disappointment.

That feeling that she regrets her agreement with me.

That certainty that I wouldn’t let her go even if it’s the right thing to do.

Did she actually do the impossible? Did she go fishing in my black hole of a heart and find my missing conscience?

I wish I could say she was dead wrong about me. That I have priorities other than Stinton Group, but I can’t. The company is my girlfriend, my wife, and my mistress.

I’m juggling all the balls, *all* the time.

If I don’t hold on with an iron-fist, it can all be taken away from me.

The board is just itching to do the honors.

I groan when I think about the emergency meeting they called for tomorrow. Dad won’t dare show up. He doesn’t attend meetings that could turn out negatively for him. I’ll be there on my own, a target strapped to my back while the board takes their shots.

Which is why I need sleep.

And why I shouldn’t be thinking about the aggravating female mechanic who keeps forcing me to find that one shred of humanity I’ve got left.

Morning comes and I’ve barely gotten two hours of rest.

Doesn’t matter. I hit the gym like I always do.

The sun is bright and the room is completely silent.

Pumping iron alone and unbothered is the only time the world feels even semi-decent.

“Looks like you got something to work out,” a familiar voice says.

I don't have to open my eyes to know who's standing in front of me.

We used to call Darrel the 'therapist' of our group long before he ever quit finance to go be a shrink. He'd take one look at our self-destructing mess of a life and give us the truth straight up.

A lot of the kids in our circle didn't like Darrel for that, but I respected his honesty. There just wasn't enough people who bothered to be honest with me after mom died.

"How did you find me?"

"Someone rented the entire gym for one hour blocks every morning. You're the only person who would do something that excessive rather than work out at home."

I grunt as I set the weight back in its cradle and sit up. "Your wife know you're obsessed with me, Hastings?"

"The wedding's in six months, Stinton." He shoves a bottle of water at me. "And no one is as obsessed with you as you are with yourself."

I chuckle and take it from him. That's the Darrel *nugget of truth* that I know and love.

Hastings looks down at me. He's tall and broad-shouldered with a head of dark hair and green eyes. The chicks used to dig his broody, mysterious vibe. Until they found out he was just a brain science nerd with muscles.

He hasn't changed since college. He's still that highly intelligent man of few words. The guy observes everything and everyone quietly and you tend to underestimate him until he makes a move that hits you at your weakest point.

It's why he was such a beast in finance.

Wall Street is still mourning the loss of him.

When I'm done relieving my thirst, I screw on the cap of the bottle. "I'm sure you didn't go to all the trouble of finding me just so you could be my water boy."

Hastings pins me with those assessing green eyes. He still doesn't smile, but I can tell he's amused. "You're right. I came to check on you."

"Huh."

"I also came to apologize."

"That's new."

"Now that I think about it, it wasn't right for me to heap the blame on you after Trevor took off. It wasn't your fault that Sunny didn't get her money and you were dealing with a lot."

“It’s alright. A man in love will do anything for his lady.”

Darrel shakes his head, but he can’t help the smile that flits over his face at the mere mention of his fiancée. Sunny Quetzal. Last I heard, she was a successful interior designer doing work all over the country and internationally. I know she must be good at what she does since my brother hired her to decorate the Stinton Investment offices. Trevor’s crap with money, but he’s got an eye for good taste.

“Did you get my wedding invitation?”

I bob my head. “Congratulations.”

He nods and then his expression shifts to a more serious one. “I heard you still haven’t located Trevor.”

I blow out a breath. “It’s weird. I thought he would have turned up by now. He’s not shifty enough to stay undercover this long.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I appreciate that, but no.”

Silence falls.

Darrel’s never been uncomfortable with these long stretches of quiet, but I’m not used to them.

I tap my leg. “Is there something else?”

“Yeah.” He drags out the word nice and slow.

I figure that means something and brace myself for the worst.

“It’s about Dawn.”

Bingo.

My fingers tremble and I try to hide it by reaching for the bottle of water again. Taking my time to carefully unscrew the cap, I tip the rim to my lips and take a big chug.

Darrel waits patiently until I’m finished, not moving a muscle.

His eyes scour my face. “Which one of you is the father?”

I almost spit out my water. “Huh?”

“Is it you or Trevor?”

I cough and then tap my chest. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Dawn’s got a lot of hatred for Stinton Group.” He pins his stare on the window. The gym has an incredible view of the city skyline. “An inordinate amount of hatred. A normal person would take that animosity at face value but—”

“But you’re a creepy mind reader so you know better.”

“Neuropsychologist.”

“I’m acknowledging your superpower. Accept it.”

His lips curl. “Since you’re so uncomfortable with the topic, the father must be Trevor.”

My head whips up.

He gives me a knowing smirk. “If it was you, you’d have told me it was none of my business. You wouldn’t have danced around it. You’re not ashamed of your achievements or your mistakes. But when it’s about your brother...”

I grab my towel and slap it over my shoulder. Rising, I glare at him. “Don’t psycho-analyze me.”

“I’m not trying to dig into your business. The thing is... my son is best friends with Beth.”

I stop short. It hits me that Darrel probably knows my own niece better than I do.

“They’re best friends?”

“She’s always over at the farmhouse. We consider her a part of the family. We consider Dawn a part of the family too.”

I blink slowly.

It’s hard to get ahead of Darrel because he never lays all his cards on the table. I could stupidly cut him off at the pass and realize he wasn’t heading in that direction anyway. Better to keep my mouth shut.

“I wasn’t going to interfere since Dawn obviously doesn’t want anyone to know. But Sunny showed me a video this morning—a video announcing Dawn as the face of Stinton Auto.”

I hadn’t planned on sending the announcement so soon, but the timeline moved up when Hills told me about the board meeting. I wanted the news out and catching fire fast before the board could contain it.

“Now, Dawn is publicly tied up with Stinton Group. It’s only a matter of time before someone starts digging into her and putting the pieces together.”

“I’m not going to let that happen.”

“There are some things you can’t control, Stinton. Even if you wanted to.” He advances on me. Lowers his voice to something close to a threat. “Now, if you were thinking of Beth first, you would have seen that. But I’m guessing you weren’t thinking of the girls.”

I scowl at him. "Say it plainly, Hastings. Are you here to give advice or threats?"

"I'm telling you that Dawn might appear to be a single mother with no family or protection around, but she's got me. She's got Alistair. She's got my fiancée and she's got Kenya."

She also has a handful of mechanics at her auto shop, but it's not like I'm going to tell Hastings I'm outnumbered.

"I don't know what agreements you have in place with her and it's none of my business either way. But if it ever comes down to a choice between Dawn and Beth or Stinton Group, I hope you don't think the girls are an easy target. There will be consequences."

"You're assuming I won't choose them," I growl.

He goes quiet again. Just stares me down without saying a word.

I squirm.

Finally, Darrel whispers, "Have you ever chosen someone else, Stinton?"

Hell, he definitely came here with threats.

The annoyance is expected.

What I don't anticipate is the guilt.

It comes hurtling at me so fast that it adds another thousand pounds to my frame.

The feeling that I'm letting everyone down, my mother, my brother, Stinton Group, threatens to tear me under.

It only gets worse when I head home, change into a suit and head out to meet the board.

"You call this a solution?" Hilary Stinton crooks a finger toward the picture of Dawn on the projector screen. Dawn looks stunning as she bends over the open hood of the car, her fingers secure around a wrench and her brown eyes sparkling at the camera.

"Stinton Auto is our most vulnerable company. If we can strengthen that weak link, it'll only have good repercussions for the rest of Stinton Group," I explain.

"You expect the world to turn around and forget what Trevor did because of this girl?" That accusation came hurling out of the bitter mouth of Angelie Stinton.

Everyone's related in this room, whether by birth or by marriage. But you wouldn't know by the way they constantly connive against each other.

The only time this family is united is when they're coming at me.

"I'm also against it." Patrick O'Heary, who married into the Stinton family and considers himself the mouthpiece of all the other relatives, raises a hand. "We should be focusing on finding Trevor quietly rather than getting all up in the public eye."

"Why would *he* want to find Trevor?" Angelie Stinton huffs. "He's better off if his brother dies."

Under the table, my fingers curl into fists. "I assure you that we're doing everything we can to find Trevor."

"How do you expect us to believe that? With everything else, you get results fast. But when it comes to your own brother, you drag your feet?" Hilary raises her fist as she rants at me. "That's ridiculous!"

"Half-brother," Angelie hisses. "He's half Stinton and half... what was your mother's name again? I keep forgetting."

My nostrils flare, but I've got practice keeping my temper in check. "Give this initiative a chance. Ms. Banner is good at what she does and she has a way of drawing people in. I know she can turn public sentiment."

"Yes, but what if that sentiment isn't what we want?" Angelie mutters. "For all the years Stinton Group has been around, we've never had someone like..."

I stiffen. "Someone like what?"

Everyone starts squirming.

"What were you going to say?" I growl.

Angelie glances at her relatives, finds that no one wants to die on this hill with her and fans her face. "My goodness. I'm just pointing out that she's very *different* than the spokesmodels we usually choose. I'm afraid the public will think we're tokenizing her and her people."

"There is no 'tokenizing' going on here. Dawn Banner is a beautiful, intelligent and capable auto mechanic. She has a real story and a real passion for the work she does." I think about her confession yesterday about why she loves fixing cars. "If you'll look at the stats," I gesture to the folders in front of them, "Stinton Group has been trending online since the announcement. The comments are positive. We're being seen as an innovator in the industry." I gesture to Hills and he hands out more booklets. "Regarding stocks, ours saw an upward trend for the first time in weeks."

For a second, nothing but the sound of plastic flipping open and the rasp of paper against fingertips is heard in the room.

I pool my fingers together and stare at each of the board members in turn. “Ms. Banner is one of the best things that happened to Stinton Group. No matter the color of her skin or her profession, she is someone we have to protect.” My stare hardens when it lands on Angelie. “So I ask each of you to think before you speak about her and give her a chance to take over the world the way she took over the automotive industry.”

Patrick clears his throat and tosses the information packets on the desk. “Fine. We’ll give her a shot.”

“It’s very out of the box, but I think it can work,” Hilary croaks.

Angelie narrows her eyes at me. “I’ll reserve my judgement. As long as you remember what you said, Max. She’s an asset. That means the moment she starts losing her usefulness...” Angelie makes a cutting motion.

A harsh anger hardens inside me, clashing with my resolve.

I push it back and dip my chin. “Understood.”

CHAPTER 7

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SKIN-FIT JUMPERS

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DAWN

WHEN MAX INFORMED me that they were moving up the timeline of the announcement, I didn't know what to expect.

Certainly not this level of excitement from my usually calm and composed seven-year-old.

"Mom, you're *everywhere!*" Beth shrieks, tablet stuck to her nose with one hand and the other freely waving at me.

"Yay," I croak weakly.

"Come see."

"I'd rather not."

"Everyone's talking about it."

"I really hope you're wrong."

Hazel eyes shoot to mine, overflowing with excitement. "You're famous."

Is it too late to take Beth and run to Belize? Sunny said there were tons of islands in her homeland. We can hide out on one of them.

"Wow. My mom's a celebrity."

I want to sink into the floor. My phone's on the table. Turned off. It's been blowing up with texts from Luana, my dad's old mechanic crew, and the female mechanics I've met at various workshops and training centers.

And those are just the numbers I recognize. News outlets have been trying to contact me too. My inbox is flooded with interview requests. It's been annoying clicking each email individually so I can delete in batches.

"Aren't you happy?" Beth asks, her face upturned to mine. A spray of freckles adorn her nose, which usually happens after she's been playing in the sun.

"Yeah, I'm happy." I stir my coffee and take a sip.

The world is watching, but the fact that people I know are watching too is what gets to me. It's humiliating to think that my dad's friends are seeing me in those ridiculous poses, with my ridiculous hair, and my ridiculous makeup.

Honestly, I wish the video had flopped and only Stinton and his family watched it. I wish it wasn't taking off like a crazy wildfire.

"I read some of the comments. They're saying you're the spokesmodel for Stinton Group."

"You know what Stinton Group is?" I stiffen.

She rolls her eyes. "Mom, I don't live under a rock."

My throat gets tight.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Beth flings accusing eyes on me. "I want to go to a photoshoot too."

"Absolutely not."

"Why?" She pouts.

If she goes to a photoshoot, she's going to meet Max Stinton. And I cannot have that.

I don't want Beth anywhere near that family.

"Is it crazy there? Is it dangerous? Did the photographer yell at you?" Her eyebrows crease.

"Of course not. It's just... not appropriate for a child."

My brain is churning. Why does Beth know about Stinton Group? If she looks any further into the news about them, she might stumble on articles about Trevor.

Breathe, Dawn. Breathe.

Stinton Group has done a great job suppressing the negative press about their black sheep of the family. There are far more articles about Max than about Trevor. And I doubt Beth will figure out that Max is her uncle on sight.

I compare the two men in my mind. Max's little brother is lean and suave and chatty. The life of the party. Loud. Flirty. He draws attention from everyone in the room.

Max, on the other hand, would probably demolish the room with his frigid stare and then retreat into a booth alone to think of new and creative ways to torture me.

"Mom, I'm not a child. I'm seven."

"Honey, seven is the very definition of a child."

"Please. I won't make trouble if I go."

No, it's too big of a risk.

"What if Bailey and Micheal come with us? Aunt Sunny can watch us while you take pictures."

"Elizabeth, change the subject," I grind out.

She sighs and then turns her tablet over. "One more question. Who did your hair?" She points to the picture where my curls are hanging down my shoulder. "It looks really pretty."

"Thank you."

"Can you ask the hair stylist to do *my* hair?"

"No, Elizabeth."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

"Why are you getting angry?" She scrunches her nose.

"I'm not angry."

"Are you hiding something?"

"I said I'm not!"

Her eyes narrow and she studies me intently.

I open my mouth and then slam it shut. *She's not talking about her father, Dawn. Be cool. She doesn't know.*

"I didn't do anything wrong," she mumbles. "Why are you yelling?"

She's right. This is my fault.

An itch starts at the collar of my neck and spreads into my cheeks. It feels like I'm being backed into a corner and there are spears shooting at me from all sides.

How much of the truth will the spotlight expose? What if my daughter finds out who her father is? Who his family is?

I reach for her hand and squeeze in apology.

No matter what the reason, I shouldn't be acting like this.

"Honey, I'm sorry. I'm just... I'd just like you to stop asking questions."

"Mom, what's wrong?" Beth's tone carries a hint of anxiety. "Are you in trouble?"

There's a knock on the door.

I spring to my feet. "Eat your breakfast quick. You need to get ready for school."

I scramble to the door.

My eyes collide with Chef Aimsley's.

"Hullo, it's me again." He waves pale hands.

My eyebrows wrinkle. "What are you doing here?"

"Breakfast." He glances at me as if it should be obvious.

My muscles tense. I told Stinton not to over-do the royalty treatment with Beth. Of course he'd completely ignore me. That jerk does whatever

he wants.

“I’m here to serve you.” He gestures to the trolley. “Stinton asked me to do so personally.”

“Stinton was supposed to cancel breakfast.” My chin sweeps my shoulder as I glance back to make sure Beth isn’t watching. “Look, I’m sorry you went to all this trouble, but I want my daughter to have a normal life and gourmet breakfasts aren’t—”

“Chef Aimsley!” Beth throws herself at the door, ducks under my arm and beams at the old man. “You’re here.”

He nods at her, his chef’s hat bobbing. “Elizabeth, I brought everything on your list today.”

“Awesome!”

“Excuse me? What’s going on?”

“I filled out the form Chef Aimsley brought last time.” My daughter wraps tawny-colored fingers around my arm. “Can we have Chef Aimsley’s food, mom? Please?”

“Elizabeth—”

“We won the raffle, remember? It’s not like you have to pay for anything.”

“Listen to me.” I grab her arm and lower myself to her level. “Nothing in this world is free, do you understand? Nothing.” My tone is too fierce. I know that, but I can’t stop myself. My hands are shaking so badly that I’m shaking her too.

Elizabeth’s smile drips away and a scared look crosses her face. “Mom.”

That was unnecessary.

I overreacted.

Elizabeth’s still watching me, taking note of every slight movement of the muscles in my face. I turn, squeeze my eyes shut and then let out a breath. Now is not the time to crumble. I have to be strong for my child.

“If it’s really uncomfortable for you, I’ll stop,” Chef Aimsley says quietly. Another innocent victim in this war between me and Stinton Group.

My daughter slumps her shoulders. “Mom, we can’t let all this food go to waste.”

“Fine.” I reach for the trolley and nod. “Thank you.”

He gives me a reassuring smile, waves at Elizabeth and turns to leave.

“Chef Aimsley.”

“Yes?”

“I appreciate your effort, but this will be the last time we accept anything like this.”

“Understood.”

I slam the door behind him and face my belligerent seven-year-old. Beth has her arms folded across her scrawny chest and looks up at me with an accusatory glance.

“That was rude, mom.” She huffs. “Chef Aimsley didn’t do anything wrong.”

No, but Max Stinton did.

“Hurry up and eat.” I shove the trolley forward.

“Why are you angry?”

“I’m not angry,” I snarl.

Her nostrils flare and she curls her fingers into fists. Turning sharply, Beth stomps to her room.

I tilt my chin to the ceiling as wave after wave of frustration floods me. It hasn’t been that long since Stinton Group started meddling in my life and things are already falling apart.

How will Beth react when she finds out about your secrets?

An unsettled feeling descends on me and sticks to my skin like glue as I drive Beth to school. She’s moodily silent in the back seat, staring through the window like she has a personal grievance with traffic.

I stop in front of her middle school and try to drum up a smile for her. “Have a good day.”

“Thanks,” she bites out.

I watch her scoot out of the backseat, climb to the ground and launch across the quad. A little boy with dark hair and blue eyes behind big window glasses bounces up to her. He takes one look at her face and then bends his head towards her, his expression shifting to concern.

I let out a deep breath, feeling grateful again that my daughter has a friend like Bailey in her life. What happened this morning tore something out of me and I don’t want to think that she’d suffer through all those negative emotions believing she’s alone.

“I love you, Beth,” I whisper to her, watching as Bailey pats her back and nudges her into the school building.

Even if she doesn’t understand, I’m doing all this for her.

One day, she’ll be mature enough to thank me.

* * *

THE VERY LAST THING I WANT TO DO IS GET DOLLED UP AND PARADE MYSELF around for Stinton Group, but I don't really have a choice in the matter. The contract was very clear and I want to get this entire show over with. Stinton promised he'd disappear from our lives when he's gotten everything he wants from me. I hope he keeps his word when that time comes.

"Ms. Banner, hair and makeup is this way." A crew member pounces on me when I step into the building.

I follow her like a lamb to the slaughter, shuffling my feet and keeping my head down.

We pass the light crew setting up tall bases that will hold the equipment. They're positioning it around a beautiful convertible docked in my station. My eyes caress the curves and lines of the vehicle. *Stunning.*

In the distance, the wardrobe people are shoving clothing racks into one corner of the shop. Beside the clothes, there's a vanity desk with a mirror surrounded by lightbulbs. The tall hairstylist from yesterday is setting out natural hair products on the desk.

Considering the havoc and chaos that's reaching a crescendo in the auto shop, I'm surprised when I feel the room shift to a stop.

What's everyone staring at?

I glance over my shoulder and notice Max Stinton entering the room. He has one hand in the pocket of his tailored blue trousers. A blue jacket hugs his arms and hints at the muscle definition just underneath.

I can't deny it. The man's got presence. With every step, waves and waves of energy seem to be pulsing off him.

To my cynical eyes, he looks arrogant and self-important.

But I see all the women around me dropping their jaws and realize that some folks might be attracted to that kind of power.

Not me, of course.

For obvious reasons.

His gaze sweeps toward me and that blue-eyed stare skewers me right in the heart.

I tell myself that I'm disgusted by him.

And I'm going to continue to tell myself that until it becomes true, dammit.

Still, the closer he gets to me, the more my resolve cracks.

His regal stride is long and potent. He looks especially dangerous with his entourage of Hills and Jefferson flanking either side. They're all tall and pale, like vampires out on a hunt. Hills regards me with his usual scowl, but Jefferson smiles softly at me.

I wish I could smile back, but all my attention is locked on Stinton. The set of his lips are tense and his eyes are lined in concentration, a hawk sighting its prey.

My heart skips a beat.

Weird.

No, terrifying.

It's anger that I'm feeling, that's all.

Right. Anger.

He glances at me and then at his watch. "You're late."

"No one's ready yet."

"Not an excuse to be late." His voice rumbles like the clap of thunder, sending chills through my body.

"I was dropping my daughter off at school, *your highness*."

His eyes flash on me and linger. I get the weird feeling that he likes my sarcastic titles.

"Did she enjoy breakfast?" Stinton asks.

Jefferson's head whips around to take his boss in, eyes wide in surprise.

Hills clears his throat.

I fold my arms over my chest. "She did, yes. However, we had an unexpected visitor this morning and I had to turn him away. It wasn't his fault. Unfortunately, his boss lacks basic comprehension. I plan on addressing that annoying boss later. Maybe if I speak slowly, he'll get it through his thick skull."

And dammit, he doesn't flinch like I hoped he would.

Max Stinton smiles—the one where his lips curl up and he's not really smiling all the way—but it's definitely a look of amusement.

Icy antagonism melts in the heat blast that settles on my chest. I watch that hint of a smile and it warms me up in the worst way.

I swing my gaze away from Stinton and focus on Jefferson. "I didn't know I'd be seeing you so soon."

"I'm shadowing Mr. Stinton to get more experience in the company."

"That's great." I smile genuinely at him.

"Ms. Banner." Stinton's voice is like ice.

I spear him with a dark gaze and he glares back in full. Arms folding over my chest, I tilt my head in an impatient whip. “What?”

“We don’t have time for idle chatter. You should be in the makeup chair now.”

I bristle at his tone. *Fliptard*.

He arches both eyebrows *what can you do about it?*

One day, I swear I’m going to pop his perfect head right off his body.

However, that day is not today. He’s still got my precious Beth in his clutches and I still have no other choice than to go along with this ridiculous plan.

Trading my glare for a mocking smile, I nod at him. “I’ll get right to that, boss.”

He smirks at me and I swear if it wasn’t for the thought of my daughter, I would slap him. And this time, I’d make sure my palm connected with his cheek.

A crew member appears out of nowhere and leads me away as if they can sense what I’m thinking. The hairstylist does his magic and the makeup artist turns me into her very own black Barbie with a flutter of her fingers.

Once again, I look into the mirror and see a completely different person.

“We’re not forcing you to change into a dress.” The stylist assures me when it’s time to change into my outfit for the shoot. “But you’ve *got* to let me show off your chest a little. You’re working with a nice rack.” She winks. “And I think it’s important that people know the women in industrial industries are still women too.”

“Do I have to jiggle my chest in their face for them to understand that I’m a woman?”

She laughs. “You’re funny.”

“I wasn’t joking,” I respond dryly.

When she sees that I’m not going to change my mind, she huffs and flounces to the clothing rack. “I knew you were going to be like this. Here.” She shoves a light blue jumper at me. “I took note of your measurements yesterday and custom-fit this one to your size.”

“It has buttons all the way to the top?” I question her.

“Yeah,” she grouses, pushing out her lips.

I shimmy into the jumper. It’s surprisingly comfortable, even though it clings to my body in ways that I normally wouldn’t choose.

“Nice work,” I tell her, moving my arms around and testing my mobility.

She beams. “Thanks. I believe that a woman can work hard and look fashionable doing it. If you don’t mind, I have a bunch of jumpers in different styles and colors here that you can use. Maybe one day, you’ll feel comfortable letting those *chuchas* out.”

“Wow. Thanks.” I accept the stack from her.

“Of course.” She winks.

I blink rapidly. The stylist and I haven’t spoken much. I mean, she’s seen me naked, but that’s hardly a reason to be so nice. If it were, Beth’s father wouldn’t have disappeared and sent an army of lawyers to my door.

The stylist smiles. “Look, I know they’re all making a fuss about you and it feels really surface-level. The lights and the cameras and the director might fool you into thinking you’re not having a real impact.” She shrugs and adjusts my jumpsuit. “But there’s more to this than just Stinton Group’s publicity stunt. You’re inspiring a lot of girls out there. Girls who wouldn’t have the courage to do what they like because it’s not ‘girly’ or because they fear being bullied or told they don’t belong. You’re letting them know that you survived in those classrooms. You survived the bumps and bruises. You’re here. You’re doing awesome and they can too.” She touches one of my curls and then steps back, admiring her work. “That’s why this job has a special meaning for me.”

I blink rapidly as emotions clog my throat.

A worried look crosses her face. “Oh no. Don’t cry. You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“Thank you,” I croak.

She shakes her head, waving away my words.

If I was the type of woman who gave out hugs, I’d probably launch myself at her.

The stylist shoves me. “Alright now, Mr. Stinton’s waiting and he seems to be in a bad mood.”

“He’s always in a bad mood.”

“But he doesn’t always attend photoshoots.” She rubs my shoulder. “That means he’s really invested in you.”

I’d disagree with her if I could speak, but I’m still trying to hold my tears back.

When I've got myself under control, I step out of the changing room. As I walk toward the cameras, I realize my heart is pounding, but it's not with dread or anger at Max or even my own worries about Beth.

A sense of purpose moves through me, flowing from my fingers to the tips of my toes. I don't consider myself a hero. Never. My motivations for putting myself out there had nothing to do with making the world a better place. But now, as I stop at the marker and face the camera, I realize that I've been shortsighted.

All this time, all I could see was Max scowling at me, the director yelling at me and those cameras in the room. I couldn't see beyond the room to the little girls playing with wrenches and sockets. I couldn't see to the young woman in a classroom full of men, struggling to be tough like one of the guys and stay true to her femininity. I couldn't see the other female mechanics in the industry who—whether they agree with me propping myself up or not—feel a sense of pride deep inside that someone like them is being applauded and recognized.

It makes the weight of the wrench in my hand a little heavier. It makes every step toward the car matter. And it makes me even more certain that I can't let someone else sweep in and fix this car.

I contemplate how I'm going to bring it up to Max while the director guides me on where to stand and when to look at the camera. They pause to adjust the scenes and I finally get my chance to motion to him.

With a flick of my fingers, I catch Max's eye and jerk my chin.

One eyebrow pops high on his forehead.

"Dawn, can you stop moving?" The makeup assistant grips my chin and keeps dousing my face in powder.

I hold my head still, but my eyes swerve to Max. I maintain eye contact until he lazily unfolds himself from the chair beside the director and swaggers over to me.

At once, the makeup girls start giggling and casting him side-glances. He pays them no attention and keeps his focus on me, cool and confident.

My heart does that weird flip again.

I'm surprised that he actually came over. I thought he would put up more of a fight.

"You know, I'm the one who's supposed to be calling you over. This isn't the way it works." He brushes up close to me and the intimacy of his words against my ear sends a shiver through my body.

I keep my tone steady. “I don’t see the other mechanic here.”

“He broke down in traffic. If you can believe that.” His lips curl up at the ends.

“Really?”

“No.”

... oh wow.

Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow.

Tell me Max Stinton didn’t just share a joke with me.

My lips melt into a smile before I can correct my facial muscles.

His blue eyes glimmer with mischief. “He’s on his way.”

“About that, Max—”

“Hm?” He tilts his head, waiting.

“I want to revisit that conversation about—”

“This is really a production!” A man in a dark grey button-down and jeans saunters into the auto shop. He’s gripping a tool box in one hand and his car keys in the other, which is the only visual indicator that he’s a mechanic.

The crew makes way for him as he walks confidently in front of the camera and sticks out his hand to Stinton. “When you said you’d be recording her, I didn’t think you’d go to all this effort for a mere diagnosis.”

I stiffen.

Max wraps his fingers around my wrist as if he can sense that I’m forming fists. He gestures to me. “Dawn, this is Henry Shtick. Henry, this is Dawn Banner, the head mechanic of Cross Roads Auto Shop and spokeswoman of Stinton Auto.”

“Fancy, fancy titles for such a little lady.”

I grit my teeth.

Max shuffles in front of me, keeping me from flinging myself at the condescending old man. “I assure you, Henry. Dawn might be small in stature, but she’s a giant in this industry.”

My eyes widen and I stare at him in shock.

Did he just... compliment me?

First a joke and then a compliment?

I start to get nervous. What exactly is Max Stinton trying to play here?

“A giant by whose standards? Yours?” Henry chuckles. “The public will believe anything you shove down their throat, but no one in the community’s ever heard of your little prized pony there, Stinton. So let’s

save all the virtue-signaling for when the cameras are rolling, huh?" He slaps Max twice on the arm.

Max releases my hand and jerks as if he'll grab Henry. In lightning quick movements, I snatch his jacket and hold on with all my might.

He glances over his shoulder at me.

I shake my head.

He frowns and then transfers his gaze back to Henry. "This is a *collaboration*, Mr. Shtick. You and Dawn will be working together to solve the issues with Ms. Dubois's car."

"Where's Mila?" His eyes bounce around.

"Mila will film her bit elsewhere." Max pushes the words out through gritted teeth. "Any other questions?"

"No. If you're done filming, you should move those cameras out of the way. I need space to work."

Jeez Louise.

"We." I lift my chin. "We need space to work." I've just decided that I'm not going to beg Stinton to give this assignment to me. I'm going to do what I've always done—Max Stinton or no. I'm going to prove myself with my own abilities.

Henry's smile is pained. "I prefer to work alone."

Max clears his throat and slants Henry a pointed look.

"Fine." Henry looks me up and down. "Let's see what you've got."

Max's phone starts jangling.

He glances at the screen and then looks at me with something close to regret. "I've got to go."

"Why are you telling me?" I mumble, flipping my hair over my shoulder.

His eyes remain fixed on me like a lion about to pounce. "I'm leaving the cameras rolling. Don't do anything that'll get you arrested."

Henry stops and then blinks rapidly. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I know how to take care of myself," I tell Max.

He purses his lips.

"Mr. Stinton, you're holding up our progress." I jut my chin at the door. "This is my domain. Go take care of yours."

He looks at me for another few beats.

It's crazy the way Max Stinton doesn't have to move an *inch* to radiate absolute power.

I can't explain why it affects me to my core.

Why it makes my stomach twist into knots and heat creep under my dark skin.

It's like a mouse skittering into the path of a lion, realizing far too late that—with one swipe—it can be skewered by the predator's claws.

I definitely feel every inch of my five-foot-two frame as Max looks me over one more time before he moves away.

Every eye in the room falls on him with a weight and a respect that has to be earned. Sunlight follows him too, dashing along behind him like a servant eager to be near.

He's striking even from the rearview. Shoulders broad beneath his suit jacket. Stride rigid and trim. All contrasts, angles, and a complicated loop of emotions he keeps packed tightly to his chest.

Have mercy, I can *feel* the way the room loses something—something electric and crackling—when he walks out of it.

Like the air around him doesn't have to function by the same rules and laws of physics that the rest of the world does.

I suck oxygen back into my lungs and crush the strange thoughts spiraling in my head.

Max Stinton isn't going to distract me.

This isn't about him.

I drag my gaze back to Henry and find that he's wearing an amused grin. I don't ask him what that grin is about and, thankfully, he's smart enough not to share.

"Alright, Ms. Banner, feel free to observe while I get to work."

Unfortunately for Mr. Shtick, I do more than observe.

Ignoring the cameras is far easier for me as I get sucked into doing what I love. The car is a beauty and I'm glad I asked Stinton to provide the make and model in advance because it allowed me to go through the manual and figure out exactly what's troubling the machine.

"You're wrong," I tell Henry.

He blinks, straightens and then glares at me. "What?"

"You're wrong. It's not the transmission that's at fault."

He wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt. Grease stains his cheeks and mingles with the sweat running down his face. It's unbelievably hot in

the garage, especially with all the lights pointing down at us.

“Look here, young lady—”

“I can see why you would think it’s the transmission.” I cut him off because I don’t want him talking down to me and earning a butt whupping. Stinton was smart to leave the cameras rolling. It’s definitely forcing me to show some restraint. I think it’s doing the same for Henry too.

However, his passive aggressive comments have been steadily getting on my nerves and it’s clear that he’s trying to treat me as his assistant.

I’m not.

And it’s about time he realizes that.

“However,” I add, “the transmission is not the problem this time.”

“The car refuses to shift out of first gear.” He points with a flathead wrench. “That’s an obvious sign that the transmission is the problem.”

“Do you know how expensive it is to replace a transmission?”

He throws his head back and laughs. “It’s not like Mila Dubois is lacking for cash.”

“That’s not the point. She shouldn’t have to spend all that money for a new transmission if she doesn’t need one. Check again. Test again. Are you sure that overhauling the trans is the right move? I don’t think so.”

“Young lady,” his tone turns into that condescending croak I’ve been hearing from men all my life, “I’m the chief mechanic at one of the most reputable garages in the West. Now, I understand that you’ve got a lot to lose.” His eyes flicker up. “Given all the eyes that are on you, but I’m going to remind you that I’ve been doing this for a long time. Far longer than you —”

“And that’s exactly why your methods of diagnosis are outdated. Cars have been evolving to become more and more computer-controlled every year. You can’t solve this the old way.”

“And I think,” he continues talking over me as if I didn’t utter a word, “that Mila Dubois chose *me* to repair her car for a reason.”

I grit my teeth. “Based on my tests, I believe the problem has to do with a faulty wheel speed sensor and throttle position sensor.”

“Mm-hm. And when *you’re* chief mechanic, you can make those calls. Until then...” He shoos me away like I’m a dog sniffing around his feet.

My fingers curl into fists.

I open my mouth to lambast him, refusing to hold back anymore, when a gasp goes up from the director. Cell phone pings echo around the room

and people stare at their devices, faces creased in dismay.

“What’s going on?” Henry yells, glancing around.

I shoot Jefferson a concerned look.

Face pale, he takes long-legged strides toward me and leans over to whisper in my ear. “There’s been an announcement on the news. Trevor Stinton is dead.”

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CHAPTER 8

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CHAOS ON TRACK

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MAX

“ALLEGEDLY. HE’S ALLEGEDLY DEAD,” I growl into the phone.

Hills bursts through the door. He gives me a pointed look and I gesture for him to wait.

“Recant your story.” I pause and listen to him argue before I get bored. “I don’t care that you’ve already published. Look, I’m doing you a favor. When you refer to the source of these rumors, you’ll find a trashy tabloid known for clickbait articles. Your defense won’t last a second in court. Not to mention, your journalistic integrity will be called into question forever. Is that what you want? If not, take the article down immediately.”

I end the phone call, stabbing my finger against my phone screen.

A sigh builds in my chest, but I don’t let it loose. Eyes sweeping to Hills, I bark, “This better be good news.”

“The PR Team is already making a public statement.”

“Good.”

“We’re trying to find out who contacted that source and gave them such a ridiculous tip.”

My fingers tremble and I curl them into fists to stop them from shaking too much. This is an utter crap storm.

But I’m grateful for that. Grateful I still have hope that my brother can be found. Alive. For a split second, I almost believed the headlines myself. It shocked me in a way I didn’t expect.

I’ve gotten that call before. When I lost my mom, there was nothing but numbness and an overwhelming desire for the police to walk back their words.

Dead?

No, she can’t be dead. Not my mom. I just saw her laughing last week. She invited Vanya and Hadyn over for my birthday. She’s making waffles and wings. She’s not dead.

I don’t want to go through that again.

No matter what he’s done, Trevor’s my little brother. He’s family.

Hills narrows his eyes. There’s the gleam of righteous indignation in his gaze. “Our lawyers are preparing to sue. In fact, they’re itching to sink their

teeth into this.”

“Good. Hit the tabloid hard. I want their doors to squeak shut within a day.”

“Done. What did the police say?”

I pick up my pen from the desk. Trevor bought it for me when I took over Stinton Group. “The police can’t confirm or deny anything at this point, but they did not give a statement to the tabloids. In fact, they’re leaning toward Trevor being alive and within reach. They just found a ping on his potential whereabouts.”

Hills lets out a breath. “You think it’s him?”

“I’m going to choose to believe my brother’s alive.” No other thought is allowed. Not until I see proper evidence.

Hills shakes his head. “I can’t believe things imploded this quickly. We were just getting some great momentum with the rebrand of Stinton Auto. This is a giant blow to progress. Now Trevor and his dirty deeds are back in the spotlight.” His eyes land on me. “You think someone did this intentionally?”

“I’ve considered that.” It would be an incredibly well-placed move. Positive opinions about Stinton Group have been flooding in for the past twenty-four hours. Now, this ‘death’ report is all the world can see.

Prop us up just to tear us down.

The company is trending again—for all the wrong reasons.

“People are dragging up his dirty deeds. The women. The drugs. They’re rehashing the downfall of Stinton Investment all over again. It’s almost like our work with Dawn was for nothing.”

Would it be someone on the board?

I undo the button at my cuff and roll up my sleeve. I doubt they would sabotage Stinton Group intentionally. After all, their wealth is tied up in our company. If Stinton Group goes down, they all go down.

I flick my pen around my fingers. “Let’s concentrate on getting Trevor’s name out of the press for now.” Another rotation. “We can’t out any other fires until we out this one.”

“What about the video we shot of Dawn today? It was supposed to be released this evening. The production team is already editing the footage.”

“I don’t think it’s the best time to release it.”

“Because of Dawn?” His stare is accusatory.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Don’t ask me dumb questions, Stinton.”

I growl at him. “You’re the one not making sense.”

“I saw you today. Everyone did. You’re protective of her.”

“She’s the mother of my niece.”

Hills rolls his eyes. “Do you think I’m blind? It has nothing to do with Trevor’s kid and you know it.”

It feels like he’s on to me.

Do I have a thing for Dawn?

Yeah.

No.

Even if I do, it’s just physical and it’s easy for me to push those thoughts out of my head. I don’t have room in my life for anyone. Especially someone like Dawn, who’s the type to barge in and take up as much space as possible.

“Mila Dubois’s agency called and expressed their concern about their starlet being dragged into this mess. If we go down, they want us to go down alone.” I fold my arms over my chest. “That’s why we have to be careful. Happy?”

Hills yanks at his tie and curses. “Talk about awful timing.”

“What matters is the police still have hope that we can find Trevor alive. Stinton Group can weather this crisis, but we’re not powerful enough to bring a person back to life.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I’m glad you’re taking this so well.”

“Trevor’s fine. It’s the company that I have to worry about.”

He sighs. “I’ll let the lawyers off their leashes.”

“Let me know if anything new turns up. We can’t afford to take another public hit right now.”

“I will.” He leaves and I sink into my office chair.

The pen rolls out of my grip and clatters to my desk. I bury my head in my hands and try to breathe deeply.

Trevor’s okay. He’s okay and he’s probably sitting in the sun somewhere, laughing about all the fuss we’re making over this false death announcement. He’s the type who’d get a kick out of dark humor like this. I can almost hear him teasing me, *‘you think I could come to my own funeral, Max?’*

“Where the hell are you, Trevor?” I mumble.

I’m too restless to sit.

I end up pouncing to my feet and prowling in front of the window.

Who would pay the tabloids to release such a ridiculous article? Someone has to be pulling the strings. No one would come against Stinton Group like this without a powerful backer.

Is it one of our enemies? Or is it more personal? One of Trevor's women?

Dawn pops into mind.

Ridiculous.

She wouldn't do this, no matter how much she hates me and Stinton Group. Her form of attack is staring someone in the face while she stabs them in the gut.

Besides, she doesn't seem all that interested in getting revenge against Trevor—as much as she is in staying far away from Stinton Group.

I take a slow breath and stop in front of the window.

Beyond the thick piece of glass is a sky that's sparkling blue. The sun sheds fiery warmth over the buildings that gleam silver and white.

Staring out at the horizon, surrounded by an office full of luxury and opulence, I realize how easily it can all slip out of my hands.

Blow after blow.

It never stops.

It's never *going* to stop.

I shake my head. These pitiful thoughts don't suit me.

I'll scrape myself back up after a minute.

There's a knock on the door.

My shoulders straighten. It's not Hills. He rarely does anything as polite as knocking before he enters.

"Come in."

Dawn steps through the door and my heart starts pounding in my ears.

I know I should keep my eyes to myself. I *know*.

But it's tough when that jumpsuit is clinging to her body like it wants nothing more than to be a second layer of her skin.

It bothered me when I saw all the men staring at her this morning. Especially that Jefferson kid. I almost wanted Dawn to go back and change into baggier overalls. Of course, telling her to change would be guaranteeing that she wouldn't. Ever. *Stubborn woman*.

The material stretches over her chest and the curve of her waist. Each sensual sway of her hips sends a bolt of electricity straight into my pants.

Great.

Now I'm going to need a cold shower.

Talk about the world's worst timing.

I clench my jaw, forcing myself to keep up a hard expression.

"What are you doing here?"

Her voice is a soft and sultry tone. "You gave the security my name?"

"Dawn."

"They just let me up here." She remains by the door as if she's too scared to come in. As if she knows what will happen to her if she gets close to me. "I thought you'd have better security, but there was no one at the receptionist desk outside your office. Hills is gone too."

"What do you want?" I growl.

I expect my harsh tone to chase her away. Any woman with common sense and self-preservation would take the hint and bolt.

But not Dawn.

No, she has to grab on with those slender hands and embrace every challenge presented to her, even if it means stepping into a cage with a viper.

Chin tipping up, she takes a step inside—then stops abruptly.

I know I'm glaring at her.

Maybe it's because I'm scared.

Maybe it's because, if I find out that Trevor really is gone, the only... *only* reason I'd be able to smile about it is that I know he wouldn't be coming back and stealing Dawn away.

That makes me an awful person.

She makes me that kind of person.

I'm not angry with her.

But I need her to believe I am. Need that like my next breath.

If she leaves, I can go back to being the heartless prince of Stinton Group. No beautiful single mom tugging on my heartstrings making me act in ways I never have before. No whisper of a conscience in my ear telling me that I could change my tone or change my perspective.

I stare her down when she doesn't move. It's always worked before. Simply making eye contact longer than socially acceptable has been known to rid me of unwanted attention. Hell, it helped me when I first got acquainted with the Stinton family.

Wasn't until I met my dad's relatives that I realized someone could stab you through the heart with a polite word and a smile. I learned to keep from flinching. Then I learned to stop blinking. To just stare and stare until the awkwardness wasn't mine alone, but it was theirs too.

Most people don't look you in the eye when they're insulting you. It forces them to consider your humanity. Forces them to consider their own pettiness.

Eventually, I learned that I could apply that tactic to business associates, to journalists, to clingy women who didn't understand that Stinton Group would always be more important to me than anything else.

I've yet to meet someone who could hold my stare.

Until Dawn Banner.

Her eyes lock on mine and she watches me with that frank, *I have nothing to hide* gaze. It's unusually direct and it's enough to rouse my anxiety, my frustration, and another emotion that I'm too smart to name.

"Look, I know we're not exactly friends." Her voice is quiet, but it isn't chilly. "And you know how much I hate Stinton Group. That much is never going to change. But..." She chews on her delectable bottom lip.

Screw it. I need to get rid of this turmoil she inspires in me.

At the very least, I won't go through it alone.

"Are you worried about me, Dawn?" I ask darkly.

Her steadfast stare begins to waver as I move around my desk, keeping my eyes on her. The fierceness in her gaze hollows out and becomes something a little uncertain.

I keep my steps slow and determined. Give her time to run if she has the good sense to. It would be better if I could chase her out.

I should have expected that I couldn't.

This woman.

This headache of a goddess in a jumper and grease on her face.

She lifts her chin higher as if her defiance is any threat to me. As if it doesn't make me want to torture her more.

My fingers are still by the time I stop in front of her.

She purses her lips. "He was Beth's father."

"Is that why you ran here as soon as you heard? Because of him?" It bothers me. Again, I war against a sense of family loyalty and propriety.

She doesn't belong to you, Max. You can't go after your niece's mother.

“Who said I ran?” Her voice lashes through the air, but it lacks its usual bite. She’s being loud. She’s not being honest.

I step a little closer. The heat of her washes over me. I can’t stop the little voice inside that’s begging me to reach out.

To touch her.

Her fingers curl into her jumper, and it’s the only indication that my nearness is affecting her. “I figured you’d be like this.”

“Like what?”

“Unfeeling.” She grits her teeth. “I knew you’d act like nothing could hurt you. Like you weren’t devastated.”

The more she talks, the more I want to sweep the door closed and back her up against my desk.

I see myself touching her over that ridiculously tight jumpsuit first. Just enough to have her bucking against my hand and screaming into my kiss. Then I’d unbutton her. Starting from the button she has at her collar. And I’d press my lips over every inch of dark skin it uncovers.

Heaven help me.

She licks her lips as if she can sense my thoughts. As if she wants it too.

My gaze on her intensifies, sliding down her face to her mouth. I can practically *feel* it against me. Soft and firm. Just like her.

My heart is thumping so hard I’m sure she can hear it. The current thickens, coiling around us like a rope binding us together.

Is she breathing?

I can’t tell. She’s just looking up at me, her beautiful, upturned face begging for my kisses. Speechless. For the first time since I’ve known her, her tongue’s not wagging at me. She’s not using that delectable mouth to bark out the most obscene things.

I lift my hand.

I graze my fingertips down the side of her cheek, barely skimming the grease stains over her cheekbones.

It’s just the barest hint of a touch.

But it’s enough to make me feel naked. To send tremors spreading through my body, teasing out an overwhelming heat that I’ve never felt before.

It’s not explosive.

Hell, if it were, I could handle it. I could find someone to give me those fireworks and get it out of my system.

No, Dawn is a simmering, steady heat.

The kind that builds gradually and by the time you've realized how trapped you are, it's too late.

"You ran out so fast you didn't bother cleaning up," I growl. Then I bring my fingers back and show her the grease stain.

Her eyes nearly pop out of her face.

She jumps back and shakes her head like she was swimming in the sea and got water in her ear.

I have the same feeling.

Foggy. Like I just travelled through those creepy forests Trevor used to tell ghost stories about.

"You could have told me earlier."

I tilt my head, watching her intently before letting my hand drop to my side. "Come somewhere with me."

"Where?"

She didn't say no. Is it because she feels sorry for me? Because she thinks Trevor is dead?

The thought that she's doing all this for my brother is a bucket of ice down my back.

I smile cruelly. Let that annoyance wash away the scalding hot attraction that had filled me only moments before.

"You'll know when we get there," I say vaguely. "Don't worry. You'll be back in time to pick up Beth from school."

Her brows hover low over her brown eyes. She seems surprised that I'd be able to think about Beth. Or maybe she's surprised I'm thinking about someone other than myself. She's made it clear what her opinion is of me.

What she doesn't know is that I do think of Beth. The form I had Chef Aimsley ask her to fill out had more than just questions about her favorite food on it. I wanted to get to know her, but I knew I wouldn't be able to given Dawn's aversion to me and everyone in Stinton Group.

"I don't know if going anywhere with you is a good idea," she croaks.

And I wonder if she's referring to the tension between us.

"We're not going to do anything illegal." Prowling over to my desk, I swipe my phone and car keys from the table. "If that's what you're worried about."

"That's the least of what I'm worried about."

I laugh under my breath and lean toward her. "Are you in?"

She instinctively scowls at me, eyes burning with the flare of a brand new challenge.

“I’ll let you drive Black Beauty.” I arch an eyebrow and dangle my keys in front of her.

She snatches the keys from me. “Don’t regret it, Stinton.”

Impossible.

When it comes to Dawn Banner, I know I’m going to do all kinds of things I’ll regret. And I’ll enjoy every second of it.

* * *

I DIRECT HER TO THE RACETRACK AND WATCH AS HER EYES DART BACK AND forth. She looks comfortable behind the wheel and while I instinctively knew that she would control Black Beauty with finesse, it was another thing entirely to see her take those back roads in style.

She drives like she does everything.

With an almost ferocious determination and a hint of insolence.

Always trying to prove something, this woman.

I had to keep reminding myself not to touch her when she threw Black Beauty into third gear. She shrieked when she felt the entire car respond. The laughter that poured from her lips reminded me that there are some things worth more than money.

Dangerous thoughts.

Dangerous woman.

What the hell is this spell she’s cast on me?

Deep down, I know playing with this fire is going to burn me.

I invite it closer anyway.

“What is this place?” Dawn asks.

I survey the excited, slightly intoxicated look in her big brown eyes that says the drive put her in a good mood and she finds me semi-tolerable in the moment.

“What do you think?” I press my fingers against hers and note the way her breath hitches as my hand brushes over her knuckles. Sliding the key out of her grip, I jut my chin at the window. “We’re at a racetrack. My friend Hadyn owns the place.”

“Racing? Is this how you handle grief?”

I catch her worried look and it almost makes me smile. That motherly side of her is coming out. Never thought it would look so cute on a woman with a temper as frightening as Dawn's, but here we are.

"Are you finally admitting that you're worried about me?"

Her expression hardens. "In your dreams, Stinton."

No, in my dreams, she would be doing something far more entertaining than just worrying and following me around.

Dammit, I'm struggling to keep myself in check and I can't pin down why it's so tough to keep Dawn on that 'don't touch' pedestal.

She climbs out of the car and walks confidently ahead of me.

This woman is irritating. Short-tempered. Outrageously stubborn. Passionate.

Stunning.

Crackling with an energy so intense that her mere presence is a distraction to every man in the room.

Focus.

How can I when she's here, flouncing ahead of me because she thinks Trevor's dead? Because, as much as she pretends that she doesn't, she cares about him?

I almost stumble over a rock and I'm glad her head is turned so I'm spared the embarrassment.

We crest the hill where the bleachers are and the track sprawls before us. There are a few cars out today. The engines make a low roar as they zip over asphalt, taking corners at warp speed.

Dawn bounces on the tips of her toes, an excited smile blooming on her dark face. The wind picks up one of her curls and she tosses it back while glancing over her shoulder at me.

Damn.

Enough.

Do not get distracted, Max.

I can't see her as anything more than Trevor's ex and the spokesmodel for the company. She's only useful to me while I can get what I want from her. I'm only dragging her around with me so I can mess with her. If she'll let her guard down because of Trevor—that's even more reason to keep myself from getting too deep.

No.

I'm not developing feelings for her.

I'm not.

Just in case, I won't touch her again for the rest of the day.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" A voice clamors from my left. "Is that Max Stinton I see?"

"In the flesh." I lift a hand.

"And who is this?" Hadyn clamors to a stop when he sees Dawn. His twinkling brown eyes give her a quick once-over that immediately sets me on edge, but he drags his eyes back to her face real quick and leaves it there.

I relax my fists.

Hadyn can live.

"Dawn Banner." She offers her hand.

He takes it and shakes. "You're..." He points at me and then at Dawn. "You're the spokeswoman for Stinton Auto. The female mechanic, right?"

"Yes, I'm female and a mechanic, but one doesn't have much to do with the other." Her smile is polite.

"Oh, right. Right." Hadyn lifts his baseball cap and sets it backward on his head. "It's just the two of you?"

"Vanya's still out on business," I tell him, since that's what he's really asking.

"Oh." He sighs. "Are you here to play?"

Dawn shoots me a look of confusion.

"Stinton?" Hadyn arches an eyebrow.

I nod. "I'm not here to race. Just to drive."

"I'm game," Dawn says. "If you do want to race."

I shake my head at her. "Who invited you?"

"You did." She flings back. "When you brought me here."

"The bleachers are comfy." I point there. "Wait until I'm done."

"You can't possibly expect me to sit this out, do you?"

Hadyn glances between the two of us, a slow smile spreading on his lips. Then he focuses on Dawn. "Do you drive?"

"I know a thing or two."

"This is different than driving a regular car, Banner."

Her brows knit together. "I'm aware, Stinton. If you need a lesson, I'm more than capable of giving you one."

A thrill shoots down my spine. What has she done to me?

“Just to be safe, I’d prefer if someone were in the car with you,” Hadyn says.

“Perfect.” She gives him an up and down look. “You’ll do.”

The flush that spreads over Hadyn’s face tells me this wasn’t part of the plan.

“Shouldn’t you and Stinton be on the same team? You arrived together after all.”

Dawn folds her arms over her chest and stares at me. “No, I’d prefer to kick his butt.”

My lips twitch.

Her eyes shift to Hadyn again. “You mind if I drive?”

“Uh... no.”

“Good. Where can I change?”

Hadyn points wordlessly and Dawn glides across the walkway, heading inside where the receptionist, lounge, and changing rooms are located.

The moment she’s gone, Hadyn stalks toward me and grips my upper arm. “Since when did you bring women here?”

“Is she a woman?”

“Cut the crap, Stinton. From the eyes you’re giving her, you’re well aware that she is.”

I turn away. “What are you still doing at the tracks? Shouldn’t you be at the company?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Fine. Don’t tell me.” I walk off.

He follows me, an annoying grin on his face. “I’m at the track because, unlike some people, I believe in a healthy work-life balance.”

“Meaning you hand everything over to your assistant so you can goof off?”

“Is that why you’re running around with the spokesmodel for Stinton Auto? Because you like being hands-on with company matters?” His voice crackles with meaning.

I stiffen. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking, oh mighty heir of Stinton Group?”

I open my mouth and then snap it shut. I can’t tell Hadyn about Trevor and Dawn’s relationship. “I don’t want to know what’s in that filthy mind of yours.”

Hadyn rubs his jaw. "Nothing filthy about it. She's beautiful. That's a fact."

"What?"

"The spokesmodel. Dawn. She's stunning."

I frown. "Watch it, Hadyn."

"What? I'm not saying I'm into her. She's kind of small for my taste. You know I prefer my women... bigger."

I roll my eyes. "Just suit up and stop talking nonsense."

"I'm happy for you."

I flip him off and stalk into the lounge, fighting to stay calm.

Hadyn can turn cold and deadly when he's at work, but when he's with the people he's comfortable with, this goofball side comes out to play. I know he's just trying to get a rise out of me, but I still want to smack him for talking about Dawn.

With a shake of my head, I disappear into the men's changing room. My racing suit is hanging in my locker where it always is. Vanya gave both Hadyn and I personalized suits for Christmas. My mother's name is on the back of each of our over-alls. Almost made me shed a tear when I saw it.

There's a knock on the door while I'm changing. "Stinton, what's taking so long?"

"I'm almost out," I growl.

Hadyn laughs. "Don't tell me the suit can't fit anymore. I told you to lay off the raisin-nut cookies."

"Raisin nut?" Dawn's silky voice follows on the heels of Hadyn's loud laughter.

"Disgusting, right? I've been telling him and Vanya that fruit shouldn't be in cookies, but they'd rather keep living in misery."

Dawn's laughter has me scrambling with the rest of my suit so I can throw the door open.

And she's there.

Sunshine in her smile. Eyes gleaming. Shoulders shaking.

The racing suit is far too big for her, but she wears it with a confidence born from wearing too-big over-alls all of her career. The sharp white of the fabric sets off the darkness of her skin beautifully.

If I were in my right mind, I would be thinking about Stinton Auto and arranging a photoshoot on the racetrack. She looks amazing in that suit and the rest of the world would think so too.

If I were in my right mind, I'd be thinking about how to maximize my relationship with Hadyn to form a partnership between his track and Stinton Auto. Make Dawn the face of that too. Capitalize on her relatability.

But instead of business, I'm stuck thinking how to make her smile again.

She catches me staring at her and the grin wobbles and then goes out. I feel the absence of it like a lone candle at midnight getting snuffed by the wind.

Her fingers tighten around the helmet tucked into her side. "I won't go easy on you because of everything that's happening."

"What's happening?" Hadyn glances at me.

I ignore the question. Hadyn will start asking questions if Dawn talks about Trevor's 'death' and I don't want to answer those questions. Not yet.

"Just get ready to eat my dust, Banner." I step in front of her.

Her lips curl up. She tilts her head back to stare at me. "I've been itching to put you in your place, Stinton. Keep talking smack and I won't be nice about it."

"Try your best."

"It'll be my pleasure."

Hadyn glances at us with a confused look. "What's... going on?"

I move away from Dawn before the urge to touch her gets any stronger. "Keep her safe, Hadyn."

Dawn's eyebrows hike.

"Stinton Group's invested a lot in her. I'd hate to see all that money go down the toilet." My eyes cut into Dawn. "She can't promote us from a hospital bed."

Her lips curl into a scowl, just like I knew they would.

I would laugh if there wasn't a ball of emotion blocking my throat.

She scoffs. "Enough talk, Stinton. Let's settle this on the track."

Hadyn gives me a *what's up with you* look as he passes me by and follows Dawn to the cars. I duck my head to hide my grin and trot after them.

The race is neck-and-neck. It's no surprise that Dawn is nimble behind the wheel, but she's never practiced on this track before. I edge across the finish line seconds before she does.

I climb out at the annex, prepared to rub my victory in Dawn's face and maybe watch her eyes get all hot and glaring again. But the face I see

waiting at the winner's circle isn't Dawn's. It's Hills.

"I knew you'd be here," he says gravely.

My adrenaline turns into bubbles and disappears with the wind. "What's wrong?" I ask, slightly out of breath.

He shakes his head. "Something's happened."

As I watch Hills's somber expression, I'm reminded of why I never take my eyes off Stinton Group. Dawn Banner is a distraction. A beautiful distraction, sure. But it's time to get myself back to the real world.

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CHAPTER 9

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TRAIN TRACK BLUES

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DAWN

I HOPE Max Stinton already has his casket picked out—because I’m sending him to his grave early.

“Where are you going?” I yell at his back as he takes off at a brisk pace behind Hills.

“Stay home and stay off the internet,” Max barks at me.

“What?”

“Hady, take her home!” Max growls.

“What’s going on?” I might as well be yelling at a statue because Max charges up the hill without even a glance of acknowledgement. And damn these short legs of mine that can’t catch up to him.

His car chirps when he presses the alarm fob. He slides smoothly into the front seat.

What the heck is going on?

“Hey!” I scramble to catch up.

Max starts the car, his phone pressed to his ear. I’m like a mosquito outside his windshield, mildly annoying but overall insignificant.

Ooh.

His dismissiveness ticks me off.

I glance around for a rock I can throw at his head.

None are around. Unfortunately.

Sweat runs down my cheek. The race car was hot and the helmet did my hair no favors. My afro’s starting to frizz and form a cloud of thick curls around my face.

I stare at Max through the window, waiting for him to wind down the glass and at least explain what the heck is going on. Confusion clamps around my shoulders when he doesn’t. It morphs into fury when he intentionally and ruthlessly pretends I’m not there.

This egotistical maniac.

My mood sours. It’s definitely not helping that he beat me in the race, forcing me to eat my words about being better than him behind the wheel.

Sure, he won fair and square.

But isn't it a little too rude to run off after taking me to the middle of nowhere so he can drive around instead of mourn his brother's death like a normal person?

Some of this is my fault. I'm aware of that. I dropped everything and hurried all the way to his office when I heard Trevor was dead because...

Because...

What am I doing right *now*?

I give the plume of dust a stink eye when I see Hills's truck take off behind Max's luxury vehicle. In a second, they're both tearing out of the parking lot and taking off for the hills.

Gone.

He really ditched me in the middle of nowhere.

That jerkwad. That brainfart. That obnoxious, ginormous prick.

Yes, I've definitely crossed the point of no return when I'm inventing stupid and new ways to paint him in my wrath, but I can't stop myself from dropping to his level. He makes me want to be immature and petty.

Shoes crunch behind me and I spin. Hadyn shucks his helmet off and shakes his head. His shiny hair falls around his broad forehead in perfect strands as if he's shooting a shampoo commercial.

There's no denying how gorgeous Hadyn is with his sculpted jaw and glittering chocolate eyes that could compete with flaming supernovas. There's no denying how that smile of his could melt a woman like a candle.

If I weren't so ticked off about Max, maybe I would have found myself flattered by the way the flashy playboy prince looks at me.

Unfortunately, Max has struck again and I can think of nothing else but him.

The grumpasourus rex.

Am I still making up stupid names for him that even my seven-year-old would be ashamed of?

Yes, yes I am.

Do I care?

I certainly do not.

A sick part of me wants to tell Hadyn to follow Max's car. Just so I can see what the fuss is about and let my displeasure be known in person. Would that anger him?

Oh, I hope so.

Just the thought of ticking him off makes my insides curl with delight.

My obsession with beating Max Stinton down to size is almost twisted.
Everything he does annoys me.

For what reason, I don't even *know*.

"Guess we should change off now." Hadyn gestures to the front door of the lounge.

I turn in the opposite direction and stare at the parking lot.

Is something really wrong?

As my adrenaline fades, the doubts flood in.

Max just lost his brother. What if his father collapsed in a fit of shock after hearing the news? What if Trevor died, not of natural causes but of more sinister means, and the police want to investigate his death?

Is Max okay?

The thought tiptoes into my mind and the pulsing concern troubles me.

I'm not feeling sorry for Max.

I wouldn't ever do that. It'd be like a hostage feeling sorry for her kidnapper.

Stockholm Syndrome is not cute.

But...

And, I mean, this is a big *but*, he's going through a shocking family ordeal.

I don't *want* to let him off the hook, but I will.

This once.

Releasing a deep breath, I turn to Hadyn. "I don't know what's going on, but I don't want to put you out. I'll catch a cab."

"Oh no, Ms. Banner."

"Call me Dawn."

"Dawn." He nods. "Max asked me to take you home."

"Max Stinton doesn't control me."

"I'd like to keep my head on my body and it won't stay there if he finds out I let you walk." Hadyn gestures to me. "I'm not a creep. Pinky swear."

I laugh.

"Besides, it'll give me a chance to have a chat with you."

"Uh-oh. A chat about what?"

He smiles secretly and juts his chin at the lounge, an eyebrow slightly raised.

In the changing room, I strip out of the racing suit and shimmy into the jumpsuit, closing the buttons in swift movements. When I emerge, Hadyn is

waiting for me. He leads me to the parking lot where an impressive vintage car is gleaming in the sunshine.

I can't hide my admiration and he notices. "Pretty, right?"

I'll be honest. I don't care about money as much as these rich folks, but I wouldn't mind being able to afford a beauty like this one day.

"You have a name for her too?" I ask.

"Too?" He scratches his chin. Then he brightens. "Oh, you're talking about Black Beauty?"

"Yup." I inspect the convertible. She must be powerful under the hood. Is it a V8 engine? My eyes remain on the car and my voice stays hollow in reverence. "I figured naming cars is a rich people thing."

"No, I think that's a Max thing." He laughs. The sound is thick and genuine. But there's something beneath it too. Steel. Like a beautiful garden covering a nuclear bunker.

A sharpness lurks at the edge of his carefree nature, and it tells me why he and Max can get along. Hadyn might *appear* to be an irresponsible heir, but his flaming brown eyes tell me that it's a mask he wears. He could be just as cold and decisive as Stinton once he's holding court.

I climb into the car and whistle at the restored interior. Whoever brought this baby back to life made sure to use the same materials as the original manufacturer. There's an attention to detail that hints at more of Hadyn's serious personality. People who care about being flashy and throwing their wealth around wouldn't invest in restoring the car with original materials. Most folks wouldn't be able to tell the difference at first glance, but I can.

And it tells me a lot about him.

My respect for Max's friend goes up a couple more meters.

Hadyn gives me an expectant look.

At first, I wonder if he's flirting with me. Then I realize I don't have my seatbelt on.

"Sorry." I hurry to fasten it in place.

"No problem." He pulls on the stick shift. "You're admiring my baby. You can take all the time you want."

"It's gorgeous. You have impeccable taste."

"I like a woman who appreciates the finer things in life."

"I don't think that label applies to me."

"No?"

"All I know is cars."

“That was more than enough to get Max’s attention.”

I squirm. Somehow, I knew Hadyn would try to fish around my relationship with Stinton. As if there *is* a relationship.

Which there isn’t.

Max Stinton is my boss.

My evil overlord.

He’s like that sea witch in *The Little Mermaid* who took Ariel’s voice in exchange for her legs.

The other end of a bad deal.

Nothing more.

Not even if he makes me shiver when his laser-focused eyes land on my lips for a few breathless seconds.

Not even if his deep and gritty voice makes my heart vibrate like guitar strings—whether he’s growling at me or returning my barbed insults with his own.

Not even if he looks like a descendant of a tall and terrifying Viking with his hard stares and sharp looks that not even his fancy suits and expensive watches can soften.

He drives me insane.

He makes me contemplate murder every three seconds.

He gets under my skin.

... so why is Hadyn looking at me like he knows something I don’t?

It’s annoying.

He’s annoying.

No wonder he and Max get along.

A smile curls his lips when he focuses on the road again. “You think that’s all Max sees when he looks at you? Business?”

“It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

“What’s obvious?”

“That he couldn’t care less about people. We’re not human beings to him. We’re just dollar signs and strings he can pull for his own notorious purposes.”

Hadyn throws his head back and laughs. “Okay, I see it now.”

“What?”

“Another reason he’s so intrigued with you. Max turns into putty around brutally honest women.”

I squirm. “It’s not like that.”

“I know exactly what it’s like. You and Max are the only people who seem completely clueless.”

My eyebrows cinch together. “Look, if you knew the full story, you wouldn’t be so smug.”

“And if you knew Max...” He shakes his head. “He doesn’t waste his time doing things he doesn’t want to do.”

“That much you don’t have to tell me.” I’ve seen Max Stinton’s legendary stubbornness with my own eyes. Trying to get him to change his mind is like pushing against a mountain. A total waste of time.

“He loves Stinton Group.” Hadyn’s eyebrows crash low over his sultry brown eyes. “Like an obsessive kind of love that worries me and Vanya. But it’s what makes him happy, so we don’t interfere. Recently, it’s gotten worse. He works non-stop because he doesn’t know how to do anything else. It’s normal for him to lock himself in his office and not leave for weeks.”

I try to picture a disgusting Max Stinton who hasn’t showered and shaved in days. I wait to be repulsed by it, but my stupid imagination can’t even function right.

Instead of seeing a bum with food stuck in his beard and eyes dark with bags, I see a rumpled and disheveled Max Stinton with a glorious five o’clock shadow, sexy arms on display as he rolls the sleeve of his shirt back to reveal manly veins snaking down to his fingers.

“Even when he’s not in the office, he’s always on Stinton Group business.” Hadyn glances in his rearview mirror. “He sleeps, eats and breathes Stinton Group. But that racetrack... it’s the one place that has nothing to do with Stinton Group. It’s the one place Max can detach and relax and forget all the responsibilities crushing him. It’s personal. It’s sacred. He doesn’t bring Stinton Group there. He doesn’t bring *anyone* he associates with Stinton Group there.”

I swallow hard. “So what?”

“So you’re not just business.” Hadyn arches an eyebrow. “If you were, I guarantee you wouldn’t have set foot on that track today.”

Pressing my cool palms against my overheated cheeks, I force myself to remain objective. Hadyn might not be as cold as Max, but he’s obviously trying to mess with me.

What’s up with these rich guys and terrorizing normal people?

“I don’t know what point you’re trying to make, but I’ve never met the Max that you’re talking about. Around me he’s...”

“Rude? Obnoxious? Demanding?”

“Yes to all the above.”

“The tough guy routine is a total act. He pretends like he never breaks down.” Hadyn rolls his eyes. “Or like he never cares. But that’s not true. He’s just...”

“Just what?” I cross my arms over my chest, waiting to see how he’ll defend Max’s obnoxious habits.

Hadyn digs his fingers into the steering wheel. “He needed something to distract him when his mom died. He thought Stinton Group was all he had, so he gave all of himself to it. The thing with Max is... he throws a hundred and ten percent into the things he cares about. There’s no in-between for him. And the state he was in after she passed... it kind of just ballooned into this hard-core, ‘no one else can get close to me’ routine.”

His words rub softly against my utter distaste for Max Stinton.

It leaves me feeling oddly unbalanced.

Is there a human heart beating under all that evil?

No. There can’t be.

It’s not hard to tell that Hadyn loves Max like a brother. Even if Max did something to disgruntle him, Hadyn is the type who could brush it off. And he’s rich enough that Max can’t push him around by dangling his most precious things as bait.

This is an obviously biased opinion.

I will ignore the pain I feel when I think about Max Stinton losing his mom.

I will not relate that pain to the way my world collapsed when I lost my dad.

Max and I are not the same.

He is not deserving of my sympathy.

I cross my legs and tuck my hair behind my ear. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but there’s not a single part of me that wants to understand Max Stinton. All we have is an employer-employee relationship.” *That won’t last long if I have anything to say about it.* “I don’t know why he brought me to the racetrack today, but I can assure you it’s not some big sign that he considers me as someone he respects. In fact, just yesterday—”

My phone rings, sparing me from laying out all Max Stinton's flaws one-by-one like a Power Point presentation on overbearing, cold-hearted CEOs.

I bend low and rummage through my purse for my phone. My movements are urgent and firm.

I used to be the kind of person who'd ignore phone calls, especially when I was working on a car. Once, I missed a call from Beth's daycare and I swore that would never happen to me again.

"Excuse me," I tell Hadyn, gesturing to the phone.

He nods and waits for me to accept the call.

I put the device to my ear. "Sunny."

"Dawn, are you okay? Are you safe?"

"Of course I'm okay." I glance at Hadyn. He's big and broad-shouldered, but he doesn't seem like a threat. Unless he's one of those gorgeous, Ted-Bundy serial killers. "I'm with a friend."

"Oh thank *God*."

"Why? What happened?" I straighten. "Is it Beth?"

"Dawn, you're all over the internet."

I flop back into my seat and groan. "I know."

I'm banning cell phones at breakfast from now on. I do not want my seven-year-old looking me up on social media first thing in the morning. That can't be healthy.

"You do?" Sunny hisses. "How are you so calm?"

"Well, I kind of signed up for this." I blow out a breath. "I mean, I didn't expect people to act like female mechanics are some kind of endangered unicorn species, but I guess I'm glad that I can inspire someone like me. It makes all the fuss worth it."

Hadyn smiles.

I smile back.

"No, Dawn. This isn't the inspirational, 'yay women' kind of buzz. This is... this is something else entirely."

"What are you talking about?" I stiffen, my shoulders slowly hiking to my ears.

Did someone leave a bad comment? I knew naysayers would eventually crawl out of the woodworks to yell about how a woman's place is in the kitchen. The internet is a breeding ground for people who want to vent their frustrations with their own lives by tearing others down. If men are brave

enough to be rude to my face, behind the anonymity of a computer screen, they can turn especially vicious.

Doesn't matter.

As long as no one threatens my daughter, I can survive anything.

"Girl..." Sunny breathes slowly.

I hear a note of gravity in her voice. It sounds like this call is about more than a few keyboard warriors whining about a woman doing auto repair.

She gasps. "Haven't you seen Mila DuBois's video?"

"Mila?" The name trips over my tongue, tickling my brain with a familiarity that I can't quite reach. Then it hits me. "Oh, the celebrity we did work for today. What about her?"

"She..." Sunny seems to stammer over her own words. "How do you not know? It's spreading like wildfire."

"I've been, uh, busy this afternoon." Busy racing a cold-hearted ice king with a penchant for scowls and brash one-liners. "What did Mila say?"

"I'll send you the video." She pauses. "Maybe I shouldn't."

"Sunny."

"I'll do it, but I wouldn't recommend reading the comments, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks." My heart is skittering.

What's the big deal?

Shaking slightly, I click on the link that Sunny shared.

"What's going on?" Hadyn asks.

"I don't know. Apparently, something happened with Mila Dubois."

"The celebrity?"

I nod and focus on the video of the starlet with airbrushed cheekbones and pouty red lips.

Mila stares into the camera. Her voice is high and shrill. "*Hey, choo-gums.*" She bats crazy-long eyelashes that look like chia pets stuck to her face. "*Like, I just had to come on here and tell you guys what happened today.*"

A regular social media story time. So far, so good.

"*We were on set, right,*" she smacks her lips, "*and I'd just gotten my car back from the auto shop. I thought my Little Cherry, that's what I call my convertible, I thought she would be all better, you know? Because I was hearing so many good things about that female mechanic girl and I thought,*" she lifts a pale hand, showing off the delicate anchor tattoo on her

wrist, “girl power, you know?” Her chuckle is so squishy and plastic that it could probably work as someone’s butt implant. *“But here’s the thing guys, Little Cherry gave the same problems when she came back from the shop. She shut down right in the middle of a music video shoot. You’ll never guess where...”*

My heart stalls in my chest.

Shut down?

“As it was going over a train track. I’m not even lying, you guys.” She stretches out the ‘guys’ so it sounds like a hiss. *“It gave the same problem and then it shut down. Right as a train was coming. So everyone was hurrying to get it out of the way before the train passed. They were trying to push it so the train didn’t... you know. But they couldn’t get it all the way across.”* She twirls her hair around her fingers. Her eyes are wide and she seems to be leaning into her story because her expressions are becoming more and more exaggerated. *“I’m not even kidding, you guys. There’s, like, footage and everything. They had to run away from Little Cherry when the train came barreling towards it. Which is fine, you know? I wouldn’t want anyone to die or whatever.”*

My chest gets tighter and tighter.

I can’t even find her speech funny anymore.

All I can see is that moment in the shop when I told the chief mechanic the transmission wasn’t the problem.

“Yeah, so, I’ll let the footage show you what happened next.” Mila holds up a phone to the camera. Footage of a train crashing into the bumper end of her car fills me with horror. I cover my mouth and lurch back. On the screen, the rear end of her car crumples like an accordion and then goes flying in a circle, nearly mowing down the video equipment set up around it.

“I don’t know what went wrong. We paid for this expensive new car part. It cost, like, thousands of dollars. But I wasn’t cheap about it. I was, like, if it’ll make my car work better, then whatever. But still.” She shakes her head sadly. *“They told me this mechanic was legit, but I’m starting to wonder, you know? Because look at my baby? She was fine this morning and now she’s all busted and bruised.”* Mila conjures tears on command. They shimmer in her pretty blue eyes and make her look more pitiful than a puppy left out in the rain. *“And I’m just so disappointed because all I wanted was for my car to work properly. They didn’t even do that.”* The

tears start falling faster. *"I'm sorry. I don't think I can talk about this anymore. I'm so upset."* Mila grabs her phone and ends the video abruptly.

"Well that was dramatic," Hadyn mumbles.

A cold shiver starts at the base of my neck and travels down to my stomach. "Hadyn, take me to the garage."

"Max asked me to take you home." He glances at my phone. "And I'm starting to see why. Mila Dubois just turned you into a hot topic. The auto shop will be crawling with tabloids—"

"I don't care."

"But—"

"I told you. Max doesn't control me and the tabloids don't bother me. Now, either you take me there, or I jump out of this car and take my chances hitchhiking."

Hadyn studies my face and probably decides that I'm good for the threat because he slams on the brakes and does a U-turn.

I chew on my bottom lip as I replay the footage of the video again. Mila said her car was displaying the same symptoms. It proves that I was right about the transmission. Changing that part didn't actually fix the conditions that caused the car to shut down.

Anger burns bright and hot in my veins. What if someone had gotten hurt? What if one of the crew members tripped while pushing the broken-down car off the railroad tracks and the train flattened someone's son or daughter like a pancake?

I don't know who I should direct this anger to—the chief mechanic who dismissed my words without hesitation or the boss who put that mechanic in charge of the repair in the first place.

Don't play the blame game, Dawn. You have to solve the problem first.

My phone vibrates.

SUNNY: Is it safe to go home? Do you want to hide out in the farmhouse?

ME: I'm okay. I'm going to the auto shop to see what I can do.

SUNNY: We'll take care of Beth until you sort this out.

A flood of gratitude nearly drowns me. Sunny and Darrel have been such steady and consistent friends. It almost feels like my daughter's connection with Bailey allowed me to stumble into a haven of my own.

SUNNY: She can sleep over if she needs to.

SUNNY: Also, Darrel asked if you want us to hire lawyers.

ME: Lawyers?

What would I need lawyers for?

SUNNY: To sue the people making mean comments. Alistair's got a pack of bloodthirsty ones on speed-dial.

Hadyn clears his throat. "Now might not be the right time to bring this up, but Max is calling." He nods to his phone that's sitting in a cradle near his dashboard. "He's probably checking on you."

"Don't answer," I mumble distractedly as I scroll to the comments under the video.

What I see nearly steals the breath from my lungs.

Let's cut the brakes on her car and see if she likes that.

Is she even a real mechanic?

Whore.

I knew this was a hoax. Stinton Group pulled the wool on all of us.

This is why I don't trust women to do a man's job.

I'm so disappointed. I was really rooting for her.

You think she tried to kill Mila Dubois on purpose?

Ouch.

I've never had this kind of animosity pointed at me before. These words are like miniature bombs, exploding all over my face.

Sure, I've fought off people's bad opinions, but I've won most of them over with my abilities, if not my tenacity. This is different. This is crueler. This is unfair.

"What are you reading?" Hadyn asks intently.

I dig my fingers into the phone as I wrestle with my emotions.

Being the strong one all the time sucks.

It means I can't break out into tears when I feel like it.

"I guess you don't know, but people on the internet can be horrible." He glances at me. "Vanya's a plus-sized supermodel. I can't tell you the number of times people have left nasty comments under her pictures. It's disgusting. They really say anything about someone they don't even know."

"I don't need your pep talk. I'm fine."

"Dawn."

"I'm *fine*." I tuck my heartbreak, my fear and the quiet, defensive fury deep inside.

My fingers relax and slide away from the phone.

Fix it first.

I have to put it back together before I can defend myself.

My phone starts ringing.

It's Stinton.

I reject it right away.

Hadyn notices and frowns at me. "You know you just prodded a bull, right? He's not going to let up until he hears that you're fine and you're away from this mess."

"What Max Stinton does has nothing to do with me."

"He's probably in a rage about this."

"Of course he is. People are attacking Stinton Group again."

Hadyn sighs as if he's completely given up on me.

I don't care.

I'm already rotating through my solutions.

First things first, I have to find a way to get that car back into my shop.

Mila Dubois just spilled hater-aide all over my professional career, but the world won't care that I told Henry he was on the wrong track.

Mila didn't call out Henry.

She called *me* out.

And since I'm the face of Stinton Auto, everyone's disappointed.

It can't end this way.

I have to fight back.

I'll prove what I can really do.

Hadyn slows the car in front of the auto shop, and I notice the photographers crowded around the garage. Clint and the other mechanics are out there, trying to get them to leave.

Guilt slams me hard in the gut. Most of these guys are hardworking men who just want to bring home a steady paycheck for their families. They didn't sign up for this circus. They didn't ask for cameras shoved into their faces, didn't ask for their lives to be held up to microscopes because of me.

Regret pins me to my seat.

Since I was young, I hated this idea that I was 'special'. I didn't want to be treated differently because I'm a woman who loves fixing cars. I wanted men to shrug when they saw me. I wanted customers to take me at my word. To nod and pretend it's no big deal that I know about carburetors and throttle position sensors.

But I compromised my values. Instead of holding fast to who I am and what I believe, I went down this rabbit hole of propping myself up in the

eye of the public.

Now Clint is getting dragged into this mess. All my co-workers are trying to stop reporters from barging into the garage. And the girls who want to be mechanics are going to face another setback because men will be thinking about this scandal when they see a female trying to be taken seriously in the auto-repair world.

Don't think about it, Dawn. You can't break down now.

I swallow the tears back and reach for the car handle.

Hadyn frowns. "Dawn, I really don't suggest you do this. I've seen how the paps can be. They're like sharks smelling blood even with celebrities who have clout. Imagine how cut-throat they'll be with a normal person."

I pull the door open.

"Let me take you home." Hadyn's voice is dropping to a no-nonsense tone. I bet it's the kind he uses at work on his subordinates. Or when he's frustrated about something and he's tired of being polite. He's not asking anymore. And, I bet if he knew me better, he'd try to physically hold me back.

"No."

"Dawn."

I swear, I see the moment he considers grabbing me. Not sure if he'd be doing it for Stinton's sake or for mine.

I slide out of his car and sling my purse higher on my shoulder. "Thank you for the ride. And for being my co-driver during the race today. Even though we didn't win, it was fun."

His brown eyes implore me to stay and let someone else handle this. Let a *man* handle this. Let Stinton handle this.

I slam the door and face the reporters.

They haven't seen me yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Those cameras—if I get recorded, will they vilify me more? Will they make me out to be someone who lied about my abilities? Someone who would prey on the dreams of little girls who want to work in a field that doesn't welcome them? Would they call me a hypocrite?

It doesn't matter, Dawn. Keep walking.

I take one step in front of the other.

Then another.

Then another.

I feel hollowed out.

I'm afraid to keep pushing, but do I have any other choice than to be strong?

"There she is!" A cameraman swerves toward me.

The other journalists jump and focus on me, noticing my slow march up to the garage doors. The mob turns as one, shifting in my direction.

For a moment, no one moves. Then, like an arrow let loose, they shoot toward me, eyes glittering with scandal and lips shooting out questions that collide in a cacophony of noise.

I brace myself, waiting for them to surround me, when something flutters above my head. It's a jacket. Someone pulls it down to cover my face. At the same time, a hand wraps around mine.

Shocked, I jolt forward.

Then slowly, I glance up and into Max Stinton's furious face.

He grunts. "Just keep walking, Dawn. I've got you."

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CHAPTER 10

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GARAGE DATE

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MAX

I HAVE to give it to Dawn Banner.

She's the only woman who can drive me to both fury and soul-crushing anxiety in equal parts.

Especially when she does stupid things like try to sacrifice herself to a mob of blood-thirsty tabloid reporters who feast on the carcasses of their news subjects.

I'd like to know why she ignored my calls and intentionally disobeyed my orders to *go home* after the racetrack. And I'll make sure I string Hadyn by the toes for not doing a better job of keeping her away from this mess.

But first, I have to get her to the car without being trampled and getting a microphone stuck down her throat.

"This way," I hiss, dragging her across the lawn of the garage.

The journalists are practically breathing down our necks. I can hear their sneakers pounding the grass. Can practically smell the desperation to spin this scoop in the most scandalous way. As long as they can suck out all the profits from it, they don't care about the shambles they leave behind.

Yeah, I've seen what they've done to people like Vanya.

And I'll detonate all over this blasted city before they do the same thing to Dawn.

Black Beauty is waiting on the street. Sunlight glints over the sleek black paint job and the gleaming silver rims.

"Hurry!" I growl into Dawn's ear. Quickening my speed, I drag her along. Jefferson stretches his body to the back of the car and pries the door open.

I half-throw, half-prod Dawn into the backseat and dive behind her. She lets out a gasp of—surprise? Pain? I don't know and I don't have time to check because cameras are getting flung at the windows.

"The hell are you waiting for?" I bark at Jefferson. "Drive. Now."

He slams his foot on the gas pedal and the reporters lurch back, narrowly avoiding getting their toes crushed. The car bounces roughly as Jefferson speeds over the sidewalk and crashes into the street.

I grab Dawn and hold her next to me to keep her from smacking her head into the window. She fits. Damn. She fits like a glove against me and the moment she pushes me away and flees my side, it leaves a hollow ache in my chest.

Dawn scoots away. Turns. Flings me a dirty glare. Her hair's billowing into a voluminous afro and the tight curls tremble in the wind. She looks like an ancient warrior about to skewer me at the end of a harpoon.

She sticks a crooked finger in my face. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Me?" I bark at her. "I'm supposed to be asking that question."

"Excuse me?" Her jaw drops.

"What were you planning on saying to the reporters, Dawn? Do you have any idea how brutal they can be? You're the face of Stinton Auto. You're not allowed to say anything we don't approve first."

"That's where you're wrong. I can say what I want. Secondly, I wasn't going to say anything incriminating to the reporters. I was just going to defend myself."

"You think that's better?" I snap. "Without a plan, they would have chewed you up and spit out your bones."

"Is that why you came crashing into the scene like you were filming some kind of action movie?"

"I had a feeling you'd do something stupid, so I had Jefferson turn the car around and take me to the auto shop instead. And it was a good thing I did." My nostrils flare and my voice goes quiet. I don't yell when I'm pissed off. My voice gets tighter and tighter like someone's squeezing the life out of it.

Jefferson nods. "It's true. He was worried."

Dawn scoffs. "Worried my—"

Digging my fingers into my palm, I spit, "What exactly were you trying to prove by heading to the auto shop when I *told* you to go home?"

"You can *tell* me anything you want. I am not obligated to listen."

This infuriating, obstinate woman. I grit my teeth. My heart is rushing through my ears. "The contract—"

"Screw your stupid contract." Her eyes are on fire and if there was any leaking gas in this car, it would probably cause an explosion. "Do you think I care that Mila Dubois is bad-mouthing Stinton Group? I don't. I know you and your family's army of crooked lawyers can make any little problem go

away.” She slams her hand against her chest. “This is about me. This is about *my* reputation as a mechanic. My name is attached to that incident at the train track.”

“We have people on it.”

“I don’t care about your people.” She scowls at me. Gets right up into my face. “Someone could have *died* today. They could have *died*, Stinton. That would have been on my head.”

“Dawn.”

“Turn the car around. I’m going back.”

“Like hell you are,” I grind out.

She surges forward. “Jefferson.” Clamping dark fingers into the head rest, Dawn commands, “Stop the car this instant.”

Jefferson gives me a nervous look in the rearview mirror. “Boss?”

“We’re taking her home.”

“Max!” Dawn whips her head around and glares at me. Those eyes are spitting daggers, but I’m made of steel and all those spears can do is bounce off my chest.

I turn away from her.

She growls at me. “The moment I’m on my own, I’m going back there.”

“Like bloody hell you will.”

“Try and stop me.”

“You think I won’t?” I stare her down.

Her nostrils flare and a vein pops up in her delicate neck. “What do you expect me to do, huh? Twiddle my thumbs until Stinton Group gives me the okay to defend myself? What if that okay never comes? How are you going to shut me up then?”

“You sit down and wait. That’s an order.”

Her eyes nearly bug.

Wrong choice of words, but it’s too late.

She lets out an exasperated breath. “As much as you consider me your property, I’m not, Max. I make my own decisions and there’s only so much you can do to control me.”

“We’re handling it.”

“What does that mean?” she hisses.

I run a frustrated hand through my hair. “Dammit, Dawn. It means we’re working on it. The PR team have been alerted. We’re in negotiations with Mila’s agency to arrange a settlement—”

“That’s not enough.” Dawn flounces into her seat, her arms folded across her chest and her gaze burrowing into the windshield. “I want to fix the car.”

“They’re not asking for that. All they want is compensation. If we can settle this quietly, then the public will eventually turn to some new thing to be outraged over—”

“I need to fix that car, Max,” she insists.

I rub the bridge of my nose. “That stubbornness of yours, do you think anyone’s going to applaud you for it? Do you think your sincerity matters to the world? All they want is a villain. No, all they want is a hero they can turn into a villain and burn in front of the nation. We’re in damage control mode now. Fixing the car won’t help anything. We pay Mila Dubois to take down the video and we pay for her to replace the car. That’ll shut them up.”

“That’s what you Stintons default to, isn’t it? Just throw money at the problem and that’ll be enough to make it go away. Here’s where it falls apart, Max. You can only bury the truth for so long. Eventually, no one will dare to trust a company that’s so afraid of being transparent and accountable.” She shakes her head. “You made me the face of Stinton Auto, but you didn’t trust me to actually fix Mila’s car. Now, I’m the one getting rotten tomatoes thrown in my face, but you don’t trust me to fix things my way. You don’t trust anyone, and that makes it impossible to trust you back.”

I chew on my bottom lip.

Holy hell.

Too many feelings tear through me.

Anger, fear, frustration that she’ll get hurt if she keeps flinging her heart down and staking her life on something we can solve with money and lawyers.

Admiration, because there’s no denying this woman practically glows with passion and purpose.

Unease, wondering if the reason I want to give in to her is because she has a point or because it’s Dawn.

And the oddest feeling, that none of it matters if I can’t protect her.

“Get me the car, Max.” Her voice gets softer as if she can see that I’m thinking about it. “Please.”

I clench my jaw and pry my eyes off her. Grabbing my pen from the lapel of my jacket, I flick it around in my fingers and force myself to

consider her suggestion—not because she’s the woman who drives me insane, but because she’s the mechanic who should have been in charge of this repair in the first place.

What if I do it her way and build on top of it so Stinton Group and Dawn suffer the least amount of damage? Can I spin this in a way that we bank on the negative press by turning it on its head?

I glance at Dawn’s upturned face. Her eyes are looking earnestly into mine.

It feels like an anvil slams on my shoulders when I nod. “Fine, but you do it my way.”

“Deal.”

“I mean it. We do this, it has to be together. And you stay away from the auto shop until I give you the okay.”

“How long will that take?”

I scowl at her.

She narrows her eyes but backs off. “Fine.” Dawn stretches her hand out to me. “Let’s shake on it.”

I frown. “That’s unnecessary.”

She grabs my hand and her slender fingers wrap around mine. Her hands are clean, but there’s a distinct stain around her nails that hints of a constant contact with oil and engine fluid. There are callouses too. I don’t think I’ve ever felt callouses on a woman’s hand before. Most of the women in my circle wouldn’t be caught dead with them.

Dawn gives my hand a hard and firm shake. It tells me more things about her.

That she’d prefer to come off as firm and aggressive than show her softer side.

That she’s so used to clawing her way forward that it’s become second nature to her.

That she can handle herself. She really can.

And it also shows me that I don’t want her to.

For some strange reason, I wish she’d cut out the tough girl act and admit that she can’t carry everything on those tiny shoulders, no matter how much she wants to prove that she can.

Jefferson slows the car in front of Dawn’s apartment. He cuts the engine.

My phone jumps in my palm.

HILLS: The board is sharpening their pitchforks.

I sigh heavily.

She glances down. "What?"

"Nothing."

My phone lights up with an incoming call.

Dad.

A headache bursts to life in my skull.

Just what I need on this never-ending crapstorm of a day.

Dawn squints at my phone and I turn it away from her. Lifting my head, I pin Jefferson with a hard look. "Go to HQ. Tell Hills to send my laptop, tablet, and any files he can get about Mila Dubois and her agency." I reach for the door and climb out. Looking back at Dawn, I grunt. "Let's go."

"Uh, what are you doing?"

I pin my eyes on her. "Babysitting."

She bristles. "Who?"

"You." I arch an eyebrow. "I'm babysitting you."

Her expression shifts to slightly confused. "Me?"

"Jefferson, I'll also need my flash drives—you know what? I'll text Hills a list. Bring them back here ASAP."

"Yes, sir."

I glance over my shoulder. "Well?"

"You're not invited to my home."

I check my watch. "School's been out for an hour. Which means Beth's either doing an extra-curricular today or she's with Darrel and Sunny."

"How do you—"

"Darrel came and threatened me the other day. He let me know that Beth and Bailey are best friends and I should watch my back if I do anything to harm either of you." I motion for her to get out of the vehicle. "Hurry up. It'll take Jefferson a while to go to the office and come back."

"I'll be right back, Dawn." Jefferson gives her a kind look.

I frown at him. "No need to announce that to her, Jefferson. I'm the one you work for."

He clears his throat and faces forward again. "Yes, sir."

When Dawn still doesn't leave the car, I wrap my fingers around her wrist and tug her to the sidewalk with me. Jefferson takes off and I look down at the tiny woman. "How's your Wi-Fi?"

"You're not invited to my house."

“What happened to trusting each other?”

“Says the man who’s literally ‘babysitting’ me because he doesn’t trust me to stay home.”

I also want to keep her off her cell phone—people are saying all kinds of horrible things—but I’m leaving that part unsaid. And I’m definitely not inspecting why protecting Dawn’s feelings matter to me.

I tap my chin. “Maybe I should re-think agreeing to work with you. This doesn’t feel like a warm and hospitable partnership.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re scum.”

“You’ve mentioned that.”

“Follow me.”

Dawn leads me up the stairs, her hips swaying gently in her jumpsuit. I train my eyes away from her backside and quicken my stride so I’m walking beside her.

My phone keeps vibrating in my pocket.

She stops and arches an eyebrow at me. “Aren’t you going to answer that?”

It could be dad. Could be Hills. Could be reporters or someone from the board demanding my resignation. It could be the police telling me about their progress finding Trevor or it could be the President himself.

I don’t know.

Don’t care.

For the next hour, none of that chaos exists.

Dawn looks frankly at me. “Well?”

“It’s not important.” I step a little closer to her. “I’m curious about something. Why do you take your mechanic work so seriously?”

She eases back. “What are you talking about?”

“I get being passionate about the job and I also get being passionate about your reputation. You’ve had to work hard to get to where you are. I can see that.” I advance on her until she backs up against the wall.

She tries to run and I surge my arm forward to cage her in.

Her brown eyes widen and lock on me.

“But there’s something else.” I dip my face close to hers and feel the tension surge between us. “Some kind of desperation. Why is it so important to you that no one gets hurt? Why do you think that’s your responsibility even if you didn’t personally work on the car?”

Her eyes dart away and I know I’m on to something.

I can feel her breath on my cheek, teasing my stubble.

“What about you?” She frowns. “Why do you feel the need to take responsibility for the things that aren’t your fault? What’s your obsession with Stinton Group?”

Her head tilts up, her gaze raw and direct.

Electric, luring me closer, making my blood boil in my veins—especially when I ease forward and watch her unconscious reaction. Lashes fluttering, dropping to half-mast as if it can hide her from me.

“I’ll spill my secrets if you go first,” I whisper.

Dawn stiffens. Her glorious lips press down until they’re thin lines. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I disagree.”

“Why are you so curious about me? Getting to know me isn’t a part of the contract.”

“Consider it a by-product.”

“Consider it none of your business.” She bounces into me and stalks up the rest of the stairs.

She might be as small as a mouse, but she’s definitely all lion today.

I have a feeling getting past her sharp claws would be the death of me.

So why do I still want to try?

Dawn lets me into her apartment and gives me a hard look. “Don’t touch anything. I’m going to change into my work clothes.”

“Work clothes?” I frown at her. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I work on my car on my off-time. Since Beth is at the farmhouse with Darrel and Sunny, this counts.” She swings her arms. “Did that explanation suit you, my liege?”

My lips curl up. “Can I have some water?”

“I’m not going to get it for you.” She gestures to the fridge. “This isn’t a hotel.”

I laugh when she’s gone and look over her small but tidy apartment. So this is how Dawn and my niece have been living over the past few years. The contrast of feminine and utilitarian is extremely apparent. The curtains are a heavy navy blue, but there are frills at the end. The sofa’s a black leather couch with no pillows, but a vase of plastic flowers gives the sparse decorations a softer touch.

I draw near to the frame on the stand. It’s of Dawn and Elizabeth smiling into the camera. My niece has light brown skin, hazel eyes and

curly hair.

A twinge of guilt pricks me when I realize that she almost didn't make her debut in the world because of me.

"Sorry about that," I murmur to the frame.

My phone vibrates again.

Whoever's calling is insistent.

I pluck it out of my pocket and balk at the number of missed calls from dad. He must be fuming. I know I'm setting myself up for a verbal smackdown when he finally gets in touch with me, but I can't worry about that right now.

Ignoring dad's calls, I dial Hills.

He answers on the first ring. "Max, where the hell are you? Everyone's absolutely panicking over here. The board has been calling your office asking for you. Mila Dubois's agency is playing hardball. They're asking for a ridiculous settlement—"

"Tell them we're not settling."

"What?" Hills's outburst nearly shatters my eardrum.

I pull the phone away from my ear, wince and then put it back. "We're going to fix her car."

"Why? They're not even discussing taking down the video, whether we pay the settlement or not. Mila's been known to exaggerate things. They can't afford for those allegations to pop up again."

My mind whirs. I was banking on them taking down the video. This is getting a little more complicated.

"Why are you suddenly thinking about fixing the car? It's an unnecessary gesture of goodwill and they're not even asking for it." Hills chokes. "Is it because of Dawn?"

I stare at the picture of Dawn and my niece again.

You don't trust anyone and that makes it impossible to trust you back.

Focus on business, Max.

"Don't tell me that's why you're not at the office. Are you with her right now?" His voice climbs to that irritating volume again. "Are you insane? Stinton Group is literally falling apart thanks to your little plan and you're off galivanting with the woman in the center of this mess?"

I flinch. "Is Jefferson back yet?"

"What?" Shuffling erupts in the background. "Yeah. He just walked in."

"He's got a list of the things I need. I'll be in the office later."

“Later? What time is later? And what should I do about the board?”

“Tell them to trust me.”

“Trust...” He barks out a laugh. “They don’t even trust each other. And they hated the idea of Dawn as the face of Stinton Auto from the start. You really think—”

“I don’t care what they think. Just pack up everything I need and send it with Jefferson.” I pause. “Also, send some guys down to the auto shop. Tell Clint that they shouldn’t do any interviews and that I’m personally taking care of Dawn. That’s why I’m not allowing her to go in.”

Footsteps patter in the hallway.

Dawn’s coming.

I hang up on Hills and turn around.

We lock eyes. I almost falter when I stare into hers.

Hills’s words run rotations through my head.

What am I doing here? I should be at Stinton Group. I should be with my team doing damage control.

“Did you get the water?”

“Huh?”

Her eyes fall to the picture of her and Elizabeth. She firms her jaw but doesn’t make any comment about it. Gliding across the floor, she heads to the fridge and opens the door.

I watch her every movement with a kind of fascinated awe. Her body’s wrapped in loose, faded overalls. She’s got her hair pulled back into a bun with a bandana over the front. Black sneakers complete a look that would look frumpy on any other woman but takes my breath away on Dawn.

She purses her lips when she catches me staring and the sight of that plump mouth pulling in makes my bones ache.

I want her way more than I want that glass of water in her hands.

Her eyebrows hover low over her eyes and she flicks her tongue out to wet the seam of her mouth that never quite closes. The quick swipe leaves behind a wet shine.

I feel my poise crumble even more when she tilts her chin up as if we’re in some kind of national staring competition. Sunshine falls over her dark brown eyes and picks up the lighter tones often hidden by shadows and fury.

Have mercy.

Even when she's at home and on edge around me, she's so unapologetically herself and it's devastatingly sexy.

It shouldn't make me so off-balance. I've seen her in jumpers at practically every meeting. And I'm not the kind of man who likes his women to hide their curves in excess fabric.

But it's Dawn.

And I'm starting to realize that she's the exception to every single rule.

She curls her fingers over the water. "You realize how creepy that is, right?"

"What?"

"The staring without blinking." She looks ready to fight me even as she continues the no-blinking contest. "Tell me. Honestly. Are you an alien?"

I break my gaze because laughter pops out of me without my permission. "No."

"Oh."

"You're disappointed?"

She scrunches her nose. "It would explain a lot of things."

"Like?"

"Why you're so cold-blooded."

I chuckle again and walk over to her. She doesn't shy away this time, keeping her gaze locked on me. Reaching out, I wrap my fingers over hers and take the cup, noting the way she trembles when I touch her.

"Thanks." I knock the glass back and try to quench a thirst that water won't fix. No, only Dawn can do that.

And it's such a dangerous thing to admit.

She put a spell on me.

I don't even recognize my own thoughts anymore.

Her eyelashes flutter and she retreats with hurried footsteps. "If you're done, let's go downstairs."

I follow her to the apartment garage and watch her unlock a bright red toolbox. When she pries it open, the top expands to reveal three giant shelves. Tools are nestled neatly inside. So is a bucket of lollipops.

Dawn grabs a lollipop, shoves it into her mouth and plucks a spanner from the depths. She swings around, sees me looking at her and frowns. "I'm not going to offer you one, but you can come and get it yourself."

"I'm fine. Thanks."

She moves to her truck and pops the hood.

I fold my arms over my chest. “You consider this fun? Fixing cars?”

“I wouldn’t have dedicated my life to it if I didn’t.” She’s so small that it looks like the hood is eating her alive when she bends over to look at the engine. “Plenty of better-paying, less dangerous ways to make money.”

“Dangerous?”

“Anything can happen when you’re working with a three-thousand-pound machine made of metal and moving parts.”

I frown at the thought of Dawn getting hurt. Maybe I should get her some kind of protective gloves...

What are you thinking, Max?

She slides back to the ground and wipes her hand against her pants. Plucking the lollipop out, she wields it at me. “This is much more fun than living in an office chained to a desk twenty-four seven.”

“Who told you that? Hadyn?” I shake my head. He and Vanya insist on tag-teaming me.

“By the way, I’m not going anywhere else with you if you dump me without an explanation again.”

I cover my mouth to hide my amusement. “Noted.”

“Did you intentionally ask Hadyn to drop me home so he could put in a good word for you? It felt like an ambush.” She walks over to her toolbox.

I can’t help a short bark of laughter. “Ambush?”

“Oh, come *on*. You’re not above paying someone to put in a good word for you. You’d do that and more.”

“No one can *pay* Hadyn to do anything he doesn’t want to. Believe me. His parents have been trying and failing to get him more interested in the company for years.” I smirk. “If your opinion of me is improving, that’s all your own.”

Her gaze flickers, rolling to me and then gliding away. Her mouth opens, but she doesn’t speak.

I don’t mind. I enjoy hanging on her every word, waiting—lounging really, in the silences and imagining a world where these comfortable moments of quiet came more often.

I also wouldn’t mind a world where those silences were because her lips were doing something a little more interesting than just gaping at me.

What would her delectable mouth feel like working its way up my—

A horn beeps outside.

“Jefferson must be here.” Dawn rubs the back of her neck and canters back to her truck.

I leave the garage to collect my things from Jefferson and then bring them back to where Dawn is working on her truck.

“Look, I’m not going to run.” Dawn frowns at me when I start setting up in a corner. “Besides, Darrel and Sunny are bringing Beth back in a few hours...”

I hear the *so you better get lost* at the end of that statement. “I’ll be gone by then.”

“Then you might as well go now.”

“I’m keeping an eye on you. The auto shop closes in,” I glance at my watch, “one hour. Relax. I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. Do whatever you want.”

I do.

While Dawn works on her car and the scent of gas fills the air, I type out emails and strategize with my marketing team over the phone. She plugs in earbuds when I get too loud and I lower my voice so I don’t disturb her flow.

The clank of her wrench creates a sort of drum beat for my fingers that fly over the keyboard. When I glance up again, the sky’s changed from bright blue to a dark velvet night, littered with sparkling stars.

My eyes seek out Dawn first. She’s inside her vehicle, a scanner on her lap and a serious expression on her face as she inspects whatever’s on the screen. Every so often, she sets her foot on the gas and the engine will roar. Her gaze sharpens a little more on the scanner whenever that happens.

The strange, choppy feeling returns, knifing me in the gut.

She’s gorgeous even when she’s scowling, but she practically glows when she’s doing auto repair. It’s incredible.

Her eyes lift at that moment. Something good must have happened with her truck because she smiles triumphantly.

That smile rips me open.

I want to share in her victory.

I want to wrap my arms around her and pat her head and tell her she did a good job—whatever that job was because I don’t understand much about a car besides the cosmetics, the horsepower, and how to change the tire.

Her smile widens as she steps on the gas and the vehicle *vrooms* in response.

Why does it feel like I could work to keep that smile on her face forever?

I breathe in slowly and force my thoughts back to reality.

This is the kind of crap that causes empires to fall. All the great warriors of the world won thousands of battles for their empires but, in the end, one woman could ruin a dynasty.

I'm not stepping into that pile of quicksand.

No matter how beautiful Dawn is.

No matter how beguiling her smile.

No matter how much she makes me question my cold and empty life.

"Yes." She scrambles out of the car. It's still running, the engine rumbling cheerfully. "I finally got the CTS sensors to switch at the right temp."

"Translation."

She laughs charmingly. "My engine's as close to optimal as I can get it."

My lips twitch. "Congratulations."

"Uh. That was so fake." She chuckles good-naturedly. "This is why it sucks talking to people who don't get it."

"I don't need to get it. It's enough that you do."

She smiles.

My lips curl up in return.

In the quiet, my phone buzzes.

It's Jefferson asking if I'm ready.

I text him back and tell him to head home now. Since he worked so hard today, he can get off early. I'll catch a cab home.

Dawn nods to my laptop. "Did you accomplish everything you needed to?"

"More or less."

"I've never seen anyone type that fast or hold a virtual meeting like he was actually there." She pauses and tilts her head.

"You have an observation?" I prod, stretching my arms and rotating my neck. Being stuck in one place for that long locked up my muscles.

"You like barking orders."

"I don't have time to waste."

"Yes, no time for manners. I remember that speech."

I stare at her. "And?"

“You’d get a much better response if your employees weren’t afraid of you.”

“Are you afraid of me, Dawn?” I erase the space between us.

She narrows her eyes at me. “Like a ghost in a horror movie. If I had some holy water, I’d have chased you out by now.”

I laugh.

Her eyes twinkle and I realize she’s teasing me.

It makes me want to grab her by the waist, hoist her to the wall and claim that mouth like the world’s ending tomorrow.

She half-smiles.

I look down at her hands. “Did you get hurt?”

“No.” She lifts her stained fingers. “The CTS sensor is mostly wiring and—”

I capture her hand and inspect it.

She snaps her mouth shut.

Keeping my eyes on her fingers, I growl, “I got Mila’s people to agree to bring the car.” We had to double the settlement money and drop our requirement for a retraction. The car was the least of their worries. They’re willing to give it to us because it was headed for the junk yard anyway. “Don’t get hurt when you fix it tomorrow.”

Her breath hitches.

I glance up and stare into her eyes. “These hands belong to Stinton Group.”

The shocked look drains into one of annoyance. She rips her fingers out of my grip.

I hold my chuckle in and step back. “Stay off the internet. Tell Elizabeth to avoid social media too.”

“Of course.” She tilts her chin up.

I step back even though I don’t want to.

I leave her garage even though it feels like I’m ripping my heart out.

On the way home, I promise myself that I’ll get over these feelings for Dawn Banner the moment our business relationship is through. I’ll keep helping her and my niece from the sidelines, from the shadows, but up close —

“Hello, son.” Dad’s voice jars me from my thoughts when I step into my condo.

I freeze, my hand on the doorknob and my heart clawing at my throat.

He steps out of the darkness and stares me down with blue eyes that look exactly like mine. “You want to explain why you’ve been avoiding my calls?”

“Dad.” My voice is a croak.

“Or,” his stare hardens, “you can tell me about Dawn Banner and that secret she’s hiding.”

My heart sinks like a stone.

Did dad find out about Elizabeth?

“Come inside.” He frowns at me. “We need to talk.”

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CHAPTER 11

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UNDER THE HOOD

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DAWN

IF BETH KNOWS about the malicious comments online, she hasn't brought it up.

I'm hesitant to talk about it first, just in case she managed to avoid all the trending topics about me and Stinton Group today.

Unfortunately, I make the mistake of checking the video again.

It's still up.

Not only that, it's gotten even more views.

The comments are basically a 'take a crap on Dawn Banner' parade.

Can we cancel this woman already?

She's such a fake.

I heard her dad wasn't even a good mechanic.

The line about dad hit me the hardest. He fought so hard to restore his good name after the accident. He struggled every day. Seeing his name getting dragged into the mud because of me makes my head feel like it's about to split open.

"Mom?"

"Huh?" I startle.

Beth is in her car-themed pajamas, gold bonnet over her head and teeth freshly brushed. She grips the blanket and stares at me in concern.

"I'm sorry, baby. What did you say?"

"I said I finally won an UNO game. Bailey said I might even be good enough to go against Belle."

"That's great, sweetie." I run my hand over her hair as I pull the blanket to her shoulders. "I'm glad you had a nice time at the farmhouse."

"Yeah." Intelligent hazel eyes fall on me. Beth chews on her bottom lip and gives me an assessing stare.

This kid.

Always holding her thoughts close to the chest.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You can tell me."

"You can tell me too," she says in a prim voice.

I curl my fingers around her hand and squeeze. She's so precious. All I want to do in this world is protect her. How is it that she's so young, but she manages to protect me with everything she has?

"I'm old enough," she adds.

My laughter pains my chest. "When you were little," I whisper, staring at her brown hands, "you used to latch onto my fingers like this and you'd smile at me. Show all your little gums."

Beth blinks, her long eyelashes bouncing up and down.

"You were so small and helpless, but when you held my hand like that, you made me feel like I could do anything. It's amazing how you still seem so small and yet you're growing so fast at the same time."

"Mom, is everything okay?" Her voice carries a heavier weight than a seven-year-old should.

I force a smile. "I'm perfect."

"I know about the video," she admits.

My eyebrows hike.

Beth sits up and her bonnet leans forward when she hunches her shoulders. "Everyone at school was talking about it. Micheal almost hit a kid who tried to talk bad about you in front of me."

"Bailey's brother Micheal?"

"Yeah." She purses her lips. Her eyebrows tighten into a V. "But I hit the kid myself, so he didn't have to."

"Elizabeth." I jump back. My daughter engaging in violence to protect herself is one thing, but I never wanted her to make that decision because of me. "You know you shouldn't—"

"Is that the point, mom? What are you going to do about the video?"

"I... we're working on it."

"Did you really make a mistake with the car?" Her gaze is frank and burning. In the soft light of the lamp, the hazel in her eyes are a murky brown.

I swallow and glance away. "No."

"Then the person who did needs to apologize. It's not fair that you're getting blamed when it wasn't even your fault."

If only the world could be that reasonable.

This isn't the first time I've gotten blame dumped at my feet when my suggestions were dismissed. I'm not holding my breath about this time being any different. If Henry had planned on making a statement admitting

to his mistake, he would have done it by now. The radio silence on his end tells me he's relieved I'm the one getting dragged through the mud.

As the scapegoat, all I can do is take the heat.

I place my hand on her shoulder. "Elizabeth, I don't want you to worry about this. I'm handling it." I rub her arm up and down. "If anyone bothers you about this, don't fight them, okay? You hold yourself back until you absolutely can't anymore. You solve the issue with everything *but* violence first, you hear me?"

She glares into the distance.

"Do you hear me?" I use my stern voice.

"Yes," she mumbles.

I lean forward and press a hard, firm kiss to her forehead. She smells like natural hair products and baby powder. I feel my heart slam against my ribs. This little girl is the reason I've gotten this far. I'm not going to give up now.

"Everything's going to work out, mom," she mumbles.

I smile. Just like when she was a baby, Beth makes me feel like I can do anything.

"Thank you." I hug her and nearly shed a tear when she pats my back as if she's the grown up.

"Now go to sleep." I help her to lie down, kiss her forehead one more time and tiptoe out of the room.

* * *

I GET READY FOR BED IN A HEAVY MOOD.

My movements are slow and plodding. The whole world looks grim right now. Uncertain. Stinton promised he'd find a way to make me fix Mila's car, but he didn't give me a timeline.

Maybe there is no timeline.

There's a possibility he could have been lying to me. It's not like he's above that.

Still, I don't get the feeling that he was.

While we were working in the garage today, Max Stinton seemed almost... human.

Hair disheveled.

Tie loose.

I don't think he realized he was unbuttoning his shirt and rolling up his collar as the garage got hotter and hotter.

I don't think he realized the way I watched him.

The way watching him made my heart beat out of time.

He was intense on those phone calls. A king holding court even from a remote location. I could just imagine the team on the other end shaking in their boots when he was silently brooding. I imagined them scribbling furiously when he gave an instruction and then dashing out to see that it's done.

Power is flinging out an idea and having a team of people turn it into something concrete. Something tangible. It's pointing in a direction, one jut of a finger to the horizon, and a crew putting their hands to the oars and pushing that ship through stormy waters.

I've always resented the rich—no, I've always resented Stinton Group for the ruthless way it conquers everyone and everything in its path. But I realize the head that wears the crown has to know how to bear the weight of that power. That responsibility.

And Max Stinton does it with grace.

He worked like a sleep-deprived tiger.

He's been going all day, I realize.

Even after finding out that his brother's gone.

It sobers me. That thought.

Trevor was a drunken mistake. I had no emotional ties to him and if I wasn't reeling from my father's death, I don't think I would have been drawn to him or his story the way I was.

However, Trevor was Max's brother.

His brother's dead and no one gives a damn.

Why would they?

Right now, Stinton Group doesn't need Max the grieving sibling. All anyone sees when they look at him, hell, all *I* saw when I looked at him this evening, was the prince of Stinton Group, flexing his dominance and making crap happen.

He might be a rogue, but that doesn't mean I have to be a jerk in return.

Besides, I asked him to trust me.

That road goes both ways.

When I lost my dad, it wasn't the big gestures of pity or condolences that brought me comfort. It was the simple things. Just a reminder that I had someone to talk to if I was overwhelmed. That I wasn't alone.

I grab my phone and send Max a picture of a lollipop on my dresser.

ME: You're probably still working like a lunatic at this hour. This is a reminder to have something sweet if you're feeling tired.

Considering the hour, I expect him to ignore my text until morning. It's not like I'm an important asset to Stinton Group right now. I'm causing the company to bleed money thanks to this Mila Dubois scandal.

However, my phone pings immediately with his reply.

MAX: Unlike you, I treasure my health. No lollipops for me.

I smile, my fingers flying over my phone.

ME: That's why you're always miserable.

MAX: Fine. Save that one for me. Maybe it'll give me magical mechanic powers.

I snort at my screen while alarm bells clang in my skull.

He's making me laugh.

I find him charming.

Maybe because it's late at night. Or because I feel a sense of camaraderie after seeing all the pressure he's under with Stinton Group.

Either way, my defenses are all the way down. I shouldn't be having this much fun texting a man like Max Stinton at this time of the night.

ME: Nothing can save you, Stinton. Not even magic.

I climb into bed and lean against the headboard. Tucking my knees under me, I pull the blanket over my body. Sleep is pulling at my eyelids, but I fight it back.

It's not because I *want* to talk to Max.

Heck no.

I just hate leaving conversations hanging. In general.

Has nothing to do with the fact that I feel a little less alone right now. Or that he might feel a little less alone too.

Nope.

Not going there.

This is just me being a decent human being—something Max is altogether unfamiliar with.

MAX: How is Beth? She's not upset, is she?

I jump when he mentions Beth. His concern for her feels genuine and it makes me even more off-balance.

ME: She's fine. I told her not to worry about it. Nothing is going to stop me from fixing this.

MAX: I feel sorry for that car. It has no idea that it's met its match.

I laugh again.

Dang.

I still don't know when I got this comfortable around Max Stinton, but I should probably back away slowly.

Slowly?

Screw that. I should run for the hills.

He's a Stinton. He's Beth's uncle. He's the very definition of off-limits.

These bubbly feelings in my stomach are because it's late and even jerkwads look appealing at this time of night. It's the booty call hour, after all. A time when women make the worst mistakes for the stupidest reasons.

ME: I should turn in. The world's most hated mechanic needs to look great for the tabloids tomorrow.

MAX: The hate won't last. You're my number one asset, Dawn. I don't invest in ventures that fail.

I roll my eyes.

ME: Screw you, Stinton.

MAX: Sweet dreams, Dawn.

Annoying boss-hole.

I slam my phone down and burrow under the blankets to escape from the unsettling twist in my stomach.

This is all Max's fault.

But I'm determined to not think about him for the next six hours.

Max Stinton can't fill my head if I'm asleep, can he?

* * *

THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION, UNFORTUNATELY, IS YES.

Max Stinton has no problems taking control of my dreams the way he takes control of everything.

Great.

Even when I'm knocked out cold, he still finds a way to claim every thought in my head.

In the dream, I'm in his office, arguing with him as usual. Except, when he prowls around the desk to bark at me, he doesn't stop there. His arms scoop me up by the waist and his lips plunge toward mine.

I wake up just before he kisses me, my heart roaring and my body as hot as flames.

I sit up and shake my head crazily. "No, no, no."

Frantic, I throw myself out of bed and dash to the bathroom. Cold water on my face doesn't do jack. Neither does reading up on the manual for Mila's car so I can see if I missed anything the first time.

No matter how hard I try, I can't shake off the dreams.

It's not just the near-kiss that haunts me. It's the impressions of *him* that I hadn't even realized I'd been picking up on.

The minty smell of his aftershave that's exactly the fragrance in his car.

The charisma that swirls around him, always a tad dark and mysterious, as if he's not putting all his cards on the table and he probably never will.

The lashing ocean-blue eyes that fix on my mouth as if he wants to devour me whole.

Crap, crap, crap.

Max is always staring at my mouth. I notice, but I pretend not to. It's easier that way. To just glower at him and call him creepy for staring instead of admitting that his gazes are like a caress and every time he watches me like that it feels like he's touching me.

I'm too warm.

I fan my face and give up on reading the car manual.

So much for not thinking about Max.

My brain completely missed the point of the assignment.

I stagger into the kitchen and grab a frying pan. In the surface of the rarely-used stainless steel, I see a frazzled woman with dark skin, a silk scarf over her hair and dark bags under her eyes.

"Get yourself together, Dawn. Now you're just being embarrassing."

My reflection rolls her eyes at me.

Okay.

I'm officially insane.

Abandoning the frying pan, I pick up my phone and scroll through the messages with Max from last night.

In the daylight, the texts have a certain... *flirtatious* angle to it.

I cringe.

Then shake my head.

Nope.

Not with Max Stinton.

Anyone but a Stinton.

Groaning in frustration, I grab the frying pan again and slam it on the stove.

The commotion wakes Beth, who drags herself out of bed to pin me with the most judgy eyes a seven-year-old can muster.

"Mom, you're not thinking of cooking, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

She yawns and scratches her belly over her pajamas. "I'd rather have cereal."

"No, you're eating a big breakfast today and you're going to school and you're going to have a wonderful, productive day."

She scrunches her nose. "I can't do that if I'm in the toilet throwing up eggshells and burnt toast."

I narrow my eyes at her.

Ungrateful little...

There's a knock at the door.

I pad over and check the peephole. There's nothing there except a trolley filled with stainless steel pans.

A frown mars my face.

"Who is it? Is it Chef Aimsley?" Elizabeth bounds over with so much hope I start to get offended.

My cooking isn't *that* bad, is it?

My daughter throws the door open and glances back and forth. "Where'd he go?"

"I don't know." I wheel the food inside. As usual, it smells delicious and my stomach grumbles.

"Mom." Elizabeth plucks something from the pan. "There's a note."

It's in Stinton's cramped handwriting.

Mila's car will be in the shop today. Wait for me.

My lips curl up.

"Mom, did you really win a lifetime supply of food?" Elizabeth watches my face carefully.

“Huh?”

“Why is someone sending us this?”

Because your uncle also happens to be the bull-headed billionaire who practically owns my face.

I get that strange feeling again.

Max is Dawn’s uncle.

It’s... weird. An oily, unsettling gunk that settles on my skin.

He’s Trevor’s brother and you’re dreaming of kissing him.

I force a small smile on my face. “Hurry up and eat breakfast. You have to get to school.”

Thankfully, she doesn’t ask any more questions.

* * *

AFTER DROPPING ELIZABETH OFF AND MAKING HER PROMISE SHE’S NOT going to be throwing punches at people for their comments, I return home and wait for Max’s call.

It’s nerve-wracking.

I’m not the woman who waits around for a man and my hands are dripping with sweat by the time he finally knocks on my door.

I throw it open. “What took you so long?”

“We had to make some... arrangements.” He stalks into my living room and immediately fills up the space.

My nerves jitter from his near proximity.

Because of the dream, I’m hyper-aware of Max’s lips which look even more delectable in real life than they did in my subconscious.

“The video’s getting a little out of control.” There’s something about him today. Something sharper. Harder. Like he’s being pushed to just a hair away from the edge of his patience.

I hate that my first response is concern and not utter hatred.

Hate that there’s a pang in my chest because I can see that all this pressure is getting to him.

He’s not allowed to falter. He’s not allowed to break.

He has to keep going or the entire corporation will turn to ash.

All those people, those families, those jobs they depend on to survive, to send their kids to college, to retire happily—it’s all balancing on his

shoulders.

He didn't build that company.

But it's sucking the life out of him.

Responsibility flocks him like flies on a corpse.

How must it feel to know you can't make one mistake?

What strength must it demand to answer to your own fallible limits by pushing harder and harder until one company is all that consumes you?

I look for a hint of resentment in his eyes, some kind of doubt, of dissatisfaction with the lot he's been given.

Nothing.

Does he really not care or is he just that good at pretending he has everything under control?

"The auto shop is surrounded right now. No one can get inside without getting photographed."

"I know. Clint called." He rang earlier, while I was driving back home. Said I probably shouldn't come in to work today, although he didn't give me a reason.

"We've managed to keep your home address from being leaked, but if we transport Mila Dubois's car here, it'll raise some alarm bells. The only solution is to get you into the garage." He juts his sculpted jaw at the door. "Come with me."

It's dangerous to pretend the villain of the story has a beating heart beneath that tailored suit. It makes me quietly comply instead of snapping at him for ordering me around like I'm his toy.

Which, technically, I am.

But now isn't the time to start quietly accepting it, dammit!

Jefferson's driving. He gives me a worried look that I can't interpret.

What's going on? Everyone's mood is so strange today.

Stinton doesn't say anything on the trip. He types on his computer and answers phone calls in rough, low tones. He's in pure overbearing boss mode as he shoots curt orders from his firm pink lips. There's an edge of frustration to him that I've never seen before too.

Did something happen last night?

It bothers me that I want to know. It bothers me even more when we arrive at the private airport and a team welcomes us at the door like we're freaking royalty.

Max stalks past them, not acknowledging anyone. His steps are sharp and sure. I watch him slip so easily into the skin of a Stinton: cold, unbothered, dominating. A fiend who commands every room even when he's not speaking.

People scurry around him, eager for his approval or his attention. Either one will do. I hate it and I'm fascinated by it all in one breath.

Max tugs me close to him when we get on the tarmac. I don't know if it's because of the activity swirling around us or because he wants to make sure I don't run off.

Either way, his touch flusters me.

I push his arm down and glance up at him. "Why do we need a helicopter?"

"You asked me to trust you." He stares down at me. "Now, I'm asking you to do the same."

Dangerous, *dangerous* man.

I let him nudge me into the helicopter and we take off. The city looks small and insignificant before me. The sky stretches out in all its glory. It's my first time riding a helicopter, but I can't even enjoy it because I'm too busy studying Max out of the corner of my eye.

Stop doing that, my common sense begs. You're not supposed to care about him.

I glance through the window and gasp when I start seeing familiar landmarks. That's... are we going to the garage?

My question is answered when the helicopter lands directly on the roof of the auto shop. Cameras turn upward. Journalists point. Clint was right to warn me away from coming here. It's like the horde multiplied overnight.

Max helps me out of the helicopter and the powerful propellers push my afro back until it looks like my hair is being beamed up to space.

"Really? This was your idea?" I yell to be heard. "To let everyone know we'd arrived?"

"If we're going to be filmed, we might as well get filmed in style." He speaks with a straight face. "I want their attention."

"You could have driven."

"Their attention, Dawn. Not their bloodlust. Not them swarming the car and bumping you on every side while you try to walk in."

He's languid arrogance. A razor-sharp knife lying in wait, patient. So incredibly patient. Because he knows he'll win no matter what. That chilly

edge settles on him as easily and smoothly as new oil in a clean filter. I used to find his aura cold and scary. It still is, but it's not as intimidating as I used to think. Maybe because I know that everything Max Stinton does is for a reason. I might not agree with those reasons, but he has them and it drives him to these lengths.

He sighs wearily. "Clint's been made aware of the plan. He's on his way up to the roof to collect you."

"You're leaving?"

"I have other matters to attend to." He squeezes my shoulders. "You do what you do best, wolverine. I'll take care of everything else."

"But—"

"Dawn!" Clint's voice rings behind me.

I turn to face my manager. By the time I swing back around, Max is already climbing the helicopter. A second later, it takes off, flying through the sky. First, it's a little out of reach and then it's so far away that if I tried to follow him, I'd plummet to my death.

Apt comparison.

Clint pins me with his worried stare. "Are you okay? Can you believe all this fuss over that one celebrity talking nonsense?"

"The world of social media notoriety is definitely not where I belong," I mumble, following him down the stairs to the garage.

I expected the workshop to be empty.

But it's not.

There are cameras set up all around Mila's convertible.

"What's this?" I motion to it.

"I don't know. Stinton called me early this morning and asked for the keys so he could send a team to set this up."

"Early this morning?" I start making calculations in my head. Max and I were texting late last night. What did he get—like two hours of sleep, in order to wake Clint early enough to sneak these in before the tabloids arrived?

"Yeah." Clint scowls at Mila's car. It's banged terribly at the side. The rear bumper is practically hanging on the ground. To restore it completely, they'll need to rip it off and install a new one. However, I'll have to get the car working first so that it can get all the cosmetic repairs it needs.

"You know what to do?" Clint asks, pointing to the car.

"Yeah. I studied up last night."

He shakes his head. "I get so mad when I think about it. I heard Stinton tried to approach Henry about admitting his wrongs on screen."

"What?" My eyes widen.

"For a chief mechanic, Henry sure doesn't know how to accept responsibility. Rumor is, he pretended like he didn't do anything wrong. I heard Stinton ripped him a new one."

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Thereabouts. I heard about it in the night from Hal. He works at Henry's shop."

My heart pangs. So... some of those harsh words Stinton had been dishing out yesterday were being directed at Henry?

I can't believe it.

It really doesn't make sense to me.

"I'm talking too much." Clint stares at my face and steps back. "I'm sorry. I'll let you have your space."

I barely acknowledge his words and turn woodenly toward the car. My mind's a jumbled mess, but I have to focus.

For a while, it works.

I lose myself in fixing Mila's car and don't even realize the time that passes until Clint stumbles out of his office.

"You got it running already?" His eyebrows jump.

"Yeah." I press the gas, then shift into another gear and test if the problem re-emerges. "Diagnosis is the hardest part of fixing a car. The actual work is much easier if you know the real cause of the problem."

"I'm impressed." He claps his hands.

At that moment, a commotion sounds from outside.

Clint and I give each other anxious looks and race to the window. I'm not sure what I expect, but it's definitely not the journalists climbing into their cars and taking off at the speed of light. The lawn, that was packed with cameras, reporters, and vans before, is creepily empty now.

"Huh. Do you think they know you fixed the car?" Clint asks.

"No. Something else is going on."

My phone pings.

So does Clint's.

He fishes it out of his pocket while I retreat to my purse to find mine.

"Oh," Clint says with awe in his voice. "I think the story moved locations." He flips the phone over and shows me the screen. "Look."

It's a livestream from Stinton Group. Max is standing on a podium filled with mikes from different news networks. He's wearing a suit that's tailored to his broad shoulders. His hair is carefully brushed away from his face and his ice-cold stare pierces me even through the camera.

"As acting CEO of Stinton Group and Stinton Auto, I'd like to apologize to the public and to Mila Dubois. Lately, there has been suspicion about the validity of Dawn Banner as the spokeswoman of Stinton Auto." His eyes take on a cruel glint. "I'm here today to expose the truth."

Everything, down to my very bones, is rattling.

"Kindly look at the screen," Max says. The people who are there live are probably staring at a projector but, in the live stream, the video shows up fully on screen. In it, I'm clearly telling Henry that he's wrong to change the transmission.

"What is he doing?" Clint gasps.

"Isn't it a good thing if he exposes Henry for the dirtbag he is?" I point to the phone.

"Look, what Henry did was low, but if the boss starts flinging mechanics under the bus just to protect you, it doesn't send a good message. Will he pin all the blame on Henry, a man with a family and a kid with disabilities? Does that mean if someone else messes up, he's going to turn on them too?"

I blink rapidly.

Clint's right.

Wait, Stinton. Don't say anything. Just let them believe it was my fault.

I can handle this.

But can Henry?

The video stops and Max returns on screen. They pan up to his handsome face and his chilly gaze sweeps the crowd.

"As you can see from the footage, when fixing Ms. Dubois's car, Ms. Banner insisted on a different diagnosis, but I didn't listen. Because of my bias, I went with another mechanic. It's my fault for not validating her words and ignoring her opinion on the true problems with the car."

My heart stops beating.

My lungs decide they're not into oxygen right now.

Dang.

He said 'my fault'.

Fully.

He didn't throw Henry under the bus.

He's protecting us both while pushing the truth out to the public.

Max Stinton is taking responsibility again and it's having a warped effect on my brain.

Because I actually feel *admiration*.

It's rough and violent and it courses through my stomach, wrenching my insides.

Then it pools, soft and fluttering, between my legs.

I'm aching for the cold billionaire with the heart that might not be *entirely* made of coal.

Is this a crush?

Ugh.

That sucks. It sucks deviled eggs.

I can't look away from the camera. It feels like he's speaking directly to *me* when he says, "If I'd listened to Ms. Banner, Mila Dubois would not have suffered the mental distress of seeing her precious car hurt, nor would the crew members have nearly lost their lives. I've asked you here today because I'd like to publicly extend my apologies to the team and to Ms. Dubois. Stinton Group will handle the insurance for the damage as well as pay for any hospital treatments that ensued from this event. And rest assured," he leans his elbows on the podium, looking like a predator in the jungle even as he hands out what's supposed to be an apology, "the vehicle will be completely restored. I'll put our best mechanic on it. And *she* will get the vehicle working better than new."

The chuckle that goes up from the crowd is soft and vulnerable and open. He has them eating out of the palm of his hand and he did it all without breaking a sweat.

I dig my fingers into the phone as the screen goes black. The press conference is over.

It doesn't matter.

I can still hear Max's deep and sultry voice slaying all the naysayers in one sharp swoop. I can still feel his cobalt eyes, crackling with intensity in an otherwise expressionless face, as he sears every viewer with a silent challenge. He threw himself under the bus and, in doing so, he dragged all the people who were hating me under there with him.

I can't breathe.

He's not here, but it's almost like he's standing in the room with me, taking up all the space around me, enveloping me in that cold and magnetic aura.

Why is a dangerous and majestic beast like Max Stinton going to so much trouble for me? And why am I starting to forget all the reasons I should stay the hell away from him?

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CHAPTER 12

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AM I CRAZY?

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MAX

IF I COULD PRETEND that spending a week avoiding Dawn Banner had successfully erased her from my mind and restored my usual antipathy for the world, I would have.

But not seeing her for the better part of two weeks has been an absolute terror on my life.

My equilibrium's shot.

My mind jumps to her whenever I see anything mildly related to cars, engines, or auto repair.

It's come to the point that I keep a bottle of engine fluid in my desk drawer just so I can pull it out, close my eyes and get a whiff of her garage.

On the outside, I'm the gruff and demanding leader of a powerful group of companies.

On the inside, I'm a nut case.

I'd like to believe that this storm will pass, but dirty dreams of Dawn inside and outside of those jumpsuits and cold showers are now my two best friends. I keep picturing her with her eyes glistening and her lips dripping my name. It's enough to jumpstart every hormone in my body.

I'm busy enough without this distraction.

The board wants me to revitalize Stinton Investment just like I did for Stinton Auto. After being misunderstood and proving her abilities in the face of all the doubts, Dawn's become invincible. Online haters think twice about coming after her and, by knock-off effect, they're tiptoeing around any negative press about Sinton Group.

I've ramped up her television and podcast appearances, banking on the scandal-turned-prime opportunity. The world's been lapping up every bit of Dawn that they can find. She's the queen of the nation's heart.

Which makes it even more important to keep her and Beth safe.

I have a dedicated team now, scouring the internet looking for any mention of Beth's daughter and blacking it out in real time.

Keeping those two out of my family's eye is fast becoming a priority.

Neck and neck with that objective is the next phase of Stinton Group's rebrand. Now, I'm trying to get the rest of our companies to the same level

as Stinton Auto.

It's tougher than it looks.

There's only one Dawn.

And it just so happens that I can't stop thinking about her.

Great freaking timing.

Especially since she's gone radio silent.

She hasn't responded to my text about leaving on a business trip. Hasn't said so much as a thank you for the conference.

Not that I did it to get her thank you.

But it would have been nice to at least keep in touch.

Holy crap. I'm whining about a woman not texting me.

Perhaps I grew too used to her sharp words and her even sharper glares. Maybe I miss the way those Africa combs she favored used to clack all over the place so I knew she was coming before she said a word.

My world seems monochrome without her oversized jumpers and soft afro passing through the peripherals of my vision, a flash of dark skin and dark eyes warming me from the inside out.

I move through the Stinton Group offices and the world feels... colorless. Bleak. Like we took a loss in the stock market, even though reality says that Dawn—and by extension Stinton Group—are seeing an unimaginable boost in popularity.

She's upholding her end of the bargain so well that I don't need to keep my hands on the wheel anymore.

I can't—shouldn't hover around her.

Keeping my distance from her is the right thing to do.

Especially now that dad's watching me closely.

I think back to the night before the press conference when he showed up at my house.

"You don't make stupid decisions, Max. Everything you've done has been for the good of Stinton Group, but this is getting out of hand. You impulsively put a stranger as the face of Stinton Auto without consulting the board. Then you keep her around after this scandal. She's caused immense damage to the company and you still haven't cut your losses. What secret does this young lady have over you?"

"You're wrong. She has nothing over me."

"Then what secret do you have over her?"

I'm relieved dad had to ask that question. It means he hasn't found out about Elizabeth yet, but if I keep lightly stalking Dawn, following her home and showing up at all her press tours and photoshoots, he's going to notice that something's up.

I've never been this involved in a Stinton Group asset. Once the product is performing, I hand it off to someone else and move on to either dismantling or building up another brand.

So that's what I did. After the conference, I handed over Dawn's promotions to Hills.

Something he's made very clear that he's annoyed about.

Or maybe what he's annoyed by is the daily updates I demand from him in the name of business.

... so what if I like to keep abreast of my... investments. Dawn's an employee of Stinton Auto. There's nothing wrong with checking up on her.

I drop my eyes to my tablet and stare at the latest picture of Dawn on her press tour. She's the darling of daytime TV, hamming it up with the brightly-clothed hosts who are eager to talk about her joys and challenges navigating a male-dominated industry.

Celebrities are raving about her too. Not just Mila Dubois—who was quick to ooh and ah over the great job Dawn did fixing her car, but also female athletes and famous comedians.

There was even an SNL sketch about the Mila drama, where the actors portrayed how Dawn must have felt when Mila called her out for a wrong she didn't do.

The world can't take its eyes off her.

Neither can I.

And it makes me so frustrated I could explode.

I scroll to another picture of her and start drooling like a dog with a bone. In this one, she's wearing one of her trademark jumpers that clings to her body. Her hair's in an exaggerated afro, like someone picked out her usual hairstyle until it expanded to a lion's mane. There are flowers tucked into her hair like she's some kind of priceless chocolate sculpture and I can't help but wish I could have seen her in person rather than spying on her online like a creep.

On paper, I'm still her boss.

I still own that face, that online personality.

It's fully within my right to call her into my office for an update.

But having such intimate access to her is exactly why I have to keep my distance.

Dawn Banner is off limits.

Even if her lips, painted a maroon shade in the video, tempt me like a siren to a wayward sailor.

Even if her sparkling eyes tells me she's getting more and more comfortable in front of the camera.

Even if I want to personally hunt down all the thirsty comments under her videos from men talking about how they'd love to 'get under her hood' and 'make her engine purr'.

If there will be any purring of Dawn's engine, it'll be from me, dammit.

The door suddenly bursts open. Hills barges into my office as he always does, eyes narrowed and lips turned down. Throwing himself into the couch, he flings his skinny tie over his shoulder. "I can't do this anymore."

I snap my tablet closed and grab my pen, flicking it through my fingers. "What?"

"Babysit Dawn. It's driving me nuts." He swings his legs around and plants them on the floor. "All she wants to do is fix cars. I have to pry her away to hair and makeup and then I have to coax her into playing nice with the television hosts. Do you know how ignorant people are? Every time one of the hosts says something dumb, I cringe and then start praying Dawn doesn't hit someone on national television."

"It's not that difficult." Although she really does love swinging her fists.

"Maybe for you." He scowls at me. "You and Dawn are exactly alike. The difference is she's snappier about it."

I don't expect the longing that roils in my gut, but it hits me hard, surging down my spine and tensing my muscles. I fight to keep the expression from crawling over my face and exposing my thoughts to Hills.

My fingers still on the pen, I mutter, "You're the one who offered to handle her."

"Only because you were rejecting all the other project managers left and right."

"Dawn Banner is the face of Stinton Auto. I needed someone who'd understand the gravity of the assignment."

"No, you didn't want anyone taking over her project in the first place." He flings angry eyes at me.

I ignore the critical look and pick up a folder on my desk, pretending to be engrossed in the latest profit margins. “The board’s expecting bigger and better things to roll out now. You know I don’t have time to oversee her—”

“Bull. But you have time to hunt me down to ask about Dawn constantly. That’s why you didn’t want a different project manager. You knew that would raise eyebrows, so you threw her on my lap like a hot potato. Now I have to deal with the two of you.” He rolls his eyes. “I feel like a soccer mom carrying twins.”

I cringe at the image. “If it’s so tough, then take a break. Dawn’s been working non-stop too. She deserves one.”

“A vacation sounds nice.”

“I said take a break from Dawn, not work. There’s plenty to do in the office.”

Hills groans. “I thought you’d loosen up now that you have a thing for Dawn. I can’t believe you’re still working like a machine.”

“I don’t have a thing for Dawn.”

My best friend gives me a ‘yeah right’ look.

“It’s just business,” I insist, although I’ve never felt the inclination to insist about anything with Hills before and that alone gives me away.

He flaps his arms over his eyes. “Max, you’re not fooling anyone, so just give it up.”

Yeah, I know.

I have trouble keeping my own mind in check. How can I convince someone like Hills that it’s just business when I can’t seem to believe it myself?

Doesn’t matter. I need to get my head screwed on straight before I start crossing even more lines. Just because those lines are in my head doesn’t make it any less dangerous. My wicked fantasies about Dawn are happening more frequently. My obsession is growing and if it continues unchecked, someone important is going to notice.

Like dad.

Like the board.

Like Dawn herself.

I tap my fingers against the desk and shake my head.

Just then, my phone pings.

One glance at the screen turns me to stone.

It’s Dawn.

I withdraw into my usual expression of indifference as I pick up the phone. “Get out, Hills. I need to take this call.”

“Which call?” He stretches lazily.

“None of your business.” I scowl at him. “Out. Now.”

He scoffs at me, picks himself out of the couch and plods through the door.

The moment he’s gone, I press the phone to my ear and speak in a crisp voice. “Dawn.”

“This is Elizabeth,” a sweet voice says.

My heart flips over in shock. Elizabeth?

The surprise is quickly followed by confusion.

Does Dawn know Elizabeth’s calling me?

“My mom doesn’t know I’m calling you,” she says in a hushed voice.

That answers that.

“Um, this is Mr. Stinton, right?”

“Yes,” I croak.

It’s my first time hearing my niece’s voice. I’ve seen her handwriting and I’ve seen the pictures of her littered all over Dawn’s apartment, but wow. It’s crazy that she’s on the other end of the phone right now.

I sit up straighter in my chair. “How can I help you, Elizabeth?”

“I’m having a career day tomorrow and I want my class to win by bringing the most people. Our whole class gets pizza that way. But this other class is beating us right now.” From her tone, I can tell that she’s frowning.

My lips tremble and I pull them in to stop from chuckling. I see Elizabeth has her mother’s love of a good competition.

“I asked mom if we could invite you, but she kept saying no. That we shouldn’t bother you.”

Her words hit me straight in the gut. Too close to where my heart is beating fast.

“So I wanted to ask you myself.” Her voice is as sweet as a melody. “Can you come to my career day? It’s at John Hearst—oof!”

“Elizabeth Drew Banner, what are you doing with my phone?” Dawn roars.

“Mom, I can explain.” Elizabeth’s voice shakes like a tree in a hurricane.

Someone grunts and the sound of shuffling ensues. The phone clicks off a second later.

Eyes wide, I call back and let the phone ring until it goes to voicemail.

Then I call again.

And again.

The fourth time I get voicemail, I launch out of my chair and prepare to run to the parking garage so I can drive over to Dawn's.

Finally, I notice her number lighting up my screen.

I pounce on the device. "Hello?"

"It's Dawn." She sounds breathless and I wonder if she'd been chasing my niece around. The thought makes me smile way harder than I should. "I'm sorry about that. I had no idea she was sneaking around with my phone."

"It's okay." I settle into my chair.

Just business my backside.

At the sound of Dawn's voice, it's suddenly impossible to keep things professional. No matter how many alarm bells are pealing in my ears.

I know it's dangerous.

I know.

Distractions make me weak.

They make me vulnerable.

And when you're steering a giant ship like Stinton Group, vulnerability means crashing into an iceberg sooner or later.

But Dawn Banner's got me wriggling in her grasp and there's no escaping.

"She's never done anything like that before." There's a hint of sheepishness in Dawn's tone.

I'd love to see her embarrassed face. Almost as much as I'd love to see her flirty face and her breathless-in-the-throes-of-passion face.

I swear for the thousandth time that I won't entertain those raunchy thoughts of Dawn Banner and yet they come barreling in anyway.

It's the sound of her voice.

If I was prepared for it, I wouldn't be this shaken.

"I'll tell her you're too busy to attend her career day." She clears her throat. "And I'll make sure this never happens again."

"I'll be there."

"Where?"

“The career day.”

“No.”

“She went to all that trouble.” I lean back in my chair and close my eyes, imagining Dawn’s annoyed face. Now that one I’ve seen plenty. Her brows draw close in the middle of her forehead. A crease appears above her nose, wrinkling her brown skin. Her lips pull into her mouth until only a thin line is showing.

“Mr. Stinton.”

“Max.” I correct her. “You’ve been calling me Max. Don’t stop now.”

“Mr. Stinton,” she emphasizes, “I have the phone on speaker, so that Elizabeth can apologize to you. I’d like you to let her know that you’re far too busy to—”

“I’m not busy at all.”

“*See, mom?*” Elizabeth chimes in the background.

“Max,” Dawn grinds out, “you just checked your schedule again and you’re busy. Right?” There’s a hint of desperation in there.

A slow, evil smile spreads on my face. “Actually, I have nothing going on all day tomorrow.”

“*So you’re coming, right?*” Elizabeth squeals.

“If it’s alright with your mother.”

“*Please, mom. Please. We’ll win for sure if he can come.*”

Dawn’s dead silent for a couple seconds and I know she’s cursing me to fall off a cliff in her head.

Finally, she spits out, “I guess if it’s not too much for Mr. Stinton—”

“Not at all. I can even bring some friends along.”

“*I knew it. You’re the best, Mr. Stinton. I thought so ever since you said those nice things about mom on TV.*” Elizabeth chirps excitedly. “*Class Two is gonna kick rocks tomorrow.*”

“Elizabeth, watch your language,” Dawn scolds.

“*Sorry, mom.*”

I chuckle. My energy’s just shot up to a hundred for some reason. Whether it’s Elizabeth’s childish innocence or the relief of finally hearing from Dawn again or both, I feel like I could run a marathon.

“You were no help,” Dawn mumbles to me. I’m going to assume her daughter’s out of earshot because her voice is chilly enough to turn me into ice.

I prop my ankle against my knee, smiling at the view outside my window as the early morning sunshine pours into my office. “I believe in giving back to the future leaders of our country.”

“Bull. You’re doing this to annoy me.”

“I’m doing this to meet my niece. Annoying you is just a bonus.”

She makes a disgruntled sound and if she were in front of me, I’d probably grab her and kiss her. It’s a great thing that she’s safely in her apartment and far away from my misbehaving hands.

“You know I don’t want Stinton Group anywhere near Elizabeth.”

“Then I won’t go there as Max Stinton. I’ll go there as Max.”

“Can you separate yourself from that company? I don’t think you can.”

I would agree with her if it were a couple weeks ago. Before I’d met her. Before she barged into my life.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” I lower my voice. “If you were so uncomfortable with the idea, why did you agree?”

She makes a garbled sound again and then goes silent.

In a soft tone of assurance, I tell Dawn, “I’m not going to admit who I am or how I’m related to her. It’s just a simple career day. It’s just business.”

Just business?

“Hmf.” Dawn snorts under her breath.

Look at that. She doesn’t buy it either.

* * *

VANYA STOMPS DOWN THE STAIRS OF HER LUXURIOUS PRIVATE JET, DARK sunglasses on her face and a scarf billowing from her neck.

She’s wearing one of those outlandish fashion pieces that I’ve yet to find an appreciation for. The top of the dress sticks out at an odd angle like a cliff jutting over the ocean and the skirt is some kind of layered poof that’s short at the front and longer at the back.

It’s fashion, Max. Fashion, Vanya would tell me when I used to ask her why she wore those ridiculous outfits. *I pulled this right off the models at Fashion Week.*

If so, she needs to get her money back.

“Whoa,” Hadyn whispers beside me. He’s got his eyes locked on Vanya as if she’s the most beautiful creature he’s ever seen. Obviously, he doesn’t share my opinions about her avant-garde clothing style.

Vanya glides across the tarmac to us. The model walk—the one that she gets paid an obscene amount of money for—is hinted at in the way she moves her waist and plants one foot directly in front of the other.

She’s a tall, voluptuous woman with enough curves to make a dangerous mountainside jealous. A creamy brown complexion, high cheekbones and sultry lips complete the look of a plus sized supermodel.

Vanya pulls her sunglasses over her pixie-cut when she nears us, revealing brown eyes that are shaded in blues, reds and greens. Somehow, on her, the explosion of color looks sophisticated rather than clownish.

“What’s with the welcome party?” Vanya asks, drawing back and eyeing Hadyn. “I mean, I know why Max is here. To beg for yet another favor.”

“I never beg,” I scoff.

She rolls her eyes. “You never give me all the details either.”

“You’re the one who said you didn’t mind speaking to a room of impressionable young women eager to learn about fashion.” I lift a hand as if to say it’s not my fault.

“You didn’t tell me they were seven-year-olds, Max.” She squints at me.

I shrug. “If I had, you wouldn’t have said yes.”

“Sneaky.” She wags her finger. “You’re learning too many lessons from him.” She nods at Hadyn. “I told you Hadyn was a bad influence.”

“I’m not that sneaky. I’ve been upfront and vocal about my love for you.”

Vanya snorts. “Is that why you were sprawled over Page Six with twins on either side Friday night?”

“You’re keeping tabs on me, Vans?” Hadyn smirks. “It’s okay to admit you’re jealous.”

She glowers at him.

I step between them before they can fight. “We should get going now. We’re already late.”

“Being fashionably late is better. Keeps up the suspense.” Vanya pats my shoulder.

The thing is I hate being late. Especially today. I’ll be seeing Dawn again for the first time in weeks. And I’ll be meeting my niece in person for

the first time too.

It's a big freaking deal.

Vanya sashays toward the car I have waiting. "What exactly is the agenda? It's nothing too long, right? I pushed back a meeting with my agent, so I only have an hour to spare."

"An hour's more than enough. Trust me."

Hadyn opens the door for Vanya.

She sticks her nose up, scrambles past him and opens the door on the other side.

I almost chuckle when I see Hadyn's annoyed look. Like Hills, he's used to women falling all over themselves for him. Vanya only tolerates his presence because he's close to me and she never lets him forget it.

Once we're in the car, Jefferson gives Vanya a besotted look.

She smiles at him. "Hey, Jeff."

"Ms. Vanya." Jefferson's Adam's apple almost slaps both me and Hadyn in the face when he swallows. "Wow. You're... you're even more beautiful than the last time I saw you."

"How sweet." She lets loose a practiced chuckle.

Hadyn scoots to the edge of his seat and grips the back of Jefferson's chair. "Hey, buddy. Why don't you keep your eyes on the road before you lose them?"

"Hadyn, don't intimidate my people."

"I'm just giving him some friendly advice." Hadyn adjusts his suit jacket. He got dressed up for Vanya. Even put some gel in his hair.

Poor guy.

Vanya doesn't notice him at all.

She's on her phone, making plans with her culinary team. Vanya's the only person I know who's busier than I am. She's juggling a full-time super model career and a secret, insanely successful cookbook and catering empire.

When she hangs up on her business call, she flits me a dark look. "You're lucky one of my model friends just asked me to be her baby's godmother or I would have turned you down so fast you'd get a headache."

"What does being a godmother have to do with this career day?" Hadyn asks.

"I'm not good with kids. I need the practice."

I cross my arms. “Relax. They’ll be impressed that you’re a supermodel.”

“What if one of them says something out of pocket?” She purses her lips. “Like ‘aren’t you too big to be a supermodel?’ Then I’ll insult them back. Call ‘em a little booger or something. And then I’ll become the bad guy.”

Hadyn rubs his chin. “If they say anything offensive, we can sue them.” I laugh.

Vanya pops an eyebrow. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Parents should have raised them better.”

Vanya scoffs. “This is why we don’t go to you for ideas.”

“Hey, I’m great with kids. You’re the one who doesn’t know what you’re doing.” He shakes his head. “I don’t understand why you’d agree to be someone’s godparent if you can’t even stand babies.”

“I never said I can’t stand babies. I said I’m not good with them.”

As Vanya and Hadyn start to fuss, I get a new message.

DAWN: Are you here yet? They’re about to start. Beth’s getting nervous.

“Ooh.” Vanya’s voice carries over to me. She’s far closer than I expect and I realize she’s peeking over my shoulder at my phone. Too late, I try to shield it from view, but she catches me and gives me a pointed smile. “Maxy’s in love.”

“What are you? Ten?” I scowl.

“It’s why she can’t get along with kids. Because she’s one of them,” Hadyn points out.

Vanya reaches across me to smack him.

“Hey, hey.” I lift up a hand to block her. “Can you guys act your age for once?”

I have no idea how mom put up with these two. They’re exhausting. And they’re clingy as hell. When mom died, they didn’t leave me alone for a second, always dropping in to annoy me to death. Always calling. Always dragging me out of my house when I didn’t feel like moving.

With them and Hills badgering me, it’s no wonder that I ran to Stinton Group to feel like I was more than just a grieving son who’d lost his world.

“I’ve been keeping up with all the Stinton Auto press junkets. Your woman is fire.” Vanya gives a nod of approval. “At first, I thought she was a fake. But the more I listened to her, the more I realized how much she

genuinely loves fixing cars. It's so inspiring. Made me want to change a tire or something."

"Like I'd ever let those pretty hands touch a car tire," Hadyn mutters.

I glare at him. "Pretty hands change tires all the time."

"Watch it, Hadyn." Vanya warns. "Stinton's testy about this woman."

"Trust me. I know." Hadyn rolls his eyes.

"You care about auto repair now?" I arch an eyebrow. Vanya doesn't even know how to change a lightbulb. Once, she called me and Hadyn over to her condo to help her set up curtain rods. The woman is hopeless.

"I love to see girls winning. Especially when they're the underdogs."

"Well, she's not my woman, so you can cut that out." I frown gruffly.

"And don't say anything weird to her when we get there either."

Hadyn grins. "He means that. I've never seen him get this protective about anyone."

"Now I'm even more intrigued." Vanya's eyes sparkle.

I start getting nervous.

Maybe it was a bad idea to bring these two along.

Even if it did mean that my niece could win pizza for her class.

* * *

IT ONLY TAKES A FEW MOMENTS TO SPOT DAWN IN THE CROWDED MIDDLE school gym. It's like she's got a light beam over her. I'd say it's the overalls or the afro or those entrancing comb-shaped earrings, but I know that's not true.

There's just something magnetic about her. Something that pulls me in whether I like it or not.

She turns around and spots me.

I almost go stark-raving mad when her mouth forms a hint of a smile.

It's warm.

It's stunning.

Then she realizes she's supposed to hate me and her expression sours.

I forget about Vanya, who's staring at all the kids in terror and Hadyn, who's looking at Vanya as if he'd sweep her out of there the moment she asks. I start walking and then jogging toward Dawn.

A pensive quirk to her full lips, she braces herself to speak to me. I can see her tensing up, can see her mind whirring as she tries to coax her expression into a stern one.

I stop right in front of her.

Finally, my heart sings.

She smells like spring and car oil. She looks like it too. There's a flower clip holding back one side of her afro, but the grease-stained over-alls tells the world exactly what she does for a living.

She's wearing a little makeup today. I don't know when I've begun to differentiate between Dawn's natural face and her made up face, but I can tell immediately. Her lips are glossier than usual. Rather than dual-toned, they're the same luscious maroon, pure silk against her dark brown skin. As vivid as butterfly wings in motion.

Her eyes are covered in something that shimmers and it only makes the gleam of intelligence stand out more.

I stare at her face like a man who'd been crawling through the desert and stumbled on an oasis.

Yeah, this woman has given me an appreciation for dual-toned lips that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life.

As she observes me in turn, her face softens and she looks almost flustered when she glances away. "You're late."

"Vanya's plane was delayed."

"Vanya?" Her eyes shoot past me. "The supermodel? That Vanya? The first black plus-sized model on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*?"

"Uh. Yeah. I think Vanya did a *Sports Illustrated* thing. How did you know?"

"She was on the Essence Hall of Fame when I went to their studio for an interview. I loved her picture so much that I looked her up. I can't believe she's here. I'm such a fan."

My heart completely stalls when I see Dawn's shy, excited grin.

Have mercy.

She has my entire soul in a chokehold.

"Mr. Stinton!" A cheerful voice sings through the crowd.

The faint stutter of my pulse rings in my ears as I watch Trevor's daughter barrel toward us. She looks like the perfect blend of Dawn and Trevor. Tawny skin. Hazel eyes. Small, slim figure. I swear I fall in love with her on sight and I have no idea how or why.

“You made it,” Beth says, tilting her head up at me.

I notice that she has to strain to meet my eyes and lower myself to her level. “I did. And, as promised, I brought my friends.”

Bailey, Darrel’s son, clamors toward us. He’s a pale boy with bright blue eyes and giant glasses. “Yes! We definitely won! Let’s tell Mr. Hanksworth.”

The kids skitter off and Dawn relaxes a smidge.

She meets my eyes. Worries her bottom lip. Sighs. “You’re not gonna —”

I reach for her arm and squeeze because *not* touching her is inconceivable to me. “Don’t worry. I registered under Darrel’s name. If anyone checks, Bailey’s the reason I’m here. It has nothing to do with Beth.”

The tension in her shoulders fades away and she gives me a real, sunshine smile.

I’m stuck on her, lingering on the thick black curves of her lashes and the hints of gold caressing her smooth brown cheeks.

She’s too dangerous.

Too complicated.

Too beautiful.

Too much.

This woman is scrambling my life and I’m handing over the pieces without even realizing what I’m doing.

How can I survive another week, another day, without seeing you?

Someone makes an announcement from the podium and Dawn breaks eye contact with me.

“You ready for this?” she mumbles.

Absolutely not.

But I dip my chin and slide my body closer to hers. “Are you?”

She looks up at me and a quiet moment of understanding passes between us. “No, but it’s not like we can stop it now.”

My grip on her arm tightens.

Oh yes, this woman is definitely going to be the end of me.

CHAPTER 13

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STARLIGHT PICNIC

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DAWN

I DON'T GET BUTTERFLIES. That's not a thing that happens for me.

But when Max Stinton pins those icy cobalt eyes my way, I swear *something* starts fluttering in my stomach like a raging tornado.

We're in an ice cream shop after the career day, making far too much noise for a group of four adults and two children.

Beth and Max are deep in conversation about cars, of all things.

He glances up.

I look away before he catches me staring at him like some kind of creepy fan girl with a juvenile crush.

Why is this happening to me?

It can't be a Stinton.

It just *can't*.

I don't even need to list out the reasons, but if I did, it would fill one of those ancient scrolls that roll out to the length of a building.

Ugh.

Staring at my ice cream, watching the cold treat slowly turn into runny milk, I coach my heart into behaving.

"... and that's why I never used to drive Black Beauty around. That is until I got Red Beauty. She's vintage, and she never leaves my garage. Unless it's for special occasions," Max says.

Beth leans forward, stars in her eyes. "How old is she?"

"She's an eighties baby," Max says proudly.

Beth squeaks and jumps into a list of all her favorite cars from the eighties. I've never seen her get that animated with anyone except Bailey. Whenever she's around strangers, she's shy and reclusive. It's hard for her to get comfortable around new faces, especially when those faces are much older than her.

Seeing her now, you'd think I'm a liar.

She's talking loudly, gesturing with her hands, and jumping in to interrupt Max whenever she gets too excited.

Even Bailey is looking at her like he's never seen her before.

“Dawn, you okay?” Sunny whispers to me. She’s sitting at my right. For most of the past hour, she’s been holding hands with her fiancé, Darrel, and trying to cheer up Bailey, who is noticeably dismayed that Elizabeth is more focused on Max than anyone else around the table.

I startle when I realize she’d been observing me.

I hope she didn’t notice me staring at Max.

“I’m fine.” My lips arch up in what I hope is a convincing smile.

Sunny pops a trim eyebrow. She’s a gorgeous woman with an impressive sense of style. Her Mayan ancestry shows in the reddish undertones beneath her brown skin as well as the bridge of her nose and the slant of her eyes. Her shiny black hair falls straight and flat, shining beneath the sunlight.

Sunny gives me an unconvinced look and then plants her hands flat on the table. I’m surprised she can move her hand given the giant diamond weighing it down.

Pressing up, she smiles at me. “I need to use the lady’s room. Do you mind coming with me?”

“Uh…”

She grabs my hand before I can say anything and tugs me to my feet.

Max swings his gaze around, his pale blue eyes twinkling, mischievous, and gentler than I’ve ever seen them. Softer. It’s like Beth softens all his hard edges.

I blink.

It’s the first time I’ve seen him that approachable and tender. The mask of arrogance is missing, allowing a different side of him to shine through. A side where the rich, cocky rogue prince of Stinton Group is outdone by the quiet, caring uncle.

Uncle. He’s Beth’s uncle, Dawn. Get yourself together.

It’s sleazy to think about him in *that* way.

But I’m locked in.

I can’t look away from the gentleness in his eyes.

I can’t resist falling deeper into his cobalt-blue gaze and wondering if this is the real Max Stinton or if it’s just an illusion.

Does that softness only come out when he’s with the people he considers family?

Does he apply that gentleness elsewhere? Like when he’s kissing whatever supermodel of the month catches his fancy, holding her body

tightly to him as he rakes his lips against her skin—

I choke on my own breath and start coughing.

Max scrambles to his feet, leaning over in concern. “Dawn, are you okay?”

“She’s fine.” Sunny tugs on me. “Let’s go.”

I stumble behind her, completely mortified.

My head is full of cotton and all kinds of sticky thoughts about Max Stinton are getting caught in there.

I’m not allowed to have feelings for this man.

I don’t care if he’s ambitious enough to turn a giant PR mess into gold for his company.

I don’t care if he’s responsible enough to take his brother’s sins on his own back and pay for them, take the blame and the anger for them, without complaint.

I don’t care that he keeps looking out for me in quiet ways and that arguing with him is something I’ve been missing for the past few weeks.

Nothing will change the fact that he’s a Stinton and thus, it can never happen.

Sunny charges into the bathroom, kicks every stall open to make sure we’re completely alone and then whirls on me. “Okay, spill. I thought you hated Stinton Group and everyone with that last name. What’s going on?”

“What are you talking about?” I retreat from her. Since I’m in the bathroom, I might as well wash my hands, splash my face with cold water and pull myself back together.

A slow, knowing smirk transforms the worried frown on Sunny’s face. “Oh my gosh. You *like* him.”

“No, I don’t.” *Crap*. I spoke too fast. I know I sound guilty.

“You’ve been giving him goo-goo eyes for the past hour, Dawn. Please give me a reasonable excuse if you’re going to lie to me.”

I suck in a shuddering breath, grateful that my lungs are still capable of filtering oxygen. My mind is teetering on the edge of a breakdown and Sunny is *not* helping.

She stomps closer. “When did that happen? While you two were working together?”

“No.” I lean over the sink and grip the edges of the counter. Shoulders hunched to my ears, I struggle to stay upright. “He’s off-limits.”

“Why? What exactly do you have against Stinton Group?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Now you sound like Alistair.” She rolls her eyes. “Dawn, you look like you’re falling apart. Holding back the truth isn’t helping you and it certainly isn’t stopping you from feeling the things you do.”

“I’m telling you. I *can’t*, Sunny.”

“Why not?”

I pace the bathroom. “He... he’s the enemy.” I fling my arms out. “Everyone in his family is toxic. Do you know...” I can’t catch my breath. “Do you know that before Beth was born, Stinton Group lawyers came barreling into my apartment. They offered money to—they wanted me to get rid of Beth.”

Sunny’s jaw drops.

My own heart smashes against my ribs.

Saying the words out loud only emphasizes how ridiculous I’m being. How unsuitable Max is for me and for Elizabeth.

“Wait.” Sunny blinks slowly. “If Stinton Group tried to pay you to terminate your pregnancy, that means that Elizabeth is...”

“Yeah.”

“Max?” Sunny gasps.

“No, his brother. Trevor.”

She covers her mouth. “Oh, this just got complicated.”

“You see?” I pace to the other side of the bathroom. “It doesn’t matter how I feel. What matters is keeping Elizabeth far away from that company. Max is Stinton Group. There’s no separating him from it. Caring about him is too dangerous.”

She stumbles back. “Okay. Let me think for a moment.”

“Think?” I shriek. “What is there to think about? This shouldn’t be happening. The fact that I even let him get close to Beth was a huge miscalculation. That’s what he does to me. He messes with my head. I’m already making big mistakes. I can’t let him get any closer.”

“Do you know if it was him?”

“What?”

“Was it Max who ordered the lawyers to try and pressure you into getting rid of Beth?”

I swallow hard. “I-I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should ask him.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. “Before you go around blaming an entire company for what Beth’s

irresponsible father did, maybe you should find out if Max deserves all that hatred or if he's just the closest target because he's here and his brother isn't."

Her words stop me dead in my tracks.

Sunny tucks a lock of her shiny, straight hair behind her ear. "When Trevor ran off with Stinton Investment's money, he took off with my pay too. I was so mad about it. I wanted the entire company to go down. But then Max called me personally and apologized on his brother's behalf. He paid what was owed to me and told me it was his fault that Trevor messed up. That one phone call showed me the kind of person he is. Someone responsible to the point of crucifying himself."

"It could have been a publicity stunt—"

"It wasn't. Max called me privately in my car. No cameras. No recordings. Nothing. I was the least of his worries and he still did it personally."

My throat is tightening to an uncomfortable degree.

Sunny's brown eyes turn contemplative. "Max is used to being the scapegoat when anything goes wrong. It really didn't sit right with me when I heard him apologizing for something he didn't do." She shakes her head. "And Dawn, you might be doing the same thing. Does it sit right with you?"

I think about Max taking responsibility for Mila Dubois's car. He really is the kind of person who'd take all responsibility. It's almost second nature. "I..." My heart thunders in my chest. "It can't be that simple."

"But what if it is?"

"He's still a Stinton," I snap.

"Yeah, but he's not Trevor."

That shuts me up.

"You want to snap at Beth's father, but you can't because he's gone. He ran off long before Stinton Group sent those lawyers. But you can snarl at Max because he's here. He didn't run when he found out he had a niece. He stayed and he's trying to be a part of her life."

Tears press the back of my eyes and I wilt against the sink. It feels like Sunny's grabbing my insides, tearing them out and scattering them all over the floor.

Max isn't all that benevolent.

He used Beth to get me to work with Stinton Group.

But he also set up a college fund for Beth, tried to work around your rules and spoil her with catered breakfasts, and he showed up to her career day when you know he has a million more important things to do with his company. On the other hand, Trevor knew I was pregnant and he disappeared.

I shake my head to quiet that voice.

It's still too risky.

"Look, I'm not telling you what to do. And I wouldn't even have this conversation with you if you didn't seem so obviously torn up about Max. I can't say whether or not he's a good man and only you know whether he's a good man *for you*, but I challenge you to think about him—not as the representative of Stinton Group, but as a man on his own merits. I think that's the only way to be fair to yourself and to him."

I won't go there as Max Stinton. I'll go there as Max.

It's what he told me on the phone when I capitulated to my daughter and allowed a Stinton to come close to her.

Sunny steps toward me and pulls me into her embrace. She smells like sunshine and safety. I'm flooded with gratitude to have her, Mama Moira and even Kenya and Alistair in my life.

"It's okay." She rubs my back soothingly. "It's okay if the answer is complicated. It's okay to move slowly and test every step before you take the plunge. No one is rushing you. And if they do, that means you should slow down even more and take your time to make sure you're certain in your own heart."

The bathroom door opens.

Another customer walks in and gives me a curious look.

I step away from Sunny. "Thank you."

She winks. "Girl, it's what I'm here for." Her phone buzzes and she looks down at it with a smile that only shows up when she's around Darrel. "Are you ready to go? Darrel is wondering if we got kidnapped."

"Yeah." I take a step and then stop. "Actually," I squeeze her hand, "do you mind taking Beth to the farmhouse after this?"

"Of course. But why?"

"I want to have a conversation with Max."

"Is this a sleepover kind of conversation?" She wiggles her eyebrows.

Heat pools in my cheeks. "We'll see."

“Atta girl.” She pats my shoulder, links our arms together and propels me out of the bathroom.

As I step closer to the table, Max’s eyes leave my daughter and lock on me.

My heart resonates on impact.

Mayday.

I’m not even sure if giving him a chance is a good idea or a colossal mistake, but I can’t deny that there’s something about him that dares me closer.

I also can’t deny that exploring that connection is terrifying.

He’s still a Stinton.

He will always be a Stinton.

But judging him based on the sins of his family is denying that he’s a man with his own thoughts and values.

There’s a reason Max Stinton keeps plucking on the strings of my heart and making me tremble in ways I never have before.

I just hope I have the courage to dig up the truth buried beneath those cold eyes and killer suits.

And I hope that when that truth appears, I’ll be able to believe it.

* * *

“CAN WE TALK?”

I’m stunned when Max asks me first.

I’m stunned he’s *capable* of asking and not ordering.

And I’m stunned by the way my heart slams into my ribs when he gives me an intensely hopeful look.

“Yeah. I just...” *Shoot. Why am I so nervous?* It’s not like he’s stopped being evil overlord Max Stinton. It’s not like he’s any less lethal and dangerous. “I need to change first.”

“Bye, Mr. Stinton.” Beth waves at him from where she’s leaving with Bailey, Darrel and Sunny. “Remember your promise.”

“What promise?” I raise an eyebrow, already on edge.

“Relax, Mama Bear. Beth wants to see Red Beauty. I told her to ask you first. She felt quite certain that you’d say no if she asked. I told her you’d definitely say no if I did. We played rock-paper-scissors and I lost.”

My lips twitch in spite of myself. That story is not what I expected at all.

“Red Beauty? Did you call your car that because the other one is Black Beauty?”

“They’re equally beautiful, so I needed a distinguishing factor,” he says crisply.

I snort out a laugh.

His eyes twinkle at me.

Max Stinton is capable of making jokes. And teasing. And being sweet to seven-year-old girls.

I fight off the admiration that flows over me and open my mouth.

Before I can say a word, a group of teenagers walk up to the ice cream shop. They catch one look at Max and start giggling in hushed tones, throwing him meaningful looks.

I start scowling immediately.

What are they looking at?

Then I pull my eyes back to Max and realize that I can’t even judge them.

He’s gorgeous.

Max isn’t wearing a suit today, but he might as well be because he looks just as imposing in a button-down and a pair of jeans.

I bet those jeans are designer. I bet those fancy sneakers are too.

I’d judge him for being shallow, but I have to admit that his clothes have a certain class. The dark grey shirt is painted over his muscular chest, allowing his beastly pecs to have their moment in the limelight. The jeans are dark and crisp, hugging his hips just right and held in place with a leather belt that probably costs as much as all four tires of my car.

The fit and quality is exactly what I would expect of any rich guy.

But on Max, there’s an elegance to the way he wears his clothes that makes it hard to look away from him.

“Dawn?” he whispers, arching an eyebrow.

I checked him out and he knows it.

The wind picks up and ruffles his hair to one side. I catch my breath when I notice how well that disheveled look fits him. How much I want to drag my fingers through his hair and mess it up myself.

There’s no stopping the pounding of my heart that wants to fly right out of my body.

Stripped down to the bare essentials, Max still looks like a devastatingly dangerous prince. Confident, gorgeous and roguish.

Yeah.

I'm definitely in trouble.

"I'll ride with you." His voice holds a crackle of amusement. "I gave Jefferson the afternoon off."

"Why?"

"Because I'm taking the afternoon off." He checks his watch. "Where's your truck?"

My jaw drops and I stalk behind him to the parking lot. "You know how to take a break?"

"Don't look so shocked. It's insulting." He arches an eyebrow. "And didn't you take the afternoon off too?"

I wonder why he knows that. "Yeah, but I've been prancing around on non-stop press tours because my jerk of a boss doesn't know what balance is."

He chuckles.

My heart stalls.

Okay, no more looking at Max Stinton when he smiles.

I can't think straight.

He takes up too much space in my car. In my apartment.

He makes me keenly aware of things I never cared about before.

Like clothes.

I'm staring at my closet full of T-shirts and jeans and panicking because I have nothing nice to wear.

We don't change for anyone, remember? Especially not a Stinton.

I reach for a regular T-shirt and shorts, but I'm still a woman so I refresh my lipstick, spray water in my afro so it's nice and moisturized and add a bit of perfume too.

I'm doing this for me, not Max.

Right.

"Wow." His gaze falls over my body when I walk into the living room. I almost buckle from the intensity of that stare.

"What?" I ask harshly.

"You own something other than jumpsuits and over-alls?"

"Sorry to disappoint."

“I’ll find a way to get over it,” he says dryly. “I’m surprised. I thought you slept in your work gear.”

“Oh please. What about you? Do you own anything other than button-downs? Wouldn’t you feel naked without your three piece suits?”

“I feel naked when I’m naked, Dawn.” He reaches for a button. “Want me to prove it?”

My mouth drops open.

He’s *flirting* with me.

My heart is beating so fast it can power a hot-air balloon.

I scowl because the alternative is giggling like one of those teenaged girls who got a glimpse of his handsome face. Yeah. I’m not going to do that. “I’d rather spare my eyes the trauma.”

Despite my harsh words, heat spreads all over my body as I imagine Max Stinton without his shirt on.

He props his arm on the chair handle and sets his chin in his hands. “Why are you so nervous?”

“Why do you want to talk to me?” I redirect the conversation, narrowing my eyes and donning an *I couldn’t care less* attitude, hoping he can’t see to the trembling woman underneath. “What’s so important that you’d crash my peaceful afternoon with your annoying face?”

And by annoying, I mean beautifully sculpted, gorgeous, GQ worthy.

But he doesn’t need to know that.

“Maybe I just want to check up on my asset. Make sure we’re not over-working you.”

My eyes narrow.

Oh, right. This is why I hate him.

“Who are you calling an asset...” The rest of the words drift away when Max lumbers to his feet and prowls toward me.

“You, Dawn. You’re the best thing that ever happened to Stinton Group.” His voice drops. “To me.”

Crap, crap, crap.

I don’t understand.

Is he talking from a business standpoint or... a personal one?

“We just have to work on that temper of yours.” One side of his lips arches up. “I hear you’ve been snappy with a few of the hosts. There was even a segment that couldn’t air because you told off the interviewer.”

“So this is an intervention?”

“Are you disappointed?” he whispers, leaning in. “Did you expect us to discuss something other than work?”

I scowl at him, my body seizing up. “One of these days...”

“You’ll tie me up and torture me?” He tilts his head. “I don’t think I’d mind.”

“Scum.”

“I’ve heard that one.”

“Jerkwad.”

“That’s new.”

My eyes narrow on him.

“You want to throw another punch, wolverine?” He wraps his hand around my fingers that I hadn’t even realized had clenched into fists.

“Don’t you ever stop being obnoxious?”

“Don’t you ever stop being so tense?”

“Again, that’s hypocritical of you. You’re not exactly Mr. Zen. Why else would you micro-manage every detail of my press tour?”

“Maybe it’s because I can’t take my eyes off you for a second.”

Holy chimo-le.

I try to breathe, but my lungs decide it’s not worth the fuss.

My heart is committing its own mutiny, crawling all the way into my throat and refusing to get down like a baby monkey running from a tiger.

I don’t know what words are when his eyes burn into mine, glowing with mischief and something else. Something different.

So I don’t say anything at all.

“Elizabeth’s an automotive genius. Just like her mom.” His eyes turn tender again.

The topic throws me off my game.

Makes me want to be soft in return.

“Right now, she says she wants to be a mechanic.” It’s why she was so amazed by Max’s speech at the press conference. He made me into a hero who saved the day. And she saw that. Appreciated it.

“I bet it was decided from birth.”

“Maybe. She doesn’t know anything else. I had her reading auto mechanic magazines since she was two. She spends most of her time in garages, waiting for me to get off work. It’s her world.”

“And she’s thriving in it. One look was all it took for me to see that she’s well-loved and well-taken care of.”

It's a big compliment and it means something coming from him.

"I'm sorry Trevor wasn't mature enough to be there for you two."

A weight settles on my chest and just won't leave. "Why are you apologizing? It's not like you were the one I slept with that night."

Would things have been different if I'd met Max instead of his brother? Would he have taken responsibility for that stupid, drunken mistake all the way? Would Beth have a father who showed up instead of one that keeps bailing on his responsibilities?

"It doesn't matter. He's gone now."

Max pinches his lips. "Actually, he's not."

"What?"

"The press made up the story. The police think they have a lead on him. They're following it now."

I blink.

Max takes my chin in his hands. "Does that bother you? The fact that he's alive?"

Yes.

No.

Maybe?

Thorny, complex emotions are clawing at my stomach. If Trevor's still alive, that means there's a chance he'll try to bully his way back into Beth's life. That means Beth will have proof that her father is alive when I always told her he was dead.

She'll also have proof that Max is her uncle.

Her uncle.

And if I give into these feelings between me and Max...

It's not right.

None of this...

I step back. "You could have told me sooner."

"Was never a good time."

"Is there ever a good time to admit your brother is fake dead?" I move back again.

I don't get far. Max wraps his arms around my waist and draws me back to him. "Before you get skittish, let me take you somewhere."

I let him whisk me to my car. I let him take the driver's seat. I let him drive me to the racetrack and I should have known he would go there. After

everything Hadyn told me, I should have known that would be the place Max Stinton feels the most like himself.

Like Max.

Just Max.

He stops the car on a hill that overlooks the city. The night sky sprawls low over the land and twinkles brighter than the lights from a hundred skyscrapers.

“This place is where I go when I need to think.” He glances over his shoulder at the backseat. “You got a blanket in here?”

I hand it over and he climbs out of the car, opens my door and gestures for me to get out. When I move too slowly, he slips his hands around my waist.

The heat of his palm against my back makes me gasp. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you out of this big truck.”

“I can get down on my own.”

“Trust me. I’m aware.” He continues to pull me against his body and swoop me down to the ground.

Lovely.

Max Stinton is still a rogue, but there’s a hint of tenderness underneath it and it’s totally disarming.

The bulk of him crowds me on the blanket. His muscular forearm brushes against mine as we both try to lie on the giant square fabric that’s meant for my tiny frame and my even tinier daughter.

My heart is pounding like crazy.

I can’t even blame it on anger this time.

Awesome.

When I glance over, trying to sneak in a peek, Max catches me and smiles. I quickly avert my gaze, feeling like a high school girl out with the bad boy senior.

“Did you bring me out here just to look at stars?” I sound like I’m complaining but, when I get a good look at the heavens, it takes my breath away.

I haven’t seen a view like this in a long time.

Stars twinkle everywhere, pressing in on all sides so it feels like we’re practically being showered in light. A quiet hush of wind fills the air with

music. It's almost like we're the only two people in the world right now, and there's an intimate sense of awe that falls on me.

Max's voice drawls low and close to my ear. "My mother worked for Hadyn's family. She was the receptionist at this track."

My eyes widen and I whip around to face him.

He's lying on his side, looking at me the way I was looking at the stars. With something close to gratitude and a hint of reverence.

He leans in close, so close I can feel the scratch of his beard against my dark skin. He stares me right in the eyes as if he wants to see himself in them. As if he needs that connection.

"It's where she met my dad. Where they fell in love. She didn't know he was married."

My heart slams against my ribs. There's a riot in my chest, a storm building inside me.

Why is he being so honest?

Why is the cold, imposing leader of Stinton Group showing me all his scars?

I don't understand.

I can't get a read on him.

"She found out when she went to tell him she was pregnant, but by then it was too late. I was already on the way. So she buried her love for him. I saw it steal the light from her eyes. I saw the way she died a little every time dad kept us a secret. I hated him at first. She was the one who convinced me not to. Said that life isn't always black and white. Said that I should focus on what I could control. Like being ready to take what belonged to me. She truly believed that when the time came, he'd make me a part of his family." He frowns darkly. "Dad was a ghost until my thirteenth birthday. That's when his first wife, Trevor's mother, died. He finally thought Stinton Group was ready to meet his bastard child."

I curl my fingers into fists.

"I wasn't always a Stinton." He looks up at the stars. "For thirteen years, I was just the receptionist's kid. I was Hadyn's playmate when he stopped by to visit. I was a nobody. But that ended when I came to Stinton Group. I had things to prove. I had people who hated me because of the way I was born and never let me forget it."

I lean close to him. Eye to eye. Nose to nose. "I'm sorry."

“I’m not telling you to gain sympathy, Dawn. I want you to know that I understand what’s happening with you and Elizabeth, maybe more than anyone. I understand why you want to keep her away from Stinton Group. I’m not trying to stop you from protecting her. I just don’t want you to think that you have to protect her from me.”

Every inch of me throbs like crazy as I meet the eyes of this beautiful, complicated man.

It’s hard to remember why I should stay away when he’s this close. Close enough that his breath is starting to become my own.

His eyes drop to my lips for a second.

I reach out and press my hand to his face, running my fingers over his scruff. The tension that sizzles between us is a quiet thing, but just because it’s not loud doesn’t make it any less powerful.

All this time, I’ve been holding myself back by remembering who he is.

But now I’m starting to wonder if I know this man at all.

Is the cold, cruel king who held my daughter for ransom the real Max Stinton, or is it the gentle, open and vulnerable man in front of me?

I can’t make sense of it.

Of him.

As the darkness presses in on either side, I realize that I want to believe the man I’m seeing now.

Max’s gaze is smoldering.

The faint sounds of the night fade away as I lose myself in his eyes.

“I never got to thank you for what you did with the Mila Dubois situation,” I say quietly.

“It was nothing.”

“It was something. And whether you want to admit it or not, Max, you have a heart beating somewhere underneath here.” I place a hand to his chest. “You could have easily thrown Henry under the bus and you didn’t. You take responsibility, even to your own detriment. It’s a strength, but it’s also a weakness. And it makes me wonder,” I lick my lips, “what if I said I wanted to take responsibility for you too?”

“What are you doing to me, Dawn?” His words are a groan. “I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t stop worrying about you.”

I shudder.

“You ruined me,” he whispers.

Just like that, I decide I’m not going to hold back anymore.

Surging over the blanket, I grab his face and latch on to his lips with a desperation that takes even Max by surprise.

He goes still.

And then he wraps his arms around me and kisses me back.

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CHAPTER 14

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THE LIES WE TELL

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MAX

HER HEART IS ROARING beneath my palm, racing, thudding, throwing a fit.

My heart is doing the same.

I gather her nearer, closing my eyes and inhaling her.

Damn. I could devour her for hours.

I am.

I will.

The kiss stretches on to eternity.

Perfect.

Sweet.

Her lips—

I've fantasized about what they'd taste like, feel like against mine.

Nothing I could have imagined lives up to the real deal.

She's so soft against me. So delectably sensual.

I knew we had chemistry, but I didn't expect the strange, crushing surge that's sweeping through my chest. An indescribable feeling that tells me I would burn Stinton Group to the ground for the woman in my arms.

It's the most frightening thing I've ever felt in my life.

Even as I realize it, I can't let her go. Shadows move around us as I crush her mouth with the pressure of my kiss, needing her to feel just a taste of the chaos she's inflicted on me.

Her moan filters through my ears.

Music.

A glorious rhapsody.

It leaves me breathless, numb, like the entire length of my body has been plucked and is vibrating at a frequency that only Dawn Banner can hear. A quivering heat that floods me from my head to my toes.

She curls her fingers into my shirt, dragging me closer as if she wants me to smother the rest of her body the way I'm smothering her lips.

I answer by rolling over her, pressing the weight of my body into her and pushing her deeper into the blanket.

Holy crap.

Lightning explodes between us, an electricity that threatens to singe every tree within a ten-mile radius.

I ease back to look into her eyes. Make sure I'm not dreaming.

Her sultry gaze drips over me like honey. Wet and inviting.

I'm trapped in this woman.

The way she makes me feel alive.

The way I want to protect her and Beth with everything in me.

The way my entire world is ripping open.

How the hell did I resist her this long?

I smirk when she wraps her arms around me and pulls me down again. Our lips meet in a slow, exploring kiss. But I quicken the pace of it as a buzzing starts in my veins. It's passion. And it's whipping around, wreaking havoc in my body and on my mind.

I tilt her head forcefully. Trapping her to the blanket, I pin her down with my leg. My hands hold her face in place as I ravish her.

Gorgeous.

Breathtaking.

She's more beautiful than the stars lighting up the sky tonight.

Dawn places her hand on my chest when I try to shrug her shorts down her legs.

I pause, not rolling off her.

Hell no.

Desire is eating me alive.

Would need a crowbar to pry me off this woman.

She pins her lips together, gazing into my eyes. "Max."

I draw a deep, shaky breath as her tongue curls over my name. It's a raw and vulnerable sound.

My body hardens.

There's no resisting her.

It's a lost cause.

I'm absolutely screwed.

"I can't make the same mistake again." She shakes her head. "I can't afford to. I have a child to consider."

My body runs cold. Is she rejecting me?

She plays with the hem of her shirt. "This is... we..."

"What?" I push up on my hands so I'm hovering over her.

"The two of us aren't good... I mean, we aren't..."

"If you can't finish the lie, then don't lie at all," I growl.

Her eyes flicker away.

I curl my fingers into fists. "We aren't the same, but we both know that. It hasn't stopped us from being drawn to each other. And I love Beth. I haven't known her long, but I know enough to say she's incredible."

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters."

"You're her uncle," Dawn hisses the word like it's scandalous.

I shrug. That's not something I can change. And it obviously bothers her more than it bothers me.

"It's not like you and I are related," I tell her, running my fingers over her forehead. The fact that she's clear-headed enough to have this conversation reveals how stubborn she is. I can barely keep my thoughts straight. "It's not illegal."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point?"

She nibbles on her bottom lip.

I press my thumb there and free her savage mouth from her teeth. "Dawn, I can't change that I'm Trevor's brother."

"I know."

"Then?"

"We don't make sense," she says.

Laughter rumbles in my chest. "Since when does love make sense?"

Her eyebrows arch.

I realize what I've said and my cheeks burn.

It's too late to walk it back.

I've said it.

It's the truth.

"Don't say things you don't mean, Max."

My eyebrows thunder together. "You challenge me. You force me to consider a new perspective. I respect you. Everything you've accomplished on your own. Everything that you are. What else should I call it?"

"What if this is just a temporary passion?"

"Oh come on, Dawn."

"I'm not a supermodel, okay? I'm not the belle of the ball. I don't do schmoozing and hosting parties. I can't fit into your glitzy world."

"The hell? What does hosting a party have to do with us?"

“If all you want is a pretty little thing on your arm, then let’s not play this game.”

“What game? You’re the one who kissed me first.”

She opens her mouth to argue, realizes I’m right and then her eyes glitter. “Fine. Then let’s call this a mistake. You can go and sweet-talk one of the women in your social circle. Go ask Vanya to introduce you to her supermodel friends—”

Frustration makes my voice low and brash. “Why would I want a supermodel?” I lift her fingers, trace my thumb over the stains that can’t quite leave her hands. “No one looks half as sexy in a pair of over-alls as you. And watching you work on cars is enough to make my blood boil. You have no idea how many times I’ve wanted you while you were bent over the hood of a truck. And these hands.” I capture them. “These are the most beautiful hands I’ve ever—”

I’m gone before her mouth clamps on mine.

Damn.

There’s nothing gentle about this kiss.

It’s as aggressive as every argument we’ve ever had since we met, and yet so much deeper—lips tangling, nipping, warring and charging between desperate breaths. I’m *bruising* her with my bites, with every desperate sweep that makes me intimately acquainted with the inside of her mouth.

The more I taste of her the more I want to sample.

She moans again.

My brain explodes and my blood turns to molten lava.

She steals my breath.

This woman.

My hands slide over her hips as my world turns buttery and warm.

Tongue.

Teeth.

Fireworks.

Joy.

Any bit of doubt that lingered in my head is obliterated by the taste of her, by the fingers that dig into my back like she’s trying to leave an imprint in my skin. By the heat of her body that meets mine in a roll of temptation and desire.

It’s way more than just wanting her.

It’s wanting her to the point that I would give up everything for her.

Dangerous.

I knew she was dangerous from the moment our eyes first met.

Oh, but it's worth it.

I take control of the kiss and let the howling storm of need turn my touch a little rougher. I nip at her neck and she scrapes my back with her nails, taunting me with a pain so delicious that I almost can't handle it.

I'm thinking of what body part I should start kissing on next, when I feel two hands pressing into my chest insistently.

I don't ignore it.

Easing back, I look down at Dawn.

Her eyes are two shining jewels in a face kissed by the sun, the moon and all the stars. So small. So soft. So fragile.

My heart is crashing in my chest like I'm falling off a sugar rush.

"Slow. I want to go slow," she mutters.

It takes me a minute to realize she's not asking me to go slowly in bed, which I would do in a freaking heartbeat.

I tilt my head to the side.

She's addictive.

I'm obsessed with her.

Slow? Can I do that?

"Beth is..." She presses her lips together. "You're saying all the right things, but I can't take chances anymore. I can't just jump into this blindly. There's a lot to consider."

I play her words over and over in my mind. Hear the fear in them. See the way she's holding herself back.

It makes me want to fight harder.

I get that she's scared.

Trevor broke her trust.

Maybe the men after my brother did too. I don't know and it doesn't matter.

Nothing else matters but the future I'm going to build with Dawn Banner.

Everything. I want everything from her.

She ignites a desire I've never felt before and I'm not going to give it up for anything.

Dawn breathes out slowly. "I mean that, Max. I don't want to rush anything. If that's a problem, then tell me right now. Nothing... nothing's

changed between us. We can get up and pretend this never happened.”

If I didn’t know her so well, I’d be offended.

But I know she’s just protecting herself. I know why she’s protecting herself too. She didn’t get this far by being weak and caving to every pressure. She didn’t turn into the genius mechanic because she jumped into situations that might be dangerous for her.

I’m not dealing with an ordinary woman.

If I were, she’d be naked and purring for me already. She would have been bawling my name to the moon and begging me and the stars for mercy.

But if it *were* any other woman, my heart wouldn’t have been moved.

I’ve gone crazy for her because she’s Dawn.

She’s the rough-talking female mechanic who has no problems putting me and anyone else in their place. She doesn’t fit in my world of subordinates and people-pleasers. She’s not interested in me because of my money or my status. Hell, she’s probably wrestling with her feelings *because* of who I am.

It’s a cold slap to the face to know I can’t go any further than kissing tonight. But it hurts so freaking good because it’s Dawn.

And she’s already got me wrapped around her little finger.

I’ll take anything she dishes out.

I’ll do whatever she wants.

“Max?”

“I understand.” I slide my fingers over her dark face.

She starts to tremble. Those vicious lips are begging for a harsher punishment and I’m just the man to dole out the lesson. Within her boundaries, of course.

I take her bottom lip in and nip it with my teeth. “You don’t want me to gobble you up on the first night that I confess my feelings for you.”

“That’s not...”

“You don’t want me taking off your clothes,” I slide a finger down the zipper of her shorts, “until you’re sure that I’m not just playing around with you. You have a daughter to consider. You don’t have room to fool around.” I slide my thumb against her inner thigh. “Even if you want to.”

Her little hiss of need rips open a piece of me that I thought had gone dead a long time ago.

My lips arch up in what I know is a primal smile. “Fine, wolverine. For tonight, all we’ll do is kiss.” To confirm it, I press my lips to her forehead. “It’s enough that you know how I feel about you.”

Her fingers slide over the back of my neck. “When exactly did you start feeling this way about me?”

“I’m not sure.” I squint at the moon. “Was it when you tried to kill a man with a spanner?”

“Kill?” She lets out a disbelieving laugh.

“Or was it when you tried to slap me in the elevator?” I rub a circle into her hip.

“It sounds like you have a thing about violence.”

I smirk. “No, I think it started from the moment Hills called me and told me a crazy female mechanic locked them in a room and fixed my car in ten minutes when other professionals couldn’t do it in ten months.”

She flutters those thick lashes and I forget my own name. “I am pretty impressive, aren’t I?”

“Toot your own horn, darling. I don’t mind.”

She laughs and then gets serious.

I gaze down at her. “What?”

“Nothing.”

My heart pounds as I stare at her. She’s not exactly shouting her love for me from the rooftops, but she’s not pushing me away either. That’s a start.

“Max.” Her voice is an intimate thrum between us. “Max.”

“Keep saying my name like that and I won’t have a shred of self-restraint left, wolverine.”

She arches her back like someone yanked a string and wraps me in a hug. It takes everything inside me not to put my hands on her and maul every inch of her body.

Her eyes meet mine.

She smiles.

Siren.

Witch.

Maybe it’s written on my face.

Or maybe she’s trying to test me.

But I can see that she trusts me.

She trusts that she can push and tease and prod at me. She can moan into my neck with the ferocity of an exploding rock concert. She can run

her hands down my chest and over my body like she owns every inch of it. She can kiss me and part her lips wider and fuse her tongue to mine, attacking me with savage delight.

And she knows I won't do anything more.

I won't push my hands down her pants or take any of her clothes off.

I'm not going to go beyond the pace that she set.

Never.

Because I care about her more than I care about my own lusts. More than I care about my schedule. Maybe even more than I care about Stinton Group.

I've given her that much power over me.

And she's reveling in it.

When we've both run out of breath, we stop kissing and hug on the blanket.

I watch her smile more than I watch the stars and I promise myself that I'm never going to lose that trust, not if I can—

"Talking about Beth, you being her uncle and all, there's something I want to ask you," Dawn whispers, her head tucked against my side, "it's about eight years ago, after I told Trevor I was pregnant."

My heart slams against my ribs.

Ice crawls through my veins.

"Eight years ago?"

She rolls on her side and props her head up with her elbow. "Some lawyers knocked on my door in the early days of my pregnancy. They said they were from Stinton Group. They tried to get me to 'take care of the problem'. Said that Trevor didn't have any room in his life for a child and that I would be better off if I took their money and terminated my baby." Her eyes get hard as flint. "They offered me cash to end Beth's life."

It hits me like a ton of bricks in that moment.

This is why she hates Stinton Group.

For some reason, I thought Trevor's irresponsible behavior played a part in her hatred. Or maybe it was because our company had screwed her family over in one way or another. I thought there was a story about a business crumbling because we'd acquired it. I thought someone had lost their job or their house.

I didn't know it was about Beth.

I didn't know it was this personal.

My mouth falls open. Shut. Open again.

A pulsing horror sweeps through my veins and makes me speechless.

“From the shock on your face, I’m guessing you didn’t know about this.” She grits her teeth. “I knew it. It was Trevor who sent those lawyers, wasn’t it?” Her lips curl up in a snarl. “If he ever comes back, he better stay as far from me as possible.”

“Why?” I blink rapidly. My face is as pale as the moonlight and I inch away from her.

Guilt crawls into the space between us and lies down next to me, cold and slimy.

“Why?” She scrunches her nose.

“It was eight years ago. He might not be the same person he was then. He might not make those kinds of decisions anymore.”

“The fact that he might have changed does not rid him of the blame. I got the feeling those lawyers had done that before. It means Trevor’s been going around making those despicable offers to frightened, vulnerable women for *years*.”

Each word that flies from her mouth is a nail in my coffin.

“I could never forgive him for doing that. I couldn’t forgive *anyone* for doing something like that. It’s evil...”

I flinch.

“... It’s despicable.”

I cringe harder.

She looks up at me with her dark brown eyes. “You didn’t know anything about that, right?”

Panic builds in my throat.

I’m not the type of man who tiptoes around the things I’ve done for Stinton Group. I’ve always been proud that, under my management, the company saw growth at a breakneck speed. It proves that I’m not the failure the family would like to paint me out to be. It proves that I heeded mom’s advice. I’m taking everything that belongs to me.

“Max?”

This time, when she says my name, it feels like a surprise gunshot to the chest.

How is it that Dawn Banner’s turned me inside out?

How is it that I’ve changed so much I’d spend every cent in my bank account to capture the moon for her if she asked?

But she's not asking for the moon now. No, those dark brown eyes are asking if I'm the type of man who would pressure her into getting an abortion just so I didn't have to deal with her baby having ties to Stinton Group. Just so Beth... so my niece, wouldn't be alive.

My chest rises and falls rapidly.

"No." The word jumps out of my mouth before I've thought it through. "I had no idea."

* * *

I'M GLAD WHEN SUNNY CALLS AND SAYS THAT BETH WANTS TO GO HOME, cutting our night short. Glad when Dawn drops me off at a pass as she hurries to get her daughter. Glad when her truck gets smaller in my line of sight.

Although 'glad' really isn't the word I want to use.

More like gut-punched.

I lied to her.

I looked the woman I'm crazy about in the eyes and I couldn't even fathom telling her the truth.

It's not like I'm a saint.

I've done much worse in my stint to keep Stinton Group above water. I've bluffed my way through M&As and played hardball with investors. I'm well acquainted with bending the truth to my own will if it'll help me in business. But I always brushed it off to the game before. I could remain detached and unmoved.

That's impossible in this situation.

Dawn is barely giving me a chance, and my first act in our relationship was to pull the wool over her eyes.

If that's not the dirtiest thing...

No, the dirtiest thing was sending those lawyers in the first place.

Damn. I can't imagine the way she'd look at me if she knew.

I run my hands over my face.

They're shaking.

I call Hills to pick me up because I don't want to catch a cab right now. I don't want to go home either.

Evil.

Despicable.

Those were the words Dawn threw at me.

She didn't know they were meant for me. Didn't know she was slicing a knife through my gut with every insult.

Trucks go by.

The wind blows.

I see none of it. Feel none of it.

Hills pulls to the side of the road and blows his horn.

I startle.

He opens the car and jogs over to me. Reaching out, my best friend shrieks, "Did you get stabbed?"

"What?"

"Gun shot? What is it?" His eyes rove over me. "Why didn't you tell me you needed to go to the hospital?"

"I don't."

"What?"

"I'm fine," I growl. Pushing him back, I lumber to my feet and stomp to his car.

Hills watches me with a surprised expression. "You were hunched over, looking like death. What the hell was I supposed to think?"

I grit my teeth and stare straight ahead.

Hills gets into the car and angrily grabs his seatbelt. "Enjoyed playing hooky today? I hope you know that I barely got the board off your scent. You've never taken a day off. Ever. Everyone kept asking if you had a terminal illness."

"I told Dawn how I felt about her tonight," I blurt.

Hills's eyes pop out of his face. His fingers slither over the steering wheel as he processes. "Okay... did she reject you? Is that why you look so terrible?"

"No, she didn't reject me. Not outright." I roll a hand over my face. "She asked me if I was the one who sent the lawyers eight years ago."

He jerks on the wheel and the car goes flying into the next lane.

A car zooms toward us, beeping like crazy.

"Hills!"

He rights the vehicle, his chest heaving. Slamming on the brakes, he glances over at me. "What did you say?"

“What could I say to that?” I roughly pop the top button of my shirt. “I couldn’t admit it.”

He curses under his breath.

My gut churns.

Scum.

Yeah, I deserve that label.

“Maybe you should break up with her.”

My eyes narrow sharply.

Hills lifts a hand. “Think about it. You’ll always be nervous about her finding out. You’ll never be happy tiptoeing around a bomb that could go off any minute. Better to cut your losses and find someone else.”

That’s impossible.

If I could have moved on that easily from Dawn, I wouldn’t have let her know my feelings in the first place. She snuck up on me when I wasn’t looking. Got under my skin before I could build a defense against her.

Giving her up is not an option.

“No.” I curl my fingers into fists. “That’s not going to work.” Inhaling deeply, I let my mind settle into a comfortable, problem-solving rhythm. I’ve been handling Stinton Group for years. When you’re steering a huge conglomerate, there’s no such thing as smooth sailing. I’ve handled everything that comes my way. This is no different. Squeezing my eyes shut, I mumble, “I’m going to tell her.”

Hills arches both eyebrows. “You are?”

“But not now.” I relax my fingers. “I’m going to show her who I am. Show her that she and Beth are everything to me. That they have nothing to fear from me. When I’ve convinced her that she can trust me,” I jut my chin down, “I’ll tell her then.”

Hills scoffs. “That’s sounds like a terrible plan.”

It might be.

But it’s the only one I’ve got.

* * *

I DON’T SLEEP THAT NIGHT.

My insides curdle with guilt when I get a goodnight text from Dawn.

When unease haunts my dreams, I get up and start plotting out all the things I'm going to do for her.

I have a spreadsheet, project timeline, and email drafted to my accountant by three a.m.

By four a.m., I'm at the gym, gripping weights and trying to convince myself that lying to Dawn will totally work out.

At five-thirty, I'm outside the most famous cafe in the city, waiting for the doors to open so I can snag Dawn and Beth croissants and piping hot strudels.

At six, I leave the breakfast on their door and send Dawn a text.

She didn't like how grand breakfast by Chef Aimsley was.

Fine.

But she can't refuse a homemade meal that costs about fifteen bucks.

I've got an early morning meeting with the board of Stinton Investment, so I don't have a free moment until the afternoon.

"Hills," I stride into my office and snag my keys, "does Dawn have any promotions today?"

"She's supposed to be doing a photoshoot for that luxury toolbox brand. After that, she'll be on the *Shane Johnson Garage* show."

"Perfect." I scoop my keys up and stride past him.

Hills stops me with a hand. "Max, I really don't have a good feeling about this."

"She's not gonna find out."

"She's a distraction. And a liability. If the board finds out you two are together—"

"There's no rule against me dating Dawn."

"It's not about you dating her. It's about how they'll try to tear into her if they find out how much she means to you. Dawn has a daughter. It means she's got a really big weakness."

"My niece isn't a weakness."

"Anybody you love that much is a weakness." He gives me a pointed stare.

"Just come out and say it, Hills. Dancing around the point has never been your strong suit."

"Fine." He spits. "Look, this is all starting to feel like a game of Jenga and the whole thing is about to come crashing down."

"I have it under control."

“Like hell you do! I’ve never seen you act this way, Stinton. You’re obsessed with this woman. She’s taking over your life, and it shows. You’re not thinking rationally. You’re desperate. It’s unlike you. You don’t second-guess yourself. You barge in. You get it done. You leave without apology. Seeing you act this way worries me. It’s only a matter of time before you make a mistake.”

“I appreciate your concern, Hills, but I plan on having Dawn *and* Stinton Group. I won’t give either of them up. So relax.”

“How can I relax when you don’t even have a decent plan?” Hills mumbles.

He’s got a point.

But I’ll never admit it.

I steer him aside and head to Dawn’s photoshoot because I need to see her. Need it like I need air.

Jefferson is there on the sidelines. Since he has a soft spot for Dawn, I assigned him to accompany her to these events. I know that he’ll look out for her if she’s put in a dangerous position. Although I don’t like the way he looks at her, he hasn’t done anything untoward, so I haven’t mentioned it yet.

“Mr. Stinton.” Jefferson glances up in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Just checking in.”

The director glances at me and then doubles-back. “Stinton, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Not here to interrupt.” I wave at Dawn who narrows her eyes in my direction. I gesture to her. “Carry on.”

She rolls her eyes.

Seeing that attitude makes me smile. My gaze runs over her as the photoshoot continues. She’s wearing her jumper halfway. The arms are tied around her waist along with a plaid jacket. Her top is a clingy white vest that shows off her curves. A curly ponytail swings with every toss of her head.

She’s a vision.

I dig my fingers into the chair, watching her work in front of the camera and marveling at how natural she is as she poses.

When the photographer stops to refresh the set, I notice Dawn touch her throat and cough a little.

My eyebrows draw together and I frown. “She’s thirsty.”

No one hears me.

I raise my voice. “Someone get her some water.”

The crew members stop and stare at me.

Dawn does too.

Confusion sweeps across her face.

“Hey! Get her some water!” The director yells, gesturing to one of the crew members.

A second later, someone flies across the room and hands Dawn a bottle of water.

She takes it with a dip of her head and then sends me an annoyed look that seems to say *what’s with you?*

I jut my chin in her direction *what are you going to do about it?*

The director glances at me. “Can we start, Mr. Stinton?”

I nod. Fold my arms over my chest. Watch Dawn intently until the shoot is over.

When it’s done, she slants me a dark look and then pulls out her phone.

I get a text a second later.

DAWN: Stop staring at me like that.

ME: Like what?

DAWN: Like you’re going to bite off the head of anyone who talks to me.

I lift my gaze to hers.

She mouths, “*Relax.*”

Warmth explodes in my chest. Just like that, in a freaking second, she flips a switch.

All the anxiety, all the tension, the tightening in my chest—it goes away.

She’s the antidote to all the poison. What the hell am I going to do without her?

My phone pings with a message.

DAWN: What are you doing after this?

I’m about to text her back when the screen shifts to green and a phone icon starts dancing in front of me.

Every muscle in my body pulls tight when I see that it’s the police calling.

I grip the arm of my chair, debating whether I should answer.

The phone goes quiet.

Then it starts ringing again.

I head outside to take the call. Something tells me I'll need the privacy.

"This is Max Stinton," I bark, staring out at the trees just beyond the warehouse.

"Mr. Stinton."

The air pressure gets hotter. Makes it hard to breathe.

"We have some news about Trevor Stinton."

"What... happened to him?"

"He was located on an island off the coast of Madrid. He was involved in a bar fight and got arrested by the local police."

I stumble back.

I can't think.

Can't breathe.

I shake my head. "Where is he now?"

"In the custody of the international police." He pauses. "Mr. Stinton, they're bringing your brother home."

CHAPTER 15

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RAISIN NUT REVEALS

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DAWN

THERE'S a sizzle in the air that I can actually *hear* whenever Max looks at me.

I'm not sure when I became so in-tuned to him but, earlier, during the photoshoot, I found myself looking at him way more than I would in the past. Maybe it's because he hasn't been to one of these photoshoots in a really long time. Or maybe I'm letting my feelings get ahead of me.

I'm still trying to wrap my brain around his confession.

We argue with each other as naturally as we breathe. It's not like that part of our relationship can change in a day. Just because there's an attraction doesn't mean we're suited for a relationship either.

What if he figures that out? What if last night was just a spur of the moment thing, inspired by the starry night and the vulnerability he felt after sharing his story about his mother?

Last night, I tried to prepare myself for the inevitability of Max taking back his words.

Then I prepared myself for what life would be like if he didn't. What would all that intensity feel like pointed at me?

It both thrilled and frightened me.

Max is raw, unrestrained power.

He does everything with a brusqueness, a fearlessness. The ferocity of an angry tiger.

What would love look like in his eyes? In his manner?

Turns out, it's just as rough as the rest of him. Just as pushy and obnoxious and irresistibly intimidating. During the photoshoot, he watched me like he would pounce to his feet, cross the room and defend me if I so much as pricked my finger on the car engine. He barked out an order to get me water as if he would flay everyone and use their bodies as a human bridge to get to the water cooler.

I should be scared of that passion, but I'm not.

I'm excited.

Giddy.

Alive.

But I can't run away with those feelings. The 'leave it all up to chance' part of my heart is what got me pregnant in the first place. I need to fold up my impulsiveness and put it back where it belongs, no matter what.

I'm a woman, yes. But I'm a mother first.

Beth is always my priority and introducing a relationship to her—

Especially with a man who has ties to Stinton Group—

Who *is* Stinton Group—

Sure, Max isn't to blame for what happened in the past. As Sunny suspected, he had nothing to do with those lawyers who pressured me to get rid of my baby. He's not that big of a douchebag and I'm really freaking relieved about that. But there are still so many problems in front of us.

Namely, he's still Beth's uncle.

I can't afford to let this electric spark carry me away and find out I made a mistake after. My daughter deserves better than that.

I do too.

So why am I still so eager to see him?

"Can you just... can you not move for a second?" The makeup artist dots at my face with her brush. They're changing my makeup for the other show that I'm filming.

I jerk my face up.

She gives me a stern look.

"Sorry." I try to stop squirming, but my excitement leaks out in the jitter of my knee.

My heart hasn't pounded like this in a decade.

I hope Max hasn't left yet. Should I text him?

There's a light tap on the door of the makeup room.

I glance up and the man at the center of my thoughts is standing in the doorway. Max Stinton prowls into the room, all scowls and confidence. His eyes are stormy with frustration. A dark cloud spitting lightning seems to follow him. If he swung a black cape and bared his fangs, he would have looked less intimidating.

Sometimes, I wonder if I went and fell for the villain of the story instead of the knight on the white horse.

The makeup assistant straightens and casts Max a frightened stare. "Mr. Stinton."

"I need the room," he says brusquely.

I narrow my eyes at him.

He purses his lips *what?*

I arch an eyebrow and push my lips out toward the makeup assistant who's shaking in her boots.

Max sighs, twists his expression into what he probably thinks is a less intimidating stare (it's not), and nods. "Excuse me. Can I have the room?"

"Ehem." I clear my throat.

"... Please."

"S-sure." She sets the makeup brush on the desk and scurries away.

The door clicks shut behind her.

As silence settles, I give Max a surveying look. He's wearing a suit again, a strict departure from the more casual button-down and jeans he was wearing last night. The pinstripe design on his jacket highlights the broadness of his shoulders and those long, long legs. His belt and shoes match the dark tones of his hair.

My eyes fix on his mouth—

Is it getting hot in here?

One glimpse at those pink lips and my blood boils to a thousand degrees.

I can't unsee the moment he devoured me beneath the stars.

I can't help but remember how firm his body was beneath my hand as I raked my nails over his shirt.

No matter how much I told myself to tame my passion, I ended up flinging myself at him again. And again. A surge of longing that couldn't be contained and refused to be tempered.

Max brings out all those forbidden feelings in me. My heart, the rebel that it is, starts beating faster when I notice he's glaring at my lips. He's definitely obsessed with that particular part of my body. Wait... is that why he's always staring at my face?

"Did you need something?" I try to ignore the tingly feelings spreading through my stomach. Just because Max and I are alone in a room doesn't mean anything has to happen.

I mean, I wouldn't *mind* if it did.

But it doesn't have to.

His eyes narrow. A hawk spying a mouse. "I wanted to attend the taping with you, but I can't."

"That's fine." I turn to the mirror and fiddle with my earring. The stylist blended gold into my cheekbones again. According to the head makeup

artist, gold is my super-color. My eyelids are dusted with hints of red and it matches the flaming shade of my lips. My normally frizzy afro has been tamed with water, a hard brush and half a bucket of gel. My curls are spiraling down my back.

I felt pretty before Max came in.

One look at him though, and I feel like a vision.

His eyes rove my face hungrily. My mouth nearly hurts from the pressure of his gaze, but he doesn't move from the door.

I arch an eyebrow. "Is that all you wanted to say?"

"No."

My lips curve up knowingly.

I wait for him to continue.

He still doesn't.

Pushing up from my chair, I lean a hand against the desk and tease, "Did you rush in here just to glare at me? Because if you did, that's annoying."

"I didn't know my mere presence was annoying."

"Oh, very annoying. *Super* annoying." My heels click softly on the floor in a rhythm that's much slower than the quickening beat of my heart. Max watches my approach, something lethal and heavy glinting in his gaze. I smile. "But I think you enjoy that."

His gaze holds me hostage. "I have a question."

"About?"

"The night you met Trevor."

I almost buck like I got shot. Those were the absolute last words I expected to hear him say.

"That night." Max steps forward. "When you met him." Another step. "What drew you to him?"

"Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

He flattens his lips together. The silence thickens between us, but it's not calm and quiet. It's heated, jumping with a dangerous magnetism that makes me want to both grab Max close and push him far away from me.

I lift my chin. "What's going on, Max?"

"I'll tell you after you answer."

A dark and crackling energy simmers in my chest. He's always like this. Closed-off and mysterious. If I didn't wake up with the taste of his lips still

on my mouth, I wouldn't believe that he was so open with me last night. It's like I'm looking at a different man.

I breathe so hard my shoulders lift and fall. "It was a week after my dad died. I was going crazy missing him and I was tired of crying, so I asked my friend Luana to take me drinking. Somewhere loud. Somewhere I could blend in and scream and cry and no one would notice."

His lips pull in.

A senseless part of me wants to wrap my arms around him and hold on tight. Wants to tell him the past doesn't matter and why are we talking about this when we could be kissing? He already said he has to leave. It's not like we have a lot of time. Why are we spending the moments we're together talking about Trevor of all people?

Focus, Dawn.

Max obviously has something to work through and I'm willing to share with him. I have nothing to hide.

"Trevor was there that night. It was impossible not to notice him. He had a big crowd around him. They were cheering him on while he took shots." I purse my lips, remembering the way he'd glanced up and found me in the crowd. "When he saw me, he came right over and offered to buy me a drink. I told him no at first." I glance away so stiffly my neck cracks. "But he made up a stupid challenge. Said if he could drink seven glasses of tequila, I owed him a dance."

"Sounds like him," Max rumbles.

"On the dance floor, I started thinking about my dad again and I..." I let out a breath. "I started crying. He could have been a jerk about it, but he took me to the VIP section. To one of the empty rooms. And he talked to me. I told him about the funeral I attended and he told me about his mom. He said, uh," I glance up at Max, "that he felt lost without her. That he had an older brother who was perfect at everything and suddenly, he didn't fit in his own family."

Max shifts back, blinks and then frowns harder.

I can practically feel the dismay crushing him.

That conversation with Trevor never made much sense to me. Not until last night, when Max admitted how he came into the Stinton family.

"I felt sorry for him. For myself. That's how we ended up at a hotel."

Max squeezes his eyes shut.

I wince, bracing myself for his comments.

This is weird, right? Talking about the guy I had a one-night stand with. Talking about how I hooked up with *his brother*. This isn't a normal conversation. This isn't a conversation I ever wanted to have with Max.

"I'm not hearing that you liked him," he mumbles finally. "Was it just pity?"

My eyes widen, and I chuckle.

"Was it?" His blue eyes pin me in place.

"Does that matter?"

"It really does, Dawn."

I fold my arms over my chest.

He's giving me whiplash.

From a blazing inferno of desire to fighting back a smile, and now he's making my chest ache in the worst way. I have a feeling that whatever's putting that look of frustration on Max's face has a lot to do with his brother.

Sympathy.

It's *swelling* in my chest as I watch this giant, imposing man try to wrestle through these complicated problems all on his own, believing that he's the only one who can solve them. Believing that he's the only one who has a stake in finding answers.

It hits me then, just how much Max has been suffering at the hands of Stinton Group too. I've been so transfixed on my own hatred for the company, my own unease with dating my daughter's uncle, that I didn't realize Max might have his own fears and worries.

I reach up on the tips of my toes and frame his cheeks with my hands. Staring at him thoughtfully, I whisper, "Even if Trevor came back right this minute, I wouldn't be interested in him."

He stops breathing for a second. I can feel his entire body respond to the words.

It puzzles me.

My eyebrows crash low over my eyes. "Max, what is this ab—"

He obliterates the distance between us with the intensity of an exploding grenade.

His mouth crushes mine. Unruly and brutal.

It'll kill me if I let it.

And I would let it. Gladly.

My fingers curl into his shirt, pulling him closer.

He takes control, walking me backward as he punishes me by holding my lips captive. Every thought is demolished, bursting into ashes as Max Stinton makes it impossible to think about anything but him.

An inferno of attraction.

A blazing uncontrollable fire.

I want it to burn.

I want it to demolish us both.

He tastes like mint and his touch burns like whiskey, hot and intoxicating.

I surrender to him, a low moan escaping my throat when he traces his tongue along my mouth and then nips it as if he wants to draw blood.

His kiss is raw and possessive.

Mine, he seems to be saying.

As if this is some kind of competition. As if someone will walk in here and try to snatch me away from him.

How can one man's touch be so greedy?

How can it make me feel even greedier for him?

I told Max I wanted to go slow, but there's not a single part of me that wants to slam on the brakes right now.

I need him as badly as he seems to need me.

My body bucks against the makeup table, bouncing me closer to him.

Max jerks back, his eyes blinking unsteadily.

"Don't go anywhere," I mumble. Grabbing his tie, I yank him closer and sear him with my lips again.

I can't think. Can't stop.

Not when he flings me against the desk, stepping in between my legs and pushing forward in a way that almost rips the air from my body.

I've never known a craving this hot. This desperate.

My thighs spread wide and I drag my hands over his back, whimpering when the front of his pants presses into my waist and makes all the blood in my body pool right below my stomach.

I rock back, spilling makeup bottles and brushes. They scatter across the floor.

A pang of surprise runs through me, but it's stomped out by Max's persistent and dangerous mouth.

With all these feelings ravaging my body, I don't know how to do anything but reach for the buttons of his shirt so I can feel more skin.

Max Stinton is a freaking wizard.

Every touch, every kiss, every caress seems to be holding me in a trance.

I arch my body against his, needing more.

Needing everything.

I thought I could fight for longer, but I can't.

I just want to let him consume me.

Until there's nothing but ash.

Until there's nothing but burning desire.

But he tears himself off me and braces his hand on either side of the desk. Even though I'm kissing him with all I'm worth, even though all my signals are flashing big, green lights, he doesn't try to touch me or tear my clothes off.

Instead, he braces his hands on either side of my thigh, pressing his big fingers into the desk. He sweeps his gaze across me and I shudder. He's ripping me open, scooping my heart out of my ribs and taking it home with him. I can feel it.

Have mercy.

I try to swallow, but the spit gets caught in my throat.

I can't move. Dangerously shallow breaths are seeping through my lips.

We're still standing close together, so every surge of my chest rubs my body over his.

A helplessly painful need curls in my core, throbbing and begging for more.

I could reach for it.

He's still got me pinned on the desk, legs spread and bodies lined up perfectly. I could free what I need from his slacks and make him forget that stupid request to go slow.

But I don't.

Something holds me back.

The stakes are too high for me to throw caution to the wind, no matter how badly I want to.

"You're killing me, wolverine," Max growls, breathing hard and fast. The harsh sound of his inhaled breaths makes me feel like my chest is splitting.

I look up at him. His blue eyes are twin flames burning in a face that could intimidate anyone with just a cold look. His lips are an unnatural red,

bearing the mark of my lipstick that rubbed off on him while he attacked my mouth.

He's gorgeous.

He's ruined me.

Forget what he said yesterday. I'm the one who's about to fall off the edge of the cliff.

He'll be fine.

He can survive if this doesn't work out, but I can't afford to fall on the rocks below. If I fall, my daughter does too.

"Did you attend the photoshoot today just to try my lipstick, Mr. Stinton?" I press my thumb to his lips and wipe the marks I left behind.

His eyes are glowing and they dilate when I touch his mouth. Framed by those thick black lashes, I get trapped in his intoxicating stare.

I'm sure I look way more disheveled than he does and I hope the makeup artist can't tell when she comes back in to retouch her work.

Max snatches my hand to stop me from caressing his mouth. He closes his eyes, leans his forehead against mine and growls, "I really freaking love you, Dawn."

My breath gets sharper and my eyes pop out of my face like someone slapped my soul a little too hard. Heat flushes my cheeks and I stare at him with a bewildered expression.

He adjusts his body and I can *feel* how much he wants me. But he doesn't do anything more than hold my hand, rubbing his thumb over my wrist.

"I..." Max struggles with his words and it's the first time I've seen him falter. The first time I've seen him look anything but confident. "I'm not the man you think I am."

I want to touch him. My fingers are shaking, *aching* to reassure him.

He stares up at me with an intense look. His eyes trace my hungry mouth before his gaze falls away. "There's a lot I haven't told you."

"You've told me the most important thing of all." He makes my heart buck like a wild deer. He makes my gut twist with longing. I whisper, "As long as it wasn't you who sent those lawyers, Max, I can accept anything. I really can."

His smile is weak, almost defeated.

"Trevor's coming back, isn't he?" I whisper.

His eyes whip to me.

The connection between us is a literal shockwave that runs through both our bodies.

He lets out a deep breath, his body pressing toward me even as he shakes his head. "How did you know that?"

"Intuition." I run my fingers through his hair. "I get the feeling your brother is the only one who can make you seem so unraveled."

He makes a low, disgruntled sound in his throat.

"You thought I'd run back to him if he showed up. That's why you looked so beaten down when you came to see me, wasn't it?" I push back, separating my hands from his skin so I can think clearly. "That's why your kiss felt..."

"What?"

"Like a goodbye."

He straightens to his full height. His expression eases back into its natural state of icy confidence. "I'm never saying goodbye to you, Dawn Banner. No matter what happens, I'm never giving you up."

"And I'm not running back to Trevor. I mean that." My eyes narrow. "It's bad enough that he disappeared when I told him I was pregnant. To send lawyers after me is more than just cowardly." I scowl. "It's inhumane. I don't care what I have to do to keep him away. He can try and take Beth from me and he'll see what happens. I'll fight him with everything I've got."

Max tries to lift his lips, but the smile doesn't quite hit. Reaching past me, he grabs a tissue from the makeup desk and swipes it across his mouth.

It's strange seeing such a big, intimidating man look so shaken.

But knowing he was so nervous about my feelings for Trevor makes me a little more certain about his intentions. There's no easy way to fix this complicated web, but seeing that his heart is truly invested in me goes a long way in calming my own misgivings.

He steps back. Gestures to my face. "I'm sorry for messing up your makeup."

"With me, Max," I rise on the tips of my toes and give him a meaningful look, "you don't have to apologize when you haven't done anything wrong. I trust you."

His hands freeze in mid-air.

His eyes search mine.

There's something hesitant in them. A flash of guilt.

A disturbing question knocks around my brain.

What is Max so worried about?

Why did he kiss me so desperately thinking that I would ever choose Trevor over him?

I want to strip him out of his clothes and show him, in the most physical way I know how, that Trevor doesn't compare. Instead, I smooth my hands over my jumpsuit. The door's unlocked and we've already made a mess of the room as it is.

Slow down, Dawn.

"What are you doing this weekend?" I ask.

He arches an eyebrow.

"I normally take Beth to hang out with her friends at the farmhouse on Saturday. This weekend, they're going on a trip to the science museum. Darrel's going to geek out about brains." I shake my head when I think of Sunny's gorgeous but nerdy fiancé. "I wasn't interested in going, so I was thinking of working on the car. But," I tilt my head, "I can make time for you. If you'd like to do something."

I can't believe I'm asking Max Stinton on a date.

He's staring at me as if he's finding it hard to believe too.

And who can blame him?

It's not like I've been vocal about my feelings for him.

Maybe I can start to be.

Just a little.

Besides, thinking about Trevor caused me to make comparisons. And when it comes to responsibility, reliability and character—things that matter way more than just looks and money—Max outdoes his brother in every category.

"Well, Mr. Stinton?" I push out my lips. "Don't leave a girl hanging."

"Okay. This weekend." He blinks slowly.

"Yeah?"

He seems to come to a decision of his own because his face hardens in a resolute frown. He withdraws from me. "I'll tell you then."

"Tell me what?"

"The truth." His smile is pained. When he swoops in to kiss me, I feel that sense of finality again.

As if he thinks this is the last time he'll get to do that.

As if he wants to savor every second.

What on earth is making the great Max Stinton act like he's about to lose everything?

My heart slams against my ribs.

I reach for his hand, holding on until he drifts away from me and softly closes the door.

* * *

"MOM, HAS MR. STINTON ASKED YOU ANY QUESTIONS?" BETH ASKS, sticking her feet up on the couch and wiggling her toes.

"What?"

"Like..." She tilts her head in a show of fake indifference, "about the car he never drives?"

My laughter is as light as snow. "Young lady, why have you been making deals with strangers behind my back?"

"He's not a stranger. He's your boss," she says smartly.

He's your uncle.

Again, a pinch of doubt squeezes my skin.

How on earth do I explain that to Beth? Especially now that her biological father is back in town.

As soon as Max left, I went online to see if there were any articles about Trevor's incarceration. Given all the white-collar crimes he committed, he should be on the front page. I wasn't too surprised when I saw that he wasn't.

Stinton Group strikes again.

Corruption to the core.

Strangely, my usual repulsion for the company's underhanded tactics is tempered by my thoughts about Max.

Before, I used to think of Stinton Group as an entity with no face. The big bad wolf that snuck around, blowing down houses and wrecking lives.

Now, when I think of the company, I think of a pair of tired blue eyes. I think of giant hands clutching a phone and commandeering a team, working nonstop to keep the entire ship from sinking. I think of hair that falls gently over a handsome forehead and is raked back in frustration as an innocent man hands out apologies on behalf of others.

Dammit. Max Stinton has made it doubly hard to curse at my arch-nemesis now.

I sigh.

“Mom?” Beth blinks.

“What?” I startle.

“You didn’t answer my question. Did Mr. Stinton ask you?”

A tangle of emotions knot in my chest. “Yes, he did.”

“And?” She chews on her bottom lip.

I watch my daughter’s precious face. I’ve never told her about Trevor. All she knows is that her dad isn’t around and we don’t need him to be either. She’s not the type who talks a lot and I was always silently grateful for that. But now I wonder if I’d only assumed she didn’t care about her dad. How lonely had she been feeling that she latched onto Max the first time she met him?

I turn in the couch and ease my arm against the back of the chair. “Why were you so excited to meet Mr. Stinton, Beth?”

“What do you mean?” She scrunches her button nose.

I lean closer to her. “Is it just because you saw him on TV?”

Her eyes skitter away and her lashes sweep down.

“Beth.” My voice holds a hint of a warning.

Her shoulders slump. “Aunt Sunny and Mama Moira were talking about him.”

“What?” My jaw drops.

“Mama Moira said the way Mr. Stinton talked about you was too, what was the word?” She taps her little chin with a finger. “Susp-tus.”

“Suspicious?”

“Yeah. She said that it felt like he liked you.”

I blink rapidly.

“Aunt Sunny said that it wasn’t so simple and that you weren’t sure if Mr. Stinton was a good guy. So I talked to him at the ice cream shop. I asked him all kinds of things and I watched him.” She shrugs. “Bailey thinks he’s scary, but I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

“What?” It seems like that’s the only word left in my vocabulary. I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.

Beth clasps her hands together and pulls it to her chin. “I think he might *seem* scary because he doesn’t smile much. But he’s really smart and cool. He knows all kinds of things.” She pauses as if her thoughts are running too

fast and she needs to gather them again. "I think he's kind of like me. He doesn't know how to make friends and it's hard when you want to join the games and stuff. So you just sit on the outside and pretend that you're too cool for it. But really, inside, you just want someone to invite you in."

My heart bucks. "Beth."

"I like him." She gives me a look that's far too wise for a seven-year-old. "But only if you like him, mom."

"You little angel." I wrap my arms around her and pepper her face with kisses.

She shrieks. "Mom. Ew!"

"Uh uh. You're not getting away from me. Come here, you cutie."

She wiggles out of my arms and goes running.

I chase her through the living room, laughing and kissing her face even harder when I catch her.

She hugs me, looking mostly pleased even if she tries to pull an annoyed frown. "I was going to help you fall in love with him when he took us for a drive in Red Beauty."

"What gave you that idea?"

"Bailey and I watched *The Parent Trap*." She giggles. "Micheal has a crush on the twins. He got so red when Bailey teased him about it."

I laugh. "Actually, I *am* going on a date with Mr. Stinton. This weekend."

"Really?"

"Yup." I watch her face closely. "Are you okay with that?"

"Yes!" She throws her arms around me. "Yes, yes, yes."

I grin.

Beth eases back and stares at me. "What are you going to bring on your date? You should make him something. Like a gift."

"I don't think that's necessary for a first date, sweetie."

"Okay, then do it before the first date."

"Why should I give him something before the date?"

"He saved you from all those bullies. He took up for you and made everyone like you again." She moans. "Come on, mom. You always say we should show our thanks when people help us out."

"Well..."

"How about we bake him cookies?"

I can see how excited she is about this and I don't want to kill her enthusiasm. "Okay. Let's do it."

Recalling that Max likes raisin nut cookies, I look up the recipe. Beth and I dance to music while we bake.

The next day, I take her to school and she stays in the car, chatting off a list of instructions.

"I want you to tell me his reaction later," Beth insists. "Remember to tell him that we made it together. That way, if it tastes horrible, you can just blame it on me."

I laugh and kiss her cheek. "I will not. Lying is wrong."

"Even if it's for the right reasons?" She bats her eyelashes.

"It doesn't matter. You should always tell the truth. Even if it hurts." I point to Bailey who's waving on the sidewalk. "You two have a good day."

"Okay, mom. Bye."

I watch her scramble out of the truck and then point my vehicle to Stinton Group.

It feels weird walking into the building again after my rise in popularity. Everyone knows me by name now. The security guard waves at me. Someone stops me to get my autograph. Another person takes my picture.

That sets off a wave of pictures and autograph signings.

Fifteen minutes pass before I can get to the elevator.

As I press the button for Max's floor, I remember our kisses and my stomach tightens into knots. I hope he doesn't mind me dropping in, but I really can't wait to see him.

The elevator doors slide apart.

I walk to the receptionist.

She gives me a frightened look and my nerves twist into a pretzel.

"Hey, I'm here to drop off something for Max." I lift the warm box of cookies in my hand. "Is he busy?"

"Uh... Mr. Stinton is in a meeting."

"With whom?"

"Um..."

"Dawn? What are you doing here?" Hills's voice bursts out behind me.

I whirl around and lock eyes with Max's assistant. "Hey, I came to drop this off for Max."

"He's... busy." Hills swallows hard. "I'll give it to him." He takes the box from my hand and steers me back to the elevators. "You should go

now.”

“Hands off, Hills,” I growl.

He raises both arms. “Sorry. I’ll let him know you were here.”

“My daughter asked me to deliver it personally.”

“Don’t you have to be at the auto shop?” Hills asks. “I’ll tell Max to meet you there.”

His insistence makes me even more suspicious. I take the container back. “Clint is holding over at the garage right now, so I can wait.”

“You need to leave.” His tone turns frosty.

I scowl. “Why? What’s going on?”

At that moment, the door of Max’s office flies open and an angry voice charges through the air. A man stomps out of the room, flinging curses over his shoulder. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Tall, lean figure.

It’s the punk I had a drunken night of passion with.

The coward who abandoned his own daughter and tried to force me to terminate her before she was born.

Trevor Stinton.

CHAPTER 16

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PRODIGAL SON

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MAX

I'M REALLY FREAKING THRILLED my brother is alive, but I'm not sure how much longer he can keep that status.

I sit in stunned silence as Trevor storms out of my office.

Yup.

My little brother is back.

Like a ghost in a haunted house. He's a terror and an absolute headache but, without him, the world felt kind of empty. While he was gone, I started looking back on our memories and searching under the ashes to find glimmers of affection and camaraderie. I even convinced myself that, when he came back, I'd try harder to be more available to him.

Absence really does make the heart grow fonder.

I'd forgotten what an absolute prick he is.

The world needs to keep thinking I'm dead, Max. That's what I want.

I still can't believe he said that.

When I faced the nation eight months ago, absorbed the blame for his actions, and bore the heavy weight of the world's disgust, I did so to save Stinton Group. I didn't think Trevor would use that as some kind of twisted evidence against me.

According to him, it's my fault he ruined Stinton Group, ran off with the investors money, and had the police on a witch hunt for his whereabouts. My fault that he hid from the authorities for *months* and then got caught in the most embarrassing way possible.

Yesterday, I hugged him and thumped his back.

Today, I'm considering whether I should shove him down a flight of stairs.

Terrible, I know.

It's not like I hate my brother.

For a brief moment I thought he was dead and the terror I felt was real. At times, when the search seemed pointless, I wondered if I would never see him again. It was a relief to hold him in my arms at the airport yesterday. It proved that the disheveled, bearded man in front of me was, indeed, my brother.

But the moment of familial gratitude has passed.

It's a new day and his surprise visit to Stinton Group just put the nail in his coffin.

I'm going to celebrate his homecoming by banishing him right back to the island he was hiding on.

"Trevor, don't you dare walk away from me," I growl as my brother stomps out of my office. We're arguing. Gone for almost a year and the first conversation he wants to have with me is about staying dead in the eyes of the law and the public.

Ridiculous.

Does he have any idea what the company's been through because of his stupid decisions? Even now, Stinton Group is spinning in an uncertain direction. It's been a headache trying to settle the board down. I spent hours assuring my family members that I'll keep Trevor under control this time.

There's no room for me to make another mistake.

"Trevor!" I bark.

"Screw you, Max."

When he disappears out the door, I lumber to my feet.

The chair goes crashing into the wall, but I barely pay it any mind.

Stomping behind him, I shoot into the hallway and snarl, "Do you think this is a game? It was hard enough convincing the commissioner to hand you over without publicly arresting—" My words slow to a horrific halt when I see the beautiful woman standing in front of the receptionist's desk.

It's Dawn.

She's wearing one of her fitted jumpers. It's a gorgeous creamy color that flatters her dark, obsidian-toned complexion. Her hair's pulled back into a small afro puff, the front weighed down by a yellow bandana. The sun strikes her cheekbones and draws the eye to the exquisite symmetry of her face.

I'm not exaggerating when I say she's the most effortlessly beautiful woman I've ever seen. It's the kind of beauty that makes you feel like you're having an out-of-body experience. Like the creature in front of you can't possibly be real.

I usually love looking into those beautiful brown eyes.

But right now, she's the last person I want standing in my office.

"Dawn," I whisper.

She doesn't respond. Doesn't even look at me.

She's looking at Trevor.

Something thick and slimy runs down my back and slithers around my neck.

Dawn bounces thick eyelashes. Up and down. Up and down.

The shock spreads pure and clear under her brown skin.

For such a savvy woman, she's crap at hiding her emotions.

I want to scoop her over my shoulder and carry her far from here yelling 'mine, mine' like an immature toddler with his toy box. Especially when I see the way my brother's drinking her in.

Trevor stares at Dawn as if *she's* the ghost. His fingers relax against his pants and his eyes rove every inch of her like he hasn't seen a woman since he ran off.

My fingers curl into fists.

Dawn's warm and pure and beautiful. She's too good for the both of us. Way too good for Trevor.

"Wow. You look incredible," Trevor whispers. It's been eight years since they saw each other. I don't know how much Dawn's changed since that night when they met, but it's obvious that Trevor still likes what he sees.

I grab my brother by the collar and jerk him back. My voice is a low growl. "Don't you say a word."

Dawn cranks her chin all the way up.

She stalks over to me, bypassing Trevor as if he's not even there.

My heart thunders. I feel both *proud* and sorry. Feelings which collide in a ball of ragged emotions.

My brother's head swings around, his eyes widening in shock. I wish I could blame him for staring, but I can't because looking away from Dawn is impossible for me too.

Her hips sway from side to side in a softly feminine rock. Determination lights up her eyes with a fire that consumes me. Her lips hitch up at the corners when she meets my gaze and my heart falls flat before her, inviting—no, *ordering* me to keep this woman as close as possible for as long as possible.

It's insane to feel that way about a person who argues like she's got an eye on giving me a stroke, but Dawn's been pulling on the strings of my heart since the day we met.

She demands more from me.

Demands everything.

I thought I could lie to her. I really did. If it's for the good of our relationship, I can do almost anything.

But hiding the truth from her has been torture.

Every time she mentions how depraved she finds Trevor for sending those lawyers, I get itchy. Frustrated. Hollow. Uneasy. It's like I'm locked in a guillotine, waiting for the blade to slice my head off. That anticipation, that fear, that heightened tension as I hold my breath for the inevitable—is chewing me up inside.

I can't throw these lies into a bin and say I'm doing it for Dawn's sake.

I'm not.

I'm doing it for my own sake.

I'm doing it because the thought of being without her frightens me to my very core.

But I can't build a relationship with her on lies.

Any other woman and it wouldn't matter.

But this is Dawn.

She deserves better.

And the only option I have is becoming that 'better' for her.

"Hey." Her smile is hesitant but full of tenderness.

"Hey," I croak.

"I brought something for you." Dawn's voice is an intimate hush. I'm not sure if she's doing that intentionally so Trevor, Hills and the receptionist don't hear or if she's just trying to raise my blood pressure by using that sultry tone.

"You did?" I stare down at her, my lips tensing.

We're like two performers in front of an audience. Even though the stage is dark, we're staring into each other's eyes and it *feels* like we're the only two people in this hallway, I'm keenly aware that we're *not*. Trevor is inches away with the power to tear my relationship up by the roots.

She raises an eyebrow. "Max, you have something in your hair."

"I do?"

Without warning, Dawn pushes to the tips of her toes and brushes her hand over my head. I hear Trevor's sharp intake of breath and I gulp.

"I can't..." Dawn grunts in frustration. Dropping flat on her feet, she turns her face up to me. "Max, can you lower your head so I can reach you?"

“Sure,” I say after a moment’s hesitation.

“Dawn, how have you been?” Trevor coos behind her.

“I really can’t wait for Sunday.” Dawn brushes her hand gently over my hair and removes a thread that must have fallen out of my suit. She shows it to me and then blows it away.

The sight of her puckering lips makes me want to slam her against a wall and claim that mouth until my lips are as brown as hers.

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip.

“I know you can hear me,” Trevor is saying.

Dawn stares me right in the eyes. “We made this for you last night.” She shoves a container at me.

“We?” I accept it, glancing down. My heart melts completely when I see that they’re raisin nut cookies.

“Yeah. We.” She winks. “I remembered you said you liked this flavor. It was easy enough to make, but we don’t bake often in that house, so I can’t promise the taste will be good.”

I chuckle.

My world is three seconds away from imploding, but she makes it possible for me to find laughter and joy.

“Ehem.” Trevor tries to get Dawn’s attention.

She raises an eyebrow. “Do you hear something? It sounds like a cowardly, irresponsible, disappointment of a man. But I could be wrong. Could just be a cockroach.”

Trevor’s jaw drops. Then he snaps it shut and his brows crease angrily. He stalks forward. “Are you really going to be like that, Dawn?”

I move quickly. Stepping in front of my woman, I slam a hand into my brother’s chest.

He bounces back, his shocked eyes moving to me.

“Keep your distance, Trevor.”

“The hell?”

“Don’t let me tell you again,” I warn gruffly.

To my surprise, Dawn pushes *me* back and stares Trevor down herself. “Listen up, you bastard. The *only, only* reason I’m not kicking you in the teeth right now is because you’re his brother.” She points to me. “And whether I like it or not, he’s the kind of person who’ll feel responsible to pay your dental bills and maybe even bail me out of jail. I don’t want him feeling sorry for you and I sure as hell don’t want to go to prison for you.”

This is not the time to laugh.

It is absolutely not.

But I snort in surprise anyway.

Dawn doesn't even flinch. "So I'm going to settle this by letting you know that you are still dead to me. You do not exist. If you ever see me around, walk the other way and don't test me because I *will not* hold myself back if there's a next time. Do you understand me?"

Trevor gulps.

Dawn's fingers curl into fists and I know she's more than capable of throwing that punch.

"Hills," I call my best friend.

He scrambles over. One look at my face and he knows what I want without me having to open my mouth. Gripping Trevor's arm, he tugs my brother in the opposite direction. "You look like you could use a drink."

While Trevor stumbles behind Hills, I lean in close to Dawn. "You're not gonna hit me too, are you?"

"Don't play with me, Stinton." She lets out a deep breath. "I wasn't prepared to see him."

"Didn't seem like it."

She glances up and her lips curl into a smile. It's bright and pure and way freaking more than I deserve.

I glance away from her. "Come with me. I have something for you too."

"You do?" Her eyebrows hike.

I nod and set the cookies by the receptionist. "Keep these safe for me," I tell her firmly. Ignoring her curious look, I propel Dawn into the elevator.

The doors close around us and she gets tense again.

I look down at her, noting the muscles clenching and unclenching in her jaw.

My eyes slip up to the camera with the blinking red light.

I think about it.

Then I throw caution to the wind, tug on Dawn's hand and drag her into what I hope is the camera's dead zone.

The kiss I drop on her lips is hot and searing.

I can't hide how much I adore her when I taste her mouth. She's glorious. She's perfect. And I know that the moment she finds out the truth, she's not going to stick around.

It makes me savor her even more, sipping from her with the knowledge that this really could be my last time.

Her hands slide over my shoulders and clasp around my neck.

I kiss her until the elevator stops and the doors whirl open to let more people on.

“*Mr. Stinton.*”

“*Sir.*”

I nod in the general direction of the employees and then I slide closer to Dawn. Slipping my hands around her fingers, I hold on tight, watching as she shyly ducks her head. Her cheeks and jaw are slightly irritated from my scruff. It makes my chest puff up to know I marked her as mine. *Mine. Mine.*

When the doors open again, Dawn tries to yank her hand back.

I hold fast.

“What are you doing,” she whispers. “People are going to see.”

“Let them,” I growl. Tugging her out of the elevator, I march proudly through my lobby.

This woman is it for me.

I realized that when I saw her again this morning.

No one will ever come close.

Ever.

I don’t know how long I’ll have her with me, but I sure as hell am going to make the most of every second.

When we get to the parking garage, I release her hand so I can open the car door for her. I turn to Dawn when I climb inside, but she’s on the phone with Clint.

“Yeah, I’m still coming in.” She meets my eyes and mouths ‘sorry’. Then she focuses on her call again. “No, I’m not a big-shot, Clint. Stop calling me that. It’s ridiculous.” Her eye roll is the most precious thing I’ve ever seen. “Okay. Okay. We should be finished with all the filming soon. I’ll be able to focus on the shop.” A second later, she hangs up.

“What was Clint saying?” I rub my thumb over her knuckles.

“Business has been booming since the press conference. People are requesting that I personally work on their car and Clint is tired of telling them I’m not there. He wants me to fight my own battles now.” She laughs tenderly. I love that Clint looks out for her like a father. I respect anyone who recognizes what a treasure this woman is.

“What do you feel about taking over all the shops in the franchise?” I ask carefully.

Her eyes narrow. “Max.”

“I’m not just saying that because of the way I feel about you.” I lean forward. “You’re good, Dawn. Crazy good. If you can whip the other technicians into shape, get them to think the way you do, Stinton Auto has no choice but to flourish.”

“Taking on more stores means I have less time to fix cars.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

Her face gets tight. “Max.”

“I worry about you getting hurt,” I admit.

“It’s a part of the job.”

“Which is why it worries me.”

“I’m not ready to take on the responsibility of all the franchises. And I don’t think I’m qualified for that either.” She tries to tug her hand out of mine again.

I hold fast. “I thought you would say that. Which is why I got these.” I reach into the backseat and pull out a box. Handing it to her, I watch surprise flicker over her face and wonder if I’ll always feel this way when I watch her. Something tells me I will.

“What is this?” Her eyes widen.

“Open it.”

She does and then she laughs. “Gloves? Really?”

“I did some research. I know most mechanics prefer not to wear them for some jobs because you need precise movements. Ordinary gloves can get clunky. These won’t. They’re made from the highest quality material. Strong enough to protect you from burns. The movement is good too. So they shouldn’t feel too clunky.”

Her eyes brighten. She reaches over the console and hugs me. “Thank you, Max.”

“It’s nothing.” I bury my nose in the crook of her shoulder and inhale the flowery scent of her perfume mixed with the savory, rich scent of engine oil. “You’re more than qualified to lead Stinton Auto, Dawn. You’re a leader and you can handle anything that comes your way. Fixing cars is what you love. I’m not trying to stop you from doing that. I just want to keep you safe.”

“I’ll consider it.” She smiles. “But I really have to go. Clint is supposed to be winding down, but business is booming so much that he’s busier than ever before.”

“Let me drive you.”

“No.” She stops me. “I know you’re busy.”

“I’m never too busy for you.”

“I know that Trevor’s waiting upstairs.” She gives me a pointed look.

I curl back.

She smiles, leans over and gives me a quick kiss. “He has nothing to do with me or Beth. That was true even before I met you and that’s not going to change now that he’s back. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.” I rub her wrist. Then I hold on tighter when she tries to leave.

Her eyebrows hike. “Max, I didn’t take you for the clingy type.”

“Jefferson is coming.” I jut my chin forward. “He’ll drive you to the garage.”

“Jeff... I didn’t even see you call him.”

“Hills did.” My best friend can be irritating at times, but he knows what I’m thinking without me having to ask. In the big ways, he always comes through. “Have a good day at work.” I lift her hands. “And don’t get hurt.”

“Why? Because these hands belong to Stinton Group?”

“Because these hands belong to me.” I kiss each of them and then get out of the car.

“Drive carefully,” I growl at Jefferson.

“Yes, sir.”

I step back and watch as he carries Dawn away, then I head back to my office.

* * *

TREVOR IS SITTING IN MY CHAIR WHEN I WALK IN.

I instantly stiffen and watch, motionless, as he turns the chair back and forth.

“So you got with my little fairy from the club?”

I don’t try to mask my contempt when I hear the affection in his voice. I let it rake over me. “Watch your mouth, Trevor.”

“What are the odds of that? I always thought we had different tastes.” He chuckles. “I guess not even my uptight, stick-in-the-mud brother can resist a pretty face. Just make sure you use protection with that one.” He shudders. “Don’t make the same mistakes I did.”

It’s like a giant hand reaches into my body and breaks what little self-restraint I had left.

Snap.

I’m moving.

I yank him out of the chair.

My fist connects with his face and he stumbles back.

“I’m not going to warn you twice.” I step forward. “Keep Dawn’s name out of your filthy mouth.”

One hand covers his bleeding mouth. The other hand lifts and waves casually at me. “Look at that. Max Stinton losing his tight grip on self-control. You’ve definitely nailed her. My gosh.” He hisses and touches his jaw. “Several times by the feel of that.”

I draw my fist back in preparation.

He lifts a hand. “It’s fine. It’s fine. You can have your little plaything, Max. For now.” He steeples his fingers and a mischievous grin crosses his face. “But I don’t know. I think I might be interested in taking Dawn down memory lane. You think she’d like that?”

A heavy rage lashes out of me—a fury I have no ability to control.

I shake him like a rag doll. “Look here you spoiled brat, I have caved to you and catered to you in whatever you’ve asked. But Dawn is off limits. Don’t you even *think* about going near her.”

“Don’t act so sanctimonious, big brother.” Trevor throws my hand off his collar and gives me a dark look. “If you start showing how much you want something, it makes me even more eager to take it.” He pries my finger off his shirt. “And let’s be honest.” Another finger. “You didn’t cave and cater to me because you wanted to. No, you had good ole’ dad to impress. And wouldn’t it be sad if the bastard son of Stinton Group was also a bully to his embarrassing kid brother?” He laughs. “You can try that act on the board and on dad, but I don’t buy it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Trevor. I’ve always had your back. Even when you didn’t deserve it. Even if it would have been better for your lazy butt to cool down in jail.”

“Then why didn’t you do it, Max?”

I go still. My eyes dart between his.

Harsh animosity crackles between us as we stare each other down.

“Why didn’t you let me self-destruct? Why did you always run behind me even when I told you to screw off? Was it because of me?” He shakes his head. “No, no, no. If my last name wasn’t Stinton, if I wasn’t dad’s legitimate heir, you wouldn’t have given a rat’s *tail* about me.” His fingers shift through the air as he stumbles toward the coffee table. “Let’s not pretend that you did those things for anyone but Stinton Group. After all,” he swipes a glass of whiskey from the surface and takes a sip, “the company always comes first... right, brother?”

I grit my teeth.

“Does she know?” His eyes pin me in place. “Does she know that you would slit her neck if her blood would keep Stinton Group alive? Does she know how easily you ruin lives? Does she know that you already tried to ruin hers?”

He’s spitting poison, but it’s effective because it’s tearing at my skin.

I fight to keep my balance.

Control. Control.

Trevor feeds off chaos. He can’t survive when there’s order. When there’s clarity and a quiet word. He needs the noise. He needs to implode every conversation and every relationship to feel at home. To feel like the rest of us are spinning out at the same rate that he is.

I can’t give him the satisfaction. I’ve already tipped my hand and shown him how much Dawn means to me. Now he’s got his eyes on her, thinks he can play with her just to mess with me.

I can’t let him get closer.

There’s still Beth to protect.

I might not have been able to treat my niece preciously when I found out she was conceived, but I sure as hell will protect her with my life now.

Gritting my teeth, I scowl at my brother. “Don’t be late to the board meeting.”

Trevor throws his arms out. “Dear dad. His son came back from the dead and he’s already trying to drag me back to the business.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know?” Trevor chuckles. “Dad struck a deal with the DA. He got me a slap on the wrist. A couple hundred hours of community service since Stinton Group repaid its debts.”

My nostrils flare. “He’s putting you in charge of another business? After that crap you pulled?”

“Yeah.” Trevor takes a sip of his whiskey, dances by me with his split lip and pats my shoulder. “He’s giving me Stinton Auto.”

* * *

I’M CLOSE TO LOSING MY DAMN MIND AND THAT’S BEFORE DAD MOTIONS ME into his office with a disappointed sigh.

“Trevor’s latest screw-up cost Stinton Group millions of dollars.” I don’t bother with a hello or a ‘how are you’. We don’t have that kind of relationship. Never have and never will. “You’re going to put him in charge of one of our companies? The one that’s causing our stock prices to soar? The one that’s leading us out of the crapstorm that Trevor left us in?”

“Well, that’s one way to see it.”

I don’t dignify his condescending smirk with a smile of my own.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, son. Although that’s always been a good thing with us. No news is good news.”

“Dad!”

“Max, don’t yell. It’s uncultured.”

I scowl and lower my voice. This meeting is not as a father to a son, but as a CEO to his acting executive. “Tell me Trevor’s mistaken. You’re not handing over our best performing company to him.”

“I am and I will.” Dad practices his golf swing.

My insides turn to a boiling inferno.

Maybe I’ve gone along blindly with all of dad’s instructions before, but I refuse to bend on this.

“Trevor wants the public to think he’s dead. He hasn’t learned a single lesson. I’m not putting him in charge of Stinton Auto.”

“Oh, you won’t. *I* will.” Dad fixes the collar of his light cream shirt. He’s married to the golf course and can be found on the greens almost every day. He and his new wife with the boob job and the laughter of a hyena just bought their own country club so they didn’t have to share.

I curl my fingers into fists. Just a few hours ago, I punched my own brother in the face. I must be getting trigger happy because I’m contemplating doing the same to my father.

“That won’t happen. Not as long as I have a say.”

“When have you ever disobeyed me, Max?” Dad lifts his golf club and inspects it. “Didn’t your mother tell you to be a good little boy when you joined our family? Haven’t you been a good little boy all these years?” He lifts his eyes to mine. Ice cold. Blue as a frozen lake. “Let’s not change this late in the game, hm? I’ve never had to teach you lessons the hard way, but I’m not afraid to start now.”

I grit my teeth until they crack. “Is that a threat?”

“Max, dear boy, why can’t we continue to be civil?” He puts the golf club to the ground again and eyes the stretch of green that’s rolled out on his office floor.

“What’s your plan, dad? You’ll pop Trevor out of a gift box in the middle of a press conference, say ‘oops, he’s not dead’ and then expect people to applaud for him?”

“I expect you to make his homecoming a triumphant miracle.” Dad swings and then smiles as he stares at his imaginary hole in one. “I want you to do for your brother what you did for that female mechanic when the world scorned her. Look at how well that turned out, hm? And if we pair Trevor with the most relatable and heartwarming spokesperson Stinton Group has ever seen, well, her popularity will smooth out all the rough edges.”

A frigid, uneasy realization dawns on me. “What do you mean ‘pair them up’?”

“I mean announce their beautiful romance, of course.” He leans against his club and looks up, squinting. “The impulsive heir of Stinton Group, America’s darling female mechanic, and their precious daughter. It’s enough to bring Oprah to tears.”

Every muscle in my body stops cold.

My heart isn’t beating anymore.

My lungs have crystallized.

“You knew,” I breathe in horror.

“Of course I knew.” He swings his club. “You used Stinton Group’s lawyers to take care of Trevor’s little female problems, remember? Once I found out Stinton Group had been involved with Dawn Banner before, it didn’t take long to find out she has a daughter. The age checked out. Short of getting a paternity test—”

“No.” I hiss. “No, you leave Beth out of this.”

Dad pins me with blank eyes. “Max, don’t you see. She’s already *in* this. She’s the granddaughter of Stinton Group. Now, can you just imagine Trevor welcoming his little girl into his arms in front of the world? *That’s* an amazing headline.”

“I won’t let you touch them,” I seethe. “You will *never* touch them.”

He blinks lazily. “Max, I’m going to ask you one more time to be that good little boy that your mama told you to be.”

“Screw you.” I whirl around swiftly.

“Is this your way of saying you’ll no longer work for the good of Stinton Group?” Dad’s voice calls to my back, stopping me before I can storm away. “Because if it is, that decision comes with consequences.”

I turn and stare at my father, my heart slamming against my chest.

An uneasy feeling crawls over my skin and makes me want to take a shower.

“I heard you’d gone and fallen for Trevor’s woman.” Dad takes his eyes off me and lines himself up for another swing, setting the golf club an inch above the floor. “Even so, I’d hoped you’d have your priorities straight. But I don’t mind being the bad guy to remind you of what’s truly important—Stinton Group.” He takes the shot. “Remember that your place is with this company. And like me, everything you do is for Stinton Group.”

I take three, decisive steps toward him. In a low voice, I spit out, “I... am *nothing* like you.”

He laughs. There’s an aura of confidence around him that makes me feel like I’m dangling over the mouth of a giant shark.

I stomp out of his office and head back to Stinton Group’s main building.

On the way, I text Dawn.

I need to make sure she’s okay. Need to make sure dad’s plan didn’t include harming her.

She responds a minute later.

DAWN: Working on a car now. Everything’s fine.

I collapse in relief.

ME: Don’t eat too many lollipops. They’re not good for your health.

DAWN: If lollipops are what take me out, I’ll die happy.

I laugh.

Dawn’s the only one who could make me smile when my world is falling apart.

I lick my suddenly dry lips.

ME: Call me if anything happens.

DAWN: Anything like what?

I don't even know how to respond to that.

I've never gone against dad before. For most of my life, I was desperate to gain his approval. I wanted to prove that he made the right choice taking me into Stinton Group. I wanted to somehow 'reclaim' my mother's honor by being perfect. Going against him was incomprehensible to me.

ME: I don't know. Just call me if you miss me.

She texts back a 'vomit' emoji.

It makes me laugh again.

Even so, I'm exhausted when I drag myself into Stinton Group and slump past Hills's desk.

Given all that's happened today, I expected Hills to be eager to ditch work. Expected him to insist on knocking off a few beers and grumbling about Trevor

Instead, Hills looks worried.

When I draw closer, he jumps to his feet. "Max."

"What's wrong?" I ask, moving toward him like I'm walking through jello.

My entire body holds its breath. I really don't have room for more bad news right now.

"It's missing," he whispers. His voice is thick and scratchy with fear.

My heart drops heavily to my toes. I swipe a pen from his desk and start flipping it. "What's missing?"

"The original files. The one with all the women you... the one with the list of women Trevor got pregnant."

I don't get it at first.

My brain misfires.

It literally can't process that piece of information without skidding its wheels.

I keep flicking my pen. "Is it misplaced?"

"I don't think so."

"Look again."

"Max, your dad. He sent me this." Hills lifts his phone and shows me snapshots of Dawn's garage. Zooming in reveals that the photographer is taking photos of Dawn from a distance.

It's a threat.

Loud and clear.

An expletive drops from my mouth when I realize what dad is about to do. Something cracks. I glance down and realize I snapped the pen in two. It falls in scattered pieces to the ground.

"Max, what are you going to..."

The rest of Hills's question is lost to the wind as I shoot out of the doors. Grappling with my phone, I try to call Dawn again, but it goes to voicemail.

Dammit, dammit, dammit.

Dad said he would find a way to get my focus back on Stinton Group.

He's always known exactly how to move his pawns in whatever direction he wants.

And I gave him a perfect piece to manipulate.

I gave him that piece when I foolishly fell in love.

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CHAPTER 17

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FAN MAIL

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DAWN

NOTHING in this world compares to how fulfilled I feel while working on a car.

The smell of oil, engine fluid, and metal fills my nostrils like the sweetest fragrance. My scanner's open on the table beside me, hooked up to the wireless module in the SUV. My hands are busy, and my heart is pounding with the excitement of solving a puzzle.

Man, *this* is where I belong.

"How's it coming?" Clint asks, his eyes twinkling as he leans against the car lift. Since I've been busy working as the spokeswoman of Stinton Auto, Clint is delaying his retirement to oversee the shop and I really appreciate that.

I tap my earbuds to silence the music and pop my lollipop out of my mouth. "Good. This repair is a little tricky because the problem refuses to show itself when I need it to." I scowl at the car. "But don't worry. I'll figure it out."

"Those are the trickiest repairs, aren't they?" He tilts his head. "Cars that hide what's wrong when it's time to fix them. That's like going to a doctor and lying about where you're feeling pain."

"Except cars are inanimate objects. Therefore, they can't intentionally hide the truth."

"You have a point." Clint chuckles, but the sound is heavy. His eyes dart away from mine.

I take my earbuds out and set them aside because it seems like he wants to talk. "Did you need something?"

"I'm clearing my desk today. Since I'm staying on longer, I figure I can tackle the paperwork piece by piece. There's a lot to work out."

I cringe, hoping that he's not trying to get me to sort out files with him. It's not that I don't want to help Clint...

Okay, I don't want to help Clint.

At least not right now when I'm so close to making a breakthrough.

He knows me too well and chuckles. "I'm not going to drag you away from your repair, Banner."

My smile bounces back.

He studies me. "I'm glad to see that being a superstar hasn't wiped out your love of auto repair completely."

"That's never going to happen."

"Are you sure? The camera suits you."

"Is that a compliment, Clint?"

He laughs, a bright red flush chasing across his pale cheeks. "I respect you as a mechanic, Banner. Wasn't until I saw all those lights pointed at you that I remembered you were a female under all that brilliance."

"Is... that still a compliment?"

His smile lacks its usual lightness.

I grab a rag and wipe my fingers on it. "Don't worry. My heart will always be in the garage. The lights might seem pretty from far off, but they're blinding up close. Working on a car without interruption suits me better. I look forward to getting back to a semblance of normal."

Hills mentioned that my schedule will be slowing down from now on and I'm grateful for that. I've gotten used to the attention, but it's been exhausting. Stinton Group dragged me back and forth, from one show and photoshoot to the next. It's great that everyone's excited about ladies in auto repair, but I'm over the glam and the fuss.

"Well, I'm glad you're back." Clint nods.

"It was weird not having me in the garage, right? I barely got to see you these past few weeks."

He lifts a hand. "Oh, it's fine. I don't mind sharing you with your fans."

I chuckle. It still feels weird that I *have* fans. My social media accounts got pumped with millions of followers overnight. It's strange because I don't even have much of an online presence. Instead, my fans have been slowly populating my 'official fan account' with the pictures I take at shows and magazine spreads.

"Actually, just last night, they uploaded a new picture of you." He shows me his phone. It's a hazy snapshot of Max and I climbing out of the car in front of Stinton Group.

My eyes widen. "When did they take that?"

"I don't know." He blinks rapidly. "People have been speculating about you two since the press conference."

Heat brands my cheeks. "Because he stood up for me?"

Clint shrugs.

I tuck the stick of my lollipop above my ear and breathe deeply. Looking back, the press conference was Max's first time saying 'I love you' to me. Actions speak louder than words, right? And by his actions that day, I *felt* that he was someone I could depend on. It's when my heart started falling for him.

"The fans have an active imagination. We're not even touching in that shot." I nod to the picture.

"So the speculation is just that? Speculation?"

"Why do you look so serious, Clint? It's not worth bringing up, is it?" I climb into the vehicle again and stomp on the brakes, testing if my diagnosis was accurate. "You've never cared about gossip before. Why are you so interested in me and Max Stinton now?"

"Because I'm confused." Clint follows me to the window. "I've listened to you rant about Stinton Group so many times in the past. You were so sure they were a terrible company." He rubs his chin. "Although I didn't say anything at the time, I was surprised when you agreed to work with them."

I listen to the rumble of the engine as I answer, "I hated Stinton Group because of one despicable deed they'd done. When I found out who was the true culprit, I realized that was where I should point all my hatred. It's way too exhausting hating an entire company anyway."

"That person you hate, is it... Max Stinton?"

"Of course not." I pull my lips in to stop the giant grin from growing, but it's too late. I'm smiling off into the distance with dreamy bliss. "Max is all bark and no—well, he has a bite, but he's a softie underneath all those frigid stares."

Clint stares at me with something close to worry.

I notice and sigh. "Hey, I'm not moving fast. I'm keeping my head screwed on straight about this. Trust me."

"Banner, I think you should come and see this," Clint says abruptly.

My foot flattens on the gas.

The car *vrooms* in protest.

I shake my head. "Can I come over later? I'm almost finished with this car."

"Now, Dawn," Clint says seriously.

I almost slam my face on the glass when I whip around. He's never used that tone with me and he's never used my first name either. Clint's always been like a doting grandfather, following along with everything I say and

babying me to the point of frustration. Whatever put that frightened look on his face...

A lump forms in my throat. "Clint, what's wrong?"

He motions for me to get out of the car.

I walk behind him all the way to his office.

Clint closes the door firmly, picks up a binder and hands it over to me. The shattered expression on his face warns me that my world is about to fall apart.

I'm scared to find out if my intuition is right.

Scared to open this book.

Something deep inside is telling me to back away slowly.

"What is this?" I murmur.

"It was delivered to the garage for you an hour ago, but I didn't tell you immediately. Ever since you started getting famous, I've been extra careful with all the things your fans send over. Some of the gifts are..." His eyebrows bunch, "disrespectful. I was always worried that you'd get something obscene and we'd have to involve the police. I didn't want you or Beth to be intimidated."

"Clint, I had no idea you were doing that." I stare at him in stunned awe. It's true that people have been sending gifts to the auto shop with my name on them. I've received some heartwarming letters about how I've inspired someone's daughter to be an auto mechanic too. I was wondering why all the fans were being so respectful. I've seen some really disgusting comments online and wondered when someone would try to send me an equally irritating gift.

"I'm only telling you this to explain why I opened the mail, Dawn." His eyes fall on the binder.

"Well? Is it like a dead rat or something?" I try to lighten the mood with a joke.

"No," he croaks. "It's... I think it's much worse."

My heart picks up speed.

Clint stares thoughtfully at the binder in my hands. "When I saw it, I considered not showing it to you. I wasn't sure if it would only upset you more. Since you hated Stinton Group so much, I figured it wouldn't make a difference if I hid the truth."

"Clint."

“But when I saw your eyes... you lit up when you were talking about Max Stinton and I can’t—”

“Clint, I’m dying of suspense. What’s in here? What ‘truth’ are you talking about?”

He swallows hard. “I’ll, uh, I’ll let you see for yourself.”

My heart is thumping like crazy.

Clint’s being weird and mysterious, two traits that are unlike him. I don’t understand what could possibly have put that shaken look on his face.

Fingers trembling, I open the binder and flip to the first page.

Terror slams against me the moment I recognize Max Stinton’s crab-like handwriting.

It thickens into mortification when I read the detailed report on the page.

“Oh my gosh.” I press a finger to my lips as I turn to another file.

Hope vanishes in a second, replaced with a desperate plea for this to be some kind of joke.

My eyes skim the page.

It’s not a joke.

The second document is exactly like the first, except the name and the details of payment are different.

“No, no, no.”

I shake my head. I don’t understand.

“Your name’s on the last page,” Clint says quietly.

I flip to the end and see it.

Dawn Banner.

There’s the date I met Trevor.

There’s the date I told Trevor I was pregnant.

It’s all there in black and white like a freaking hospital report.

I’m the only one with the line—‘did not agree to sign’.

“I’m sorry, Dawn,” Clint says softly.

I hardly hear what he’s saying.

Because I’m looking up and, through the glass pane, a man is rushing into the auto shop.

It’s Max.

He skids to a stop in front of Clint’s office, looking completely frantic. His hair is a mess like he ran his fingers through it incessantly on the way here, and there are stains of ink all over his fingers and forearms.

Wild-eyed and panicked, he takes a step toward me and then stops.

I stare at him as a deep, pulsing realization seeps through me.

“Banner?” Clint calls my name softly.

I had no idea.

He lied to me.

He looked me right in the face and he lied to me.

I love you, Dawn.

Did he lie about that too?

Max stumbles forward. In a few seconds, he’s in the office. His eyes lock on mine and though I’m standing across the room, it feels like he’s choking me. When he finally rips his gaze away and drops it to the stack of papers I’m gripping in my trembling hands, he sucks in a sharp breath.

I can’t move.

The sight of him cuts me to my very soul.

“Dawn... Dawn.” He curses. “I can explain.”

Clint walks up to Stinton and puts a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t think now is the right time.”

Max shakes him off. “Dawn, I wanted to tell you.”

If he’d told me that it was a cruel trick set up by Trevor, I would have believed him. I would have believed anything because I so badly wanted to trust him.

But in an instant, the rose-tinted glasses are ripped from my eyes.

I see everything from Max’s perspective. See my stupidity as I kissed him under the stars. See my foolish hope when I asked if he sent the lawyers and the relief I felt when he told me he didn’t. See the way he must have smirked and laughed when he realized that I was throwing my heart at him like a fan would throw her bra at her favorite artist on stage.

My mind is spiraling, slanting down into a chasm of pain and regret. A black hole that threatens to open up and swallow me, ripping apart the fabric of my heart, my soul, my everything.

Disgust smothers me.

Reality coats me in a mess of shame.

I should never have given my heart to Max Stinton of all people.

I should never have been so stupid.

Max makes a sound in his throat. It’s so intense and broken that it shakes me out of my own panic for a second. I glance up and realize that

the pain chewing me alive seems to be crushing him too. His face is lined with stress and regret.

It's too late for that.

Nothing matters.

His blue eyes are unrecognizable to me. I don't know this man.

No, that's wrong.

My father used to tell me: *'when someone shows you who they are, believe them.'*

This is the real Max Stinton.

I *do* know this man.

I just tried to convince myself he was someone else. I lied to myself because my heart desperately wanted to believe that he was good. That he wasn't tainted in the darkness of Stinton Group. That he was above it all.

My fingers curl into the papers until they're crushed.

I don't think I can survive this.

My pulse is pounding to a crazed rhythm.

Joy vanishes like the morning fog, all the hope and love I had building in my chest, gone in an instant.

I feel like I'm being skinned alive.

"You liar," I whisper.

Max flinches like I slammed him with a hammer.

I hear something shatter.

It's my heart.

Nothing will ever be the same.

Not my career. Not my life. Not my future.

Max's chest swells. "Dawn, I was going to tell you—"

"Shut up," I hiss. The voice that rips out of my chest doesn't sound like mine. It doesn't even sound human.

I'm paralyzed, but the world is spinning. It feels like I'm getting battered around in a wrestling ring. I'm surprised my body is still upright.

Max's face is turning red with—frustration? Annoyance that he got caught? I don't know. I'm too splintered inside to care about him right now.

Releasing my fingers, I watch the documents float to the ground. They look so harmless. Those lines. Those words. With a few easy strokes of a pen, he stormed into the lives of innocent women. He pressured them at their weakest moments. Inserted himself into a decision that wasn't his to make.

I always knew he was a monster.

But along the way I convinced myself that I was seeing something softer, something more humane in the darkness. *Stupid.*

I stalk past Clint, who's standing motionless in front of Max.

Then I storm past Max too.

When I try to get to the door, Max cuts into my path. "Dawn, I know how this looks, but I swear to you that I was a different man then. If I had to do it over, I wouldn't have made the same choices."

"Get out of my way."

"Dawn."

I drag my eyes to his, my face hardening like a stone. "Get the hell *out of my way!*"

His chest pumps up and down.

He doesn't move at first and I feel like screaming my head off. I feel like throwing punches at his handsome face. I feel like hog-tying him and stuffing those documents into his mouth until my heart stops bleeding. Anything but let the tears of disgust, rage, and heartbreak slip down my cheeks.

My eyes crash into his with the ferocity of a hurricane. "You played with me. You *lied* to me. You said all those sweet things about Beth when, eight years ago, your only mission in life was making sure she never saw the light of day."

"Dawn."

I fling my hands at him, ready to slap his face.

He stays still and braces himself for it.

Clint grabs me. Thick fingers wrap around my wrist and yank me back.

I lunge at Max anyway, not caring how ridiculous I look. All I can do is feel the outrage thrumming through my veins. It consumes me. It makes everything else in the world look fuzzy and dim.

"Was it fun playing around with me, Stinton?" My voice is rising with the same heat and fever as my pain. "Did you enjoy turning me into a fool, you bastard?"

"Dawn—"

"Let me go, Clint." I turn to the man holding me back.

His eyes train on me, filled with worry.

"I said let me go. I won't hit him."

Clint's fingers release me slowly.

“It’s okay.” Max steps forward. “You can go ahead and hit me. You can do whatever you want to me, Dawn. I deserve it.”

He deserves to get the ever-living-*daylights* kicked out of him.

I want to explode.

I want to tell him how much he hurt me.

I want him to deny it and point to those papers and laugh about how I’m being ridiculous. Tell me that he would never do those things, say those things—as if women are cattle that he can manipulate and buy off for his own gain.

But I can’t move my mouth.

I can’t speak.

And I can’t stop the tears that are still pressing in the back of my eyes.

Max clenches his jaw.

Looking at him is painful. I stalk past the man I was falling in love with and head out of Clint’s office, noting the other mechanics who are deathly silent in the mechanic bay. They must have seen the commotion through the glass pane. Maybe they heard it too.

Humiliation burns my cheeks.

Max’s footsteps clomp toward me and then I hear Clint’s low voice. A glance over my shoulder reveals Clint holding Max back. He could easily brush Clint off like he did in the office but, this time, he allows the old man to keep him away. His blue eyes are creased to near slits. His lips are a tense, thin line.

I can’t believe I fell in love with this man.

This monster.

Pain cuts like a knife through my stomach.

I allow myself to feel it.

I’m not going to shy away from this agony.

I was so eager to run to him. To fall for him. The same way I embraced Max Stinton in my foolish eagerness is the same way I’ll embrace the truth.

It’s a fitting punishment.

A beautiful death sentence.

I hurl myself into my car and listen to the engine rumble to life.

My fingers curl over the steering wheel and a heart wrenching sob rips out of me. I squeeze my eyes shut and let the mass of rage, hurt, heartbreak and humiliation barrel into a heated stew in my gut.

Bastard.

Monster.

Jerk.

Liar.

I gasp out loud, feeling the tears running down my cheeks only barely.
The scraping of my heart as it's being beaten with a stick hurts far more.

I've never experienced anything like this before.

Not even when my dad died.

I'm *suffering*.

I want to crawl into a hole and let someone bury me.

It's my fault.

I let the pain consume me, accepting the punishment for falling in love
with the cruel prince of Stinton Group.

My phone rings at that moment.

I want to ignore it, but I fish it out of my purse and put it to my ear.
"Hello?"

"Hi, Dawn baby."

Mama Moira's voice breaks what little restraint I had left. My tears flow
faster and faster. I gasp, sputter, choke. Break down with such loud,
devastating wails that Mama Moira sounds frantic.

"Dawn? Dawn baby, what's wrong? Do you need me to call the police?"

"N-no."

"Can you drive? You shouldn't drive. Where are you? Let me come to
you."

I spot Max stepping out of the garage.

His eyes are on my truck.

I sniff. "No, let me come to you."

Max's gaze is so splintered, so far removed from his usual cool and
frosty mask, that I want to reach out and touch him.

Even after seeing the evidence of who he is, of what he's done, I still
want to go to him.

I must be off in the head.

Yanking on the stick shift, I back the car out of the parking lot so fast
that rocks fly up under my tires and then I fly into the street.

* * *

MAMA MOIRA ISN'T THE ONLY WOMAN AT THE FARMHOUSE. SUNNY AND Kenya are there too. They were best friends before I met them and it shows when they both rise to their feet, wearing identical expressions of worry.

I stop short when I see them.

Mama Moira pulses forward. She's a short, plump woman with tan skin and long black hair. She's wearing a floral skirt and an embroidered blouse that I get to see up-close as she wordlessly drags me into a hug.

I fall into her and come apart all over again.

It's crazy.

I thought I was all cried out in front of the garage. It's like having a mother's touch flips a switch inside me. Maybe it's because I didn't have a mom growing up, so I didn't get to build a defense against it. I've always been strong. Always thought I could do it on my own.

Mama Moira's gentleness and care just yanks the hurt out of me. Unravels me until I can't do anything but sink into her comfort.

The feel of two more arms wrapping around me prompts me to look up.

Kenya and Sunny are hugging me on either side.

Like an idiot, I start bawling harder.

It's like a faucet that's been turned on inside me. It keeps pouring until it becomes an avalanche of regret and hurt, swirling in a mixture of intense humiliation.

I keep replaying that moment eight years ago. How frantic I felt when I found out I was pregnant. The desperate hunt to find the man I'd made that stupid mistake with. The way Trevor answered the call so cheerfully when I first connected with him. The hesitation and finally, the utter distaste he showed me when I told him I was pregnant.

I think of the panic I felt as I tried to get used to the idea of becoming a single mother. I'd been terrified, but I also knew that I wanted my baby to have a chance. I wanted her to experience the world with me. I wanted to tell her about my dad and find comfort in the fact that someone would live on beyond me and keep his memory alive even when I was gone.

In that chaotic whirlwind of uncertainty and loneliness, Max Stinton sent lawyers to manipulate me. Sure, he wasn't the one who showed up at my door with a cracked smile and a briefcase. He wasn't the one who walked into my home, sat me down in the living room and shoved a piece of paper at me. He wasn't the one who rattled off a number with too many

zeroes and told me that all this could be mine if I only agreed to cut all ties with Stinton Group and with the child growing in my stomach.

But it *was* Max.

He sent his dogs at me. He gave the command.

It was his order and he was proud of it. He was more interested in cleaning up after his brother, in protecting Stinton Group, than he was in morals, integrity, or being a decent human being.

I fell in love with him even though I knew there was a possibility he'd been a part of that. And the moment he told me he wasn't, I latched on to it blindly. Asked no questions. Accepted it—and him—as if the world would end if I didn't.

I made a fool of myself.

My heart is heavy and I can't move past that fact.

It's brutal, but I have to face it.

I don't have a choice.

"I..." I try to find the words to confess my stupidity to them. There are so many words in the English language and yet I can't think of a single one. My eyelashes are heavy with my tears and I'm hopelessly battered by another wave of sobs. "I..."

"You don't have to talk," Mama Moira says. She pats my back, her tone sweet and gentle. "You don't have to say anything, Dawn. You can just sit down and catch your breath."

"I'll get her some water," Kenya says, her dark face creased in concern. She darts away to the fridge and returns a second later with a glass.

My hands are shaking so hard I can't even take it. To be honest, I can't even *see* the cup to accept it. My face feels like a pufferfish. My eyes are so bloated I can't open them past slits.

Sunny leads me to the couch and sits down with me, Mama Moira right on her heels. She doesn't ask me why I'm bawling as if I'm having a personal apocalypse. She doesn't ask me why I'm acting like we're all gonna die tomorrow. She just wraps her arms around my shoulders and stays close.

Mama Moira sits on my other side. She pins me with dark eyes that look exactly like Sunny's. We've never really gotten personal. Mama Moira's just been around to help Sunny with her wedding. I've tasted her amazing fry jacks and the other Belizean dishes she makes. I've seen her fuss at Belle—Kenya's daughter, Bailey and Micheal. She's even gotten fussy at

Beth too, something my daughter never got to experience from a grandmother before.

I know those capable hands of hers can roll tortillas like nobody's business and can sew a blouse with the intensity of a contestant on *Project Runway*, but I didn't know they could offer such comfort.

She pats my shoulder. "I called Sunny because I wanted to check if there was anything wrong with Elizabeth. You scared the Mayan out of me when I heard you bawling and I needed to know for myself." Mama Moira blinks slowly. "Sunny started asking me what was wrong and I told her you seemed to be upset. She came over right away."

"I was here already." Kenya leans toward me. "I hope you don't mind, but I can leave if you'd like."

"No." I shake my head. "It's fine."

Sunny continues to rub my back. "I'll tell Darrel to pick up the boys and Beth today."

"And I'll tell Alistair to invite them over for a play date," Kenya adds. "Belle will love to have her cousins over."

Sunny strokes my hair. "Mrs. Hansley's on her day-off so the men will have babysitting duty."

I blink rapidly. "I can pull myself back together in time—"

"You don't have to," Mama Moira coos. "Dawn baby, you don't have to be so strong all the time. It's great that you can, but it's terrible when you *have* to. There's three of us and one of you. We can handle your pain, your anger. That's what family is for." She thumps her chest. "You get to unbuckle those burdens when they're too heavy and you get to share them."

I shake my head because I don't deserve their tenderness and understanding. "I feel like an idiot."

"As if we all don't make questionable decisions in our lives?" Kenya asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Ask Darrel what I did to him in high school. Pure movie-villain move." Sunny shudders. "We all have things we regret."

"No, this is different." My words choke in my throat.

Thinking of those documents makes my eyes sting and my vision turns blurry again.

The brown and black faces of these amazing women run together into messy, chaotic colors like spilled paint.

“I knew I was making a mistake.” My throat is knotted. “I should have never gotten involved with Stinton Group. With Max. He... he’s not the man I thought he was.”

What if he is? What if he can explain?

I shake that voice free.

It’s so wrong that I still want to defend him. To find reasons to forgive him.

His darkness spilled over into my life like the night sky murdering the sun, and now the lines between right and wrong are blurring as I fight to find a reason to keep him around.

“Oh.” Mama Moira makes a sound deep in her throat. “You poor thing.”

“Max?” Sunny blinks. “Max Stinton. You and Max Stinton were—”

“Sunny.” Kenya stops her.

I blink and force a smile to balance out my trembling lips. “I let my guard down around him.” To the point that I let him dangerously close to my heart. So close that the truth has absolutely demolished me. “Would you believe it if I told you I fell in love with a monster?”

The women glance at each other.

Then Mama Moira leans forward. “Alright, Dawn baby. You go ahead and tell us everything.”

CHAPTER 18

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THE DOWNPOUR

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MAX

I DON'T KNOW what the hell to do to fix this.

Where can I even *start*?

I lost my focus, my edge, my sanity when I fell in love with Dawn and now that she's gone, it's left me floating in a dark abyss of uncertainty and pain. If I'd shown some restraint when I was throwing my heart at her, maybe I wouldn't be in this mess. Maybe I could still function. Unfortunately, she didn't really give me a damn choice but to rip my heart out and place it—bloody and beating—in her hands.

Now there's no hope of getting it back.

No hope of reversing the damage.

Did I really think this would work out? Did I really think someone like Dawn could just turn a blind eye to my past? Especially when that past involves her and the little girl that owns the other half of my heart?

Hell no.

I knew a woman with such strong views would snarl at me if she knew the truth. It's why I lied to her. Because the thought of living without her made me physically ill and I was willing to take my chances so I could keep her around for a little longer.

But look at that.

The truth is out and I lost her anyway.

The moment I saw her tearing out of the auto shop, I wanted to give chase. I barely talked myself out of that before I hopped into my car and went speeding towards dad's mansion. Halfway there, I asked myself what I was doing.

Did dad lie to Dawn? Did he make up something that wasn't true in order to break us apart?

No. He didn't.

He just showed her the truth. A truth I was too afraid to unleash.

And now I'm stuck trying to stumble through life without Dawn and Beth in it.

Screw that.

Screw everything.

It would have been better if I'd never met her in the first place.

I was so freaking satisfied without her.

I didn't care about anyone or anything and that suited me. All I had, all I *needed* was Stinton Group. It was a hollow life, but at least it was freaking *safe*. At least I didn't have a five-foot two stick of dynamite obliterating my peace of mind and dripping her sweet smiles all over my dreams.

She sees me as a monster.

That much I am.

But just like villains don't turn into blood-sucking serial killers in one day, the change in me didn't announce itself. It just slowly and surely arrived.

The first women weren't pregnant.

I'd been working hard to move Stinton Group forward. So yes, I sent lawyers when Trevor's girl trouble threatened to bleed into our bottom line.

It seemed like a simple equation at the time.

Money fixed things.

Money changed things.

So I just handed out what I needed to in order to keep the women and the tabloids quiet.

Stinton Group dominated every waking moment, and the stress of cleaning up after Trevor's messes was a headache I did not have the time or the energy to handle.

Better to keep it clean.

Better to be efficient with the aftermath.

Most of those women had their eye on my brother, thinking they could milk him for some cash anyway. A few of the more pitiful ones really thought that Trevor would love them. There was no saving those women. The cold-hard truth was enough to wake them up. And the others? I gave them the cash they wanted and they were more than happy.

The first pregnancy scare nearly shook me to my core. Before, Trevor's women had no concrete ties to Stinton Group. Had no way to milk him for everything he was worth. Eighteen years of child support and petty demands. Dragging the company through the mud with relationship drama that could be plastered all over Page Six.

Uncontrollable variables.

So I controlled them. Did everything in my power to make sure they understood that Stinton Group was not their ticket to a better life. That

Trevor didn't love them. He didn't care about anything as demanding as love. He wasn't going to rush in and save them and wasn't it better if they saved themselves?

The lawyers were good.

The women all took the deal.

I never had a bad report.

Until Dawn.

After she tossed the money back in the lawyers' faces, I decided to stop handling the pregnancy cases and handled my brother instead. After all, he was the source of the issue and the chaos would go away if he'd just learn to either zip up or strap up.

Thinking back, it was Dawn who changed me.

She was so powerful, she managed to influence me before we ever met in person.

Dangerous woman.

I always knew it.

I think about the last look she flung at me when she got inside her car. I'd never seen her so hurt and I felt like the worst kind of scum. Because I could see her fighting to look detached. I could see her holding back her tears and pretending that she was someone hard and vicious when, underneath all that spark of hers, beats the heart of a fragile, emotional person.

It's me who robbed her of that brilliance. Who shifted the dial on her bold and bright heart and set it to something hard and protective.

Damn.

Do I have to let her go?

It was eight years ago.

A part of me wants to point that out to her.

But I don't.

I can't hide that I have a long and dark history behind me.

This is exactly who I am. A man who can't even hold Dawn's trust.

Why should I act surprised? Why can't I just pack the hell up and move on from her?

I grab the bottle of beer and glare at the view of the ocean slamming against jagged rocks. The night sky is practically kissing the water, still waves reflecting the moon in its utter, silver brilliance.

This place is new. I was driving and driving a few nights ago when I found it and just stopped.

I don't want to be here right now.

Not when I do all my best thinking at the racetrack. But I tried going back there and realized that memories of Dawn had already taken over. I saw her in the lounge, smiling at me as she snapped off a mouthy insult. I saw her laughing with Hadyn outside the changing rooms, teasing me about my raisin nut cookie preferences. I saw her getting into a car on the track, wearing an oversized racing suit as she tried to stuff all that voluminous hair into a helmet. I saw her on the hill looking out over the city, her fingers intertwining with mine as she whispered thank you for protecting her during the press conference. I saw stars and I saw her lips, sipping from mine like she'd never tasted honey so sweet.

Dawn's memories were haunting me, floating all over the place I once considered my refuge. Damn—she couldn't be nice enough to give that place up, could she? After taking my heart, she went and took everything else I own.

My phone rings.

I debate ignoring it.

Trevor's been trying to reach me. Dad wants him to take over Stinton Auto and change his image into the devoted family man. It'll be like itchy skin on him. A nightmare come true. He's never been interested in the company or in taking responsibility for his actions. Hell, I have no idea what he's interested in besides trouble and women.

Groaning when the phone continues to ring, I dig my beer into the sand and slovenly reach for the device.

It's Hills.

I sigh heavily, think about it, and then I answer. "I'm not dead."

A string of curses hit my ears. I have to pull the phone away and wait until Hills settles down. When I finally hear something other than four-letter words shrieking from the cell, I put it back to my ear.

"You couldn't freaking answer the phone, you selfish idiot? Do you know how many times I almost called the police? Do you know how close I came to putting out an APB on your crazy—"

"I'm hanging up now."

"Wait." Hills breathes out. "Are there any guns?"

"What?"

“Pills?”

“Shut up.”

“What is that sound?” He pauses. “Is that the ocean? Dude, you’re not going to jump in, are you? I swear, if you are, I’ll fish you out and then kill you myself.”

“I’m not going to do anything stupid, Hills.”

“That ship has sailed, Stinton. It started when you fished Dawn Banner out of the auto shop she was buried in and it hasn’t stopped since. I blame you, but I blame her too. This all started when you took your eye off the ball.”

“Watch it, Hills.”

“No, you don’t get to disappear for *days* without a freaking warning and then tell me to watch myself. Especially right now. Do you know how chaotic the company is? Your brother was dead last week and now he’s walking around the hallways drinking bourbon and flirting with the female staff. We’re trying to keep the news under wraps, but he doesn’t give a freaking damn about anything but himself and he’s been going to clubs and calling himself Terrence, Trevor Stinton’s twin.”

I pinch my nose between my fingers. “Terrence?”

“Not to mention your dad wants Trevor to take over Stinton Auto. He asked me to contact Dawn and bring her to the company. I’ve been stalling, but he just asked me directly for her number.”

I scramble up. “What?”

“Yeah, I thought that would get your attention.”

“Of course it would. Dad already has Dawn’s number and address. He wanted you to tell me that.”

“Tell you what?”

“That I’m still on his leash.” I grip a handful of sand and dig in. “Dawn’s the most effective punishment he can think of.”

“What exactly is he trying to punish you for?”

“Putting someone above Stinton Group,” I murmur.

Hills curses again.

I think of the binder I saw in Dawn’s hands that day. The way the papers fell from her and scattered like glass shattering at her feet. Regret torpedoes my insides and makes it hard to speak.

“What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know.”

“You always have a plan, Max,” Hills thunders.

Yeah, but that was before Dawn Banner obliterated me. I let myself get tangled up in a woman I *knew* wanted a better man than I could ever be and now I’m paying for it.

“There’s going to be a huge fallout if the public realizes that Stinton Group is giving Trevor another chance. Not to mention the utter backlash from the board when your dad tries to throw our most profitable company into the trash can that is your younger brother.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Hills’s voice is giving me a headache.

“Max, wake the hell up!”

“Maybe it won’t come to that.”

“Like hell it won’t.”

“Trevor’s always capitulated to what dad wants, but this time he’s sure to put up a bigger fuss. He seemed to prefer being dead. Why else would he go to all that trouble to pay the tabloids and stay out of sight.”

“Is that what you think?”

I freeze.

“It wasn’t his choice to be dead.” Hills drops the bomb on me.

I nearly lose my phone to the sand and the waves. “What?”

“Your brother was real chatty when I caught him in your office yesterday, sampling your top whiskey...”

Why am I not surprised? Trevor never could keep his hands out of my liquor cabinet.

“... And he let it slip.” Hills growls as if he’s personally affronted by the news. “It was your dad who decided to kill him off. He’d already found Trevor a few weeks back, but he wanted to see what you were going to do with Stinton Auto. Turns out, the plan was always to steal the progress you’d made with the company and use it to shower Trevor in confetti. Making the public think he was dead was so his dramatic return could snag attention and get people talking about his ‘miraculous’ comeback.”

“Did Trevor know that dad wanted to tie up Dawn and Stinton Auto in a bow and hand them over to him? Is that why he agreed to do it?” I dig my fingers into the phone.

I don’t deserve Dawn, but my brother sure as hell doesn’t either. Especially since he hasn’t changed from his ways.

“I don’t know, Max. What I do know is that your dad is the scariest guy I’ve ever met. It’s creepy how he’s been pulling the strings behind the

scenes.”

I shake my head. Hearing that it was dad all along is no surprise. In fact, it makes sense. Dad was probably waiting until Dawn gained popularity, so he could make use of her in other ways.

No wonder he had been so upset when the Mila Dubois scandal broke out and it seemed like Stinton Auto would tank before it even began.

And no wonder he didn’t seem all that upset when the tabloids announced that his younger son was dead. At the time, I’d been wrestling with my feelings for Dawn, so I didn’t pay much attention. It wasn’t like dad and I were close anyway. I figured his radio silence about the tabloids was because he was handling it in his own way.

I didn’t realize he was behind it.

It does explain why that tabloid would come after Stinton Group though. They had the man with majority shares backing them up.

“Do you understand now?” Hills grunts. “Things are getting crazier over here and you’re the only person who can stop it.”

“I’ll be there in the morning,” I say quietly.

“You still need time to lick your wounds, Max? Look, she was just a woman—”

“She wasn’t just a woman to me, Hills.” The words are sharp, but it’s only because something equally sharp is clawing at my insides. I grab my beer to numb that feeling. “I’ve spent my life cleaning up Stinton Group’s messes. Now, Stinton Group has made a mess of me and I’m still figuring out how to fix it. Or...” I swallow. “Or even if I should.”

“Max, I’m sorry about Dawn, but you have bigger things to—”

I hang up on him and flop back into the sand.

I’ve always been the man with a plan. Stick an irresponsible, horn-dog of a little brother in front of me and I’ll keep him out of trouble if it kills me. Give me a company that’s bleeding money and I’ll rip out the departments that aren’t working, hand them a new plan and turn them into a money-printing machine. I can work until the wee hours of the night. No holidays off. No scandals with women. No women at all trying to lure me away from taking the company to new heights.

I was impenetrable.

Until one female mechanic sashayed in front of me with her dark skin and her dark eyes, and knocked me off my feet.

Groaning, I stare at the stars.

Damn. Even looking at the night sky makes me think of Dawn.

The beer's having zero effect.

I sigh heavily and throw a hand over my face.

I've had a pint too many to trust myself behind the wheel, so I doze off right there on the beach until I feel the temperatures drop. My eyes pry apart and I get a glimpse of angry clouds as warning before the heavens crack open and dump a bucketful of water on me.

Great.

Even Mother Nature freaking hates my guts.

I crawl into my car, shivering and frustrated and drive off, not caring where I go, even if it's off the edge of the earth.

* * *

WHAT AM I EVEN DOING HERE?

I end up outside Dawn and Beth's apartment like a creepy stalker, standing in the rain getting drenched as if I'm trying out for an extra in one of those melodramatic music videos.

The rain pelts my face and neck, plastering my hair to my forehead. It drips down my shirt and squishes in my shoes that are muddy from my venture to the beach.

I fix my eyes on Dawn's bedroom window. I've been in her apartment before and I saw the door with the stickers on it. That was Beth's bedroom. It's on the opposite side of the apartment.

Dawn's bedroom faces the street.

I imagine Dawn lying in bed, wearing her jumpsuit because picturing her in anything else is pretty freaking difficult and I don't have the right to fantasize about her in her underwear. I imagine her slender hand pressed up against her cheek as she does the one thing I haven't been able to in days—sleep deeply.

I don't belong here.

I know that as well as I know the inside of my palm.

But tearing myself away from that apartment is like asking me to separate my lungs from my chest. It's not gonna happen.

A range of feelings run through me as I let the rain pelt my head and wonder what I'd say to Dawn if I could see her now.

I'm miserable without you.

I love you.

I'm sorry.

None of those words can fix this. Can change that I sent those lawyers and then lied about it. Nothing can erase the taste of her bitterness.

It's hopeless.

I should pick up the pieces and point my eyes on Stinton Group.

I should try to protect Dawn and Beth like I promised and leave it there.

What else can I do?

At that moment, Dawn's bedroom light clicks on and it's like a flare of hope spurs to life in my chest too. Just knowing that she's up and moving around. Just knowing that I'm close to her even though I'm so far away.

I'm insane.

How the hell did I sink this low?

What kind of enchantment did she put on me that I've become a pathetic loser who'd wait outside a woman's apartment just to be near her?

My phone pings.

DARREL: Went to Stinton Group and you weren't there.

DARREL: Hills said you hadn't been to work for a while. He said you might need help.

Yeah.

I do need help.

Maybe Darrel can noodle around in my brain and disconnect all the wires that fire up whenever I think about Dawn. Better yet, maybe he can put me under and pick out all the memories I have of her.

Dawn's bedroom light goes off. She must be back in bed again.

I lower my eyes and tuck my phone back in my pocket. I don't deserve to be here, spying on her. I don't even deserve the crumbs.

Forcing myself to turn around, I climb back into my car and drive to the empty house that won't ever feel like home.

Vanya is outside.

Great. Just what I need tonight.

"I'm not in the mood, Vanya."

Her eyes narrow. "You look awful."

"Thanks."

She follows me into the house without a word and perches in my sofa. Her eyes scan the beer bottles scattered about and the piles of empty pizza

boxes.

“You’re dying without her. What are you going to do?” Vanya asks.
I curl my fingers into fists and stalk past her. “Nothing.”
At least for tonight.

* * *

HOW DO I FIX THIS?

My mind is an empty cavern. All I can see is Dawn’s bright smile lighting up her face. All I can hear is her sultry voice calling my name while she ran her fingers over my cheeks.

It keeps me up all night and, by the time the sun comes up, I feel like I tortured myself to the brink of exhaustion.

So this is what heartbreak feels like.

I stare at the ceiling while the sun crawls over the horizon. Then, when I’ve accepted that I have to rejoin the world of the living, I get up, shower and shave off the days-old beard that grew in while I ran away from my responsibilities.

Since I’m trying to get my life back in order, I head to the gym. At least that space is still sacred and untainted by memories of Dawn.

Or it should be.

Until Darrel and Holland Alistair appear above my head while I’m pumping iron with my trembling arms and my hangover-induced headache.

I plunk the weights back in the cradle and sit up.

Alistair is glaring at me, which is something he’s always done. And it’s never bothered me before. I don’t really care whether the men in my business circle like me. Only that our shared goals are in alignment with Stinton Group’s plans. However, I’m stunned to see him here. If Darrel weren’t with him, I’d assume this was some kind of stickup.

I jerk my eyes away from Alistair and turn to the therapist.

Darrel hands me a bottle of water just like he did last time.

Only this time, I don’t take it.

Reaching for my towel instead, I wipe it over my face. “I know why you’re here,” I growl. “And I’m really not in the mood.”

“We come in peace.”

I snort. "Then why did you bring the scowling one?" I nod at Alistair. "If all you came to do is talk, you shouldn't have brought a grenade."

"Relax. You look like death warmed over, Stinton. It wouldn't be a fair fight to gang up on you now."

I glower at Alistair and half-rise. "You want to test that theory?"

"Hey, hey." Darrel lifts a hand. "That's not why we're here."

I sit back down slowly.

"We heard about what happened with you and Dawn," Darrel says.

My eyes widen and my heart quivers just hearing her name.

When did I get this weak?

If all it takes is just the sound of her name to cut me off at the knees, then I really am screwed.

My shoulders cave in and I grip the towel tighter. "How is she?"

Darrel and Alistair share a look.

"Not that much better than you," Darrel says finally.

I glance up.

"Sunny and Kenya have been rallying around her, but..." Darrel purses his lips. "She's devastated, Max."

Hearing it from someone else is a sucker punch to the gut.

"I know." I wipe the towel over my face again. "I messed up."

I might be a bastard, but I won't deny when I've done wrong. I've been apologizing on Trevor's behalf for most of my life. The words 'I'm sorry' aren't foreign to me. But this searing pain in my gut when I think about Dawn's suffering is.

If I could go back in time, I would erase myself from her life completely.

It would be the right thing to do.

Darrel tilts his chin up and squints at the horizon. "Can I be honest?"

"Have you ever asked permission before?" I finally grab the water from him, unscrew the cap and sip.

"Your sense of responsibility has always driven you, Max. Even when we were in college, you didn't play around like the other guys. You were always upfront with the girls you were with. We thought it would run them off, but it didn't. Those girls saw you as a challenge. They wanted to change your mind, so they ran to you, competing to be 'the One'. The one that made you different. The one that took your eyes off Stinton Group. It was almost sad to watch them all fail. None of them could shake you."

I suck in a deep breath.

What is he trying to say? That this is karma?

That I'm finally getting a taste of how those women—women whose names I can't even remember—felt when I played with them in college?

"I'm not here to rag on you about what you've done." Darrel's tone is quiet and firm. His eyes sear me. "I'm here to remind you that there's always a way forward. Even if that way sucks and you'd rather take any other path."

Alistair cracks his neck. "He's right. Moping doesn't look good on you, Stinton."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Are you here to rub it in?"

"I'm here to balance Darrel out. He has good feelings towards you. I don't." Alistair lifts large hands. "I've known about your dirty little clean-ups for your brother. Claire was one of the women Trevor used and dumped. Turns out, my first wife had a real problem with the way she was told to back off. And it didn't take me long to trace that little show of intimidation back to you."

I square my shoulders.

Alistair lifts a hand. "It wasn't like you threatened her and it wasn't like you were the douchebag that broke her heart either, but you were covering it under a rug. To me, that made you just as guilty as the jerk who hurt her." He leans against the weight machine. "I always thought you were a shady bastard, Stinton. But when I saw that press conference and heard what you did for Dawn, I started wondering if there was more to you than I'd anticipated."

"Is that a compliment, Alistair?"

"Never. Just an observation." He tilts his head. "What I don't like is watching the people under my protection shatter because of you. I saw it once with Claire. Now, you've got Kenya worrying her head off about Dawn. I don't like to see my wife upset. It makes me want to burn things to the ground, you understand?"

Darrel puts a hand on Alistair's shoulder. "What he's saying, Max, is that we don't think you're a bad guy. If we did," the pressure on my shoulder increases, "this conversation wouldn't be so civil, whether or not we're college buddies."

My lips tense.

“What we all can agree on is that Trevor, with his current behavior, is not ready to be a part of Beth’s life.”

I bristle. Even though I agree with them, it’s ingrained in me to want to defend my brother.

“Don’t say it, Max.” Darrel shakes his head. The man really does have mind-reading abilities. “You’ll only regret it.”

“What was he going to say?” Alistair asks.

Darrel shakes his head. “Something about how Trevor is Beth’s real father.”

“Were you?”

I growl at Darrel. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that being a father has nothing to do with blood. It’s a lesson that took me a really long time to learn, but it’s the truth. I don’t want to see Trevor tear Dawn and Beth apart the way he’s torn up so many other lives. We can protect them as much as we can on our end, but you’re the only one who can protect them properly. No one else has the power you do. No one else has the access to Stinton Group that you do.”

“Of course I’ll protect them.” I’m offended that Darrel thinks I wouldn’t.

The stakes are higher than they’ve ever been, but I’ve already lost Dawn. I have nothing more to lose. I’m willing to throw myself on a grenade if it means keeping dad’s hands off my niece.

Darrel arches an eyebrow. “Even if it costs you Stinton Group?”

“You asked me that question before.” I rise to my feet. “The answer is different this time. I had everything when I had Dawn. Without her, I have nothing.”

Alistair purses his lips. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Darrel relaxes.

Alistair crosses his legs at the ankles. “So how are you going to get her back?”

My eyes swerve to him.

He gives me a pointed look. “Were you just planning on giving up on her?”

My pride rears its ugly head. I’ve already fallen this far. Why do I need to chase her? Why do I need to beg for another chance? What if she doesn’t give it? Then I leave with a bruised ego and empty hands. Hiding behind

barbed wire and a cold mask is easier. Safer. Dawn ripped that facade to shreds once. Giving her the opportunity to do it again is insane.

Darrel frowns at me and sticks a hand into his pocket. "Can you live without her, Max?"

Hell.

The answer is no.

The biggest freaking no that I can summon.

"I ruined everything by lying to her. I don't know where to start to get her trust back," I admit.

"It's not gonna be easy, but there's a way."

I lift my head eagerly.

"There's a way that'll show her you're not the same as Trevor, that you're beyond the dirtiness of Stinton Group. But it's going to cost you everything."

I finally see what he's hinting at, and it hits me like a ton of bricks.

The funny thing is, it doesn't scare me. Not even a little.

Everything becomes so freaking clear in an instant.

I'm going to protect them.

And then I'm going to do what needs to be done.

I launch past Darrel and Alistair, heading for my phone. Shifting it out of the duffel, I call Hills and bark, "I need Dawn's contract on my desk the moment I get into the office." I throw my gym bag over my shoulder and shoot like a rocket down the stairs. "And then I need you to schedule a meeting with the filming crew."

"Why?" Hills squawks.

"I'm making an announcement."

"About Trevor?" he asks hopefully.

"About me." I take the stairs instead of the elevator. "I'm officially resigning from Stinton Group."

CHAPTER 19

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DANGLING CONTRACTS

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DAWN

I'VE NEVER BEEN good at feeling helpless.

I found out my one-night-stand knocked me up?

I gave myself a few days to panic and then went looking for him.

That ignorant buffoon didn't want to be a part of me or the baby's life?

I shrugged him off and prepared to live life as a single mother.

Morning sickness made me allergic to the smell of gasoline?

I clipped my nose and kept working to earn my certificate so I could provide for my daughter.

Life tried its best to knock me flat on my face, but it never quite succeeded. I'm stubborn like that. Crazy like that. I'd rather foolishly charge on, believing things will get better than let the panic sink under my skin.

Dad called me his 'little choo-choo train' because I keep chugging at my own pace, no matter what. It's a trait I've taken from my childhood and nurtured into life as an adult. If I just keep moving, if I just keep putting one foot in front of the other, I can make it through the darkness. I can push through the bad times. It's how I've lived my entire life.

Nothing stops me in my tracks.

Stopping is defeat.

And yet, here I am, frozen solid, while the world becomes a blur around me.

"Today, I will officially step down from Stinton Group."

The man uttering those words has the most electric blue eyes and a square jaw chiseled by an angry sculptor. He clutches the edges of a podium, tan fingers digging into the wood.

It's Max.

But it can't be.

Because that version of Max is saying things the real Max would never say.

"Thank you for all your support and please continue rooting for Stinton Group in all its ventures."

Max gives the camera a long and cold stare. His icy blue eyes are like a punch to the gut. I curve my fingers over the phone as if I can touch his face.

He's wearing a grey suit that perfectly hugs his broad shoulders. His hair is brushed away from his forehead.

All business. All intimidating stares.

And yet he's saying utter nonsense.

Resigning?

Max Stinton is leaving Stinton Group?

That's like a fish deciding it's 'resigning' from the ocean.

Ridiculous.

It can't live anywhere but under water. It's literally *built* for it. Thrives in it.

A fish out of water isn't a fish.

It's sushi.

I dig my fingers into the phone, my head throbbing harder.

Why would he do that?

Why would he cut off his own limb?

The Stinton Group livestream goes dead and, immediately, my phone starts ringing.

I jump when I see Max's name sprawling across the screen.

My eyes widen.

The livestream just ended a second ago. Did he walk off the stage and immediately call me?

I quiet my thrashing heart and send his call straight to voicemail.

No, I can't be distracted by that.

He *lied* to me.

I bared my heart to him. Gave him the perfect opportunity to admit the truth.

Rather than be upfront, he chose to hide behind lies.

Coward.

So what if he's resigning? I'm not going to assume it's because of me. I definitely will *not* allow this gesture to make my heart waver.

Who's to say this isn't just another manipulation tactic by Stinton Group? Maybe Trevor and Max sat together and concocted this plan in order to introduce Trevor to the world again. Max isn't above dirty deeds

like lying and twisting his words until they become something beautiful and distracting.

He was able to fool me once, but I'm smarter now.

I've been bruised by love and I...

I don't realize I'm crying until I taste something salty on my lips. The phone shakes in front of me because I'm trembling so hard.

It rings again.

Max.

I wish I could turn it off completely, but I don't want to risk missing an emergency call from Beth's school.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I set the phone back in my purse, dry my face, and pop my car open. The auto shop looms before me with its giant doors and shiny glass panes.

My thoughts turn to Max again.

I officially step down from Stinton Group.

His voice hadn't wavered while he made the announcement, but it must have cut him to even utter that sentence. He shut his eyes to decency and let the darkness consume him just to protect that company. He worked like a maniac to bring Stinton Group to the heights of power. And it's a legacy he protects at all costs, even if it means tearing someone else down.

Now he's just... letting it go?

Do not let him get to you, Dawn.

I force myself to keep moving even though all I want to do is drop to my haunches and cry. That first step is hard, but I keep putting one foot in front of the other until I'm standing in the garage.

Marco and the other mechanics all stop what they're doing to watch me.

Clint pokes his head out of his office. The moment he sees me, he gives me an up-and-down survey. It's my first time arriving at the garage in 'casual' clothes. No matter how packed my schedule, I've always worn my over-alls or a jumper when I go to the shop.

It's a habit. Just being near a car makes my hands itch to get under the hood and diagnose it. I've never missed an opportunity to work in the garage.

Except today, I didn't come to tinker with an engine.

I came to hand in my resignation.

Clint glances at the envelope in my hands and his face turns pasty white. Flinging his arm toward his office, he croaks, "Let's talk in here."

The entire workshop stops and stares at me.

I give Marco and the guys a nod before trailing my manager into the office.

Clint flops into his chair and wags a finger at the envelope. “Does it have to come to this, Banner? Do you have to walk away when this place is perfect for you?”

“I can fix cars anywhere,” I say, playing with the edge of the envelope.

“You told me once that Cross Roads Auto felt like home.” His eyes burn into me. “Has that changed because the name became Stinton Auto?”

“I wasn’t at home because of the shop, Clint. It was because of you.”

His eyes flicker. His throat bobs.

“You looked after me without making it seem like you thought I was weaker. You allowed me to bring Beth here in the evenings so I could keep an eye on her and have peace of mind. You treated us like your family—”

“You *are* family, Banner. Which is why I can’t accept this.” He shakes his head.

“You don’t have a choice, Clint.”

“Can’t I change your mind? Even if this place is owned by Stinton Group, it’s managed by me. I wanted someone I could trust to take over.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t work under Stinton Group any longer.”

“So no more commercials?”

“No.” I shake my head. I don’t care what Max says. If he tries to push the contract at me, I’ll shred it into tiny pieces and shove it down his throat.

“What are you going to do now?” Clint asks.

“There are tons of opportunities.” My voice has a cheerful tone, but there’s a line of unease beneath it. I’ve never been good at faking how I feel. Especially in moments like this one. Especially when something this beautiful comes to an end. “Every automotive network is clamoring to give me a show. And other garages are trying to poach me left, right and center.”

Clint pools his fingers together and slides them over the desk. His pale hands are lined with callouses. Hard and square. The hands of an honest, hardworking man. Because his skin is so pale, the stains on his hand and under his fingernails are more apparent. Clint doesn’t bother to scrub it off anymore. It’s there. Like a part of him. A tattoo of love and labor.

“Banner, I ask you to think this through.” He spreads his hands toward me. “Please. I don’t want you to make a permanent decision on a temporary feeling.”

“I have thought it through.” My chin wobbles but I still push it up. “Nothing’s going to change my mind.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I have more job offers than I know what to do with.” I slide the resignation toward him.

“I’m not talking about what you’ll do next. You’re smart and you’ll succeed at anything you put your mind to.”

My heart thumps. “Thank you, Clint.”

“What I’m talking about is suddenly cutting ties with Stinton Group.”

I stiffen. “It’s not going to be a problem.”

I hope.

“The company was brutal enough to send that binder here. They wanted you to find out what Stinton had done in the most cruel way possible. If they can do something like that, if they can play dirty games like that, what else are they capable of?”

“I’m not afraid of them.” If Max tries to keep me locked in the contract after what he did to me, he’s not even human. “I’ve never been afraid of Stinton Group and their corruption. Max can—”

“You think I’m worried about Max Stinton?”

I blink slowly.

Clint huffs out a breath that shakes his entire body. “Oh no, Banner. This is way beyond Max Stinton.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you seriously not see it? That bomb wasn’t for you. It was for him.”

His words slam me down like a wrestler dragging his opponent to the mat.

A light bulb goes off.

Clint’s right. I was too emotional to recognize it, but the way the binder got into my hands *was* strange. It very clearly wasn’t Max’s doing. Someone wanted me to find out who he really was and what he’d done. They were weaponizing Max’s secrets. Turned it into a bomb that exploded between us both. It doesn’t make Max any less guilty, but it does prove that I can’t let my guard down thinking this is over.

“Whatever Max Stinton did and whatever darkness is inside him, there’s someone above him that would make Max look like a Boy Scout.” Clint taps his finger on the desk. “Do you understand me? There’s someone even

worse than Max Stinton who has you in his crosshairs now. And he just took out the one man who was capable of protecting you.”

I shudder. “You saw the press conference too?”

“It’s everywhere. Max Stinton resigning from Stinton Group is like a chocolate M&M turning into a skittle. Doesn’t make sense.”

I blow out a breath as my mind whirs.

Clint’s chair creaks in the silence. He gets up and rounds the desk. “Dawn,” he calls my name softly, “I don’t know what happened between you two, but... are you sure that Max Stinton was the one who gave those orders?”

“Yes.” I swallow past the lump in my throat.

“I’m guessing you two aren’t together anymore.”

I blink rapidly. “I’d be crazy if I was still with him.”

“How have you been handling?”

“Great.”

Awful.

I can’t sleep.

I can’t eat.

I’m putting on a brave face for my daughter but, inside, I feel hollowed out.

At least I haven’t cried anymore. Seems like I emptied my entire body of tears that day in the farmhouse.

“You know that I’ve got your back, right? Whatever you need.”

I smile painfully.

“No matter what the Stintons try to do, I’m here for you. *We’re* here for you. We might not be a big conglomerate with an army of lawyers, but we protect our own. Just because we fix things for a living doesn’t mean we don’t know how to burn things down.”

I laugh. “If I were a hugger, I’d give you a big one right now.”

“It’s alright. I feel it in here.” He taps his chest. Slowly, painfully, Clint reaches over the desk and takes my resignation. “You’ll always have a home here, Banner.”

I sniff and turn away from him.

This garage was my refuge but now, when I see this place, the glass pane looking out of Clint’s office, the lift and the tool trolley, all I see is Max.

* * *

THERE'S A BLACK VAN WAITING OUTSIDE MY APARTMENT WHEN I GET HOME.

I give the strange vehicle a stink eye. It's taking up three parking spaces.
Talk about obnoxious.

I climb out of my truck and give the van a wide berth as I head toward my building. Suddenly, the van door screeches open and two bulky men leap out.

My alarm bells start wailing.

I dig my fingers into my purse, taking stock of them from the corner of my eye. The beefy guys are heading right for me.

Is this a kidnapping in the middle of the day?

I quicken my steps, my eyes on the front door and my heart pounding desperately. What if Clint was right about someone above Max wreaking even more havoc on my life? What if the lines that mysterious 'big boss' draws are worse than Max's rock bottom decision-making?

The men are practically breathing down my neck.

I'm still too far from the door.

Deciding retreat isn't going to work for me, I whirl around and swing my purse at the beefy guy on the left. My bag connects with his shoulder and bounces off him like a penny at the base of a mountain.

The musclehead doesn't even flinch. Instead, he studies me. "Ms. Banner?"

Fear builds in the back of my throat, but they haven't nabbed me yet. Maybe there's still time for me to outsmart them and make a run for it.

"Who's asking?" I snap.

"George Stinton. He would like to have a word with you."

Everything in my body goes still.

George Stinton? I've heard that name before. Long ago, when I was doing my research on Stinton Group to find a way to get in touch with Trevor, I looked up the company. George Stinton was plastered all over the company website. There was even a video of him talking about how he 'took a small loan of five hundred grand' and 'built this company from the ground up'.

Rich kids.

"Here." Musclehead Number Two lifts a cell phone at me.

I take it hesitantly. So far, I'm not getting body-snatching, kidnapper vibes from them. If their intent *was* to abduct me, they would have done it by now.

"Hello?" I grumble.

"Ms. Banner, this is George Stinton. I'm sorry for the scary looking men in front of you. I would have sent a nicer welcoming party, but I didn't think you'd pay as much attention."

My nostrils flare. "So you sent your goons to try and intimidate me?"

"Are you intimidated? I sincerely doubt that." He chuckles.

I hate him on sight.

Well, technically I haven't *seen* him yet.

I hate him at first *sound* then. His voice is a thick and scratchy worm in my ears. There's a seedy undertone as well, as if he's spent too much time in a musty cell, cooking up ways to wreak havoc on the city.

"I'd like to have a meeting with you. I simply sent a car and a few companions." Stinton laughs. "Do you have time, Ms. Banner?"

"If I said I didn't?"

"I'd ask you, politely, to make time."

"I don't work for Stinton Group anymore."

"Oh, on the contrary, Ms. Banner, I have a contract in front of me that says you do."

My body goes rigid.

My breath hitches.

Did Max hand the contract over to his dad? Did he run and spill all about Beth the moment our relationship crashed and burned? Is this his revenge?

A blistering rage bubbles in my chest. I don't want to believe it. I hope the man I fell for isn't such a backstabbing beast, but I can't even find a convincing argument. Max lied to me. Who's to say he isn't that cold and heartless?

"Get in the car, Ms. Banner."

"My afro can't fit in a burlap sack. In case you were thinking of trying to put something over my head," I bite out.

He laughs. "Oh, I can see why Max was so enchanted by you. What a biting wit you have."

"I have biting teeth too. In case you want to test me."

His chuckle makes me want to stick a pen in his shoulder. Not enough to make him bleed. Just enough to make him bawl out in pain and acknowledge his own mortality.

“I’m looking forward to this, Ms. Banner.”

The line goes dead.

Stomach roiling, I follow the beefy men to their van and get inside. There’s no blindfold or burlap sack over my head. Instead, there’s sparkling water, champagne and snacks in the back of the luxury van. The vehicle seems like one that transports celebrities. The windows are tinted and there’s so much room in front of me that I could fit a bathtub between me and the front seat.

I don’t touch any of the snacks.

I’m not in Cinderella’s pumpkin carriage.

I’m in a gilded cage.

On my way to Stinton Group, I text Sunny and Kenya to let them know where I am. Just in case my body washes up in the river tonight.

The muscleheads escort me all the way to Max’s office, as if they’re afraid I’ll vanish if they take their eyes off me for a second. I guess a man as calculated as George Stinton would assume I’d be the type of guest who’d run.

Which I would.

As I walk down the familiar hallway, I grit my teeth and force myself not to think about Max. Or why George Stinton is using Max’s office to hold his meetings. Or why Hills looks at me with surprise in his eyes when he sees me being escorted in by the beefy guys.

Without a word, Max’s best friend ducks his head and pretends he didn’t see anything.

A flash of hurt zips through me.

Yeah, I know Hills and I aren’t exactly friends, but the fact that he doesn’t care at all about what’s happening is a blow.

I have enemies on all sides here in Stinton Group.

One of the beefy guys opens the door and I strut inside. Sure, I might be shaking slightly, but I’m not going to let George Stinton see. He already thinks he has the upper hand because of that stupid contract. I have to make him see that I’m not some doll he can jerk around.

“Ms. Banner.” A tall man with greying hair and Max’s sharp blue eyes lounges behind the desk. He unfolds himself from the chair and prowls

toward me with the grace of an aging panther.

I can see why Max's mother would fall in love with him. He's practically rolling in dark charisma.

There's a similar intensity in Max, but it's tempered by the tiny glimmer of kindness that Stinton Group never managed to snuff out. While Max had some lines he wouldn't cross, I get the feeling that his father would cross all of them and laugh about it.

"Don't look at me with such fierce eyes, Ms. Banner, I'm not going to hurt you. Why would I? When you've done such good for Stinton Group. When you're family."

My eyebrow pops so high it almost explodes off my face. I jut a finger to the space between us. "We are *not* family."

"On the contrary, my granddaughter is the tie holding our little world together. That's especially true for Trevor."

I start trembling at the mention of Beth. "I don't care who you are, you conniving old man. You do *not* talk about my daughter as if she's a bargaining chip."

"Oh? But it was fine when Max did it?" He chuckles and leans against his desk. "You know, Ms. Banner, I really don't respect a hypocrite."

The poison-tipped arrow hits its target. I flinch. "What do you want?"

"I gave you a few days to settle in to the new normal, but now it's time for us to work out our next steps. I'd like to discuss what happens next between you, Trevor and Stinton Auto."

"There is no me and Trevor."

"According to the paternity test that you will be legally obligated to take, there is." He smiles sharply. It's the bloody grin of a lion who just tore into an innocent gazelle, dangerous and disarming.

I knew I was walking into a trap.

Panic billows in my heart. I latch on to anything I can to keep the upper hand even though it feels like I'm grasping at straws. "That contract protects Beth. It says that she shouldn't be mentioned to the press or to the family."

"Ms. Banner," he picks up the contract and dangles it in front of me, "you really should read the fine print before you sign things." His eyes glitter. "It's true that we can't mention anything about Beth to the press, but *you* can. And you will. Unless you want us to start talking about custody battles and lawyers."

I can't breathe. Even so, I don't waver and fight back with all my might. "Trevor is a train wreck. No self-respecting judge will give him parental rights."

"No, but we can make it very ugly, very quick. We can start pulling out your dirty laundry one-by-one. And then we can go to your dad's laundry. Re-open that investigation on how your mom died in that car accident. Didn't he always believe it was his fault for misdiagnosing her car and sending her out into an icy night?"

I launch myself at his desk. "The police cleared him of the charges."

"Yes, but he always carried that guilt with him, didn't he? Wondering if the police were wrong and if the accident was his fault."

My body trembles.

The owner of Stinton Group is dirtier than I could have ever imagined and the depths he'd go just to get his way makes me shudder.

"I was right to keep Beth away from this family. You're all disgusting, low-down *animals*."

"No, Ms. Banner, we're *your* disgusting in-laws. For as long as you and Trevor both shall live." He chuckles. "Or at least, for as long as I hold on to this contract." He taps the page. "You are the face of Stinton Auto. And Trevor is the new CEO of that company. Whether you like it or not, you are contractually obligated to do interviews with him. And if the interviewer *happens* to bring up your daughter, you're going to answer in a manner that is positive for Stinton Group and for Trevor. Are you understanding the picture I'm painting?"

I am.

And it's like a noose tightening around my neck.

When Max had control of me, the rope wasn't so itchy. It didn't burn. There was still room to breathe.

But George Stinton is out for blood.

I won't have anything left when he's through with me and, even then, he'll find a way to pick off my carcass and make a stew of my bones.

I don't have a choice.

"That's right." He croons like a vet who just shot a frantic horse with a tranq. "You're a smart woman, Ms. Banner. You know what you're up against here." He flutters the contract again and tucks it into a binder. "Now, shall we discuss your first joint appearance with—"

The door bursts open before he can utter another word.

Max storms in, looking like an unleashed tiger with his blue eyes bright enough to burn me. He's still wearing the pristine grey suit from the press conference, but his hair is wind-torn and limp. I look closer and notice the sweat dripping all over his forehead in punishing drops.

Did he run here?

My heart jumps in my throat.

Oh, no.

I'm not looking at Max to save me.

I'm not going to give him that benefit of the doubt.

Stupidity doesn't look good on me.

Neither does blind hope.

He walks forward.

Every step drives me further and further into a whiplash of confusion and longing.

He lied to me.

But screw it.

I'm happy to see him because the devil I know is better than the devil I don't.

Max stops in front of me, his blue eyes tearing me apart. "Dawn." He says my name so raggedly, so intently, that it turns me inside out. "Are you okay?"

I glare at him.

George Stinton keeps his cool, but there's a tremor of displeasure in his voice when he says, "What are you doing here, Max? I don't remember inviting you to this meeting."

Max ignores his father.

His gaze remains on me for a beat—long, heavy and assessing, as if he wants my fury to burn him. As if he wants to feel that pain.

That look sears me all the way to my heart and it feels like he's touching me even though he hasn't moved his arm once.

Finally, he turns to his father. "I told you not to drag her into this." His voice is darker and harsher than I've ever heard it. It makes me shudder.

George Stinton sighs heavily. "You're the one who dragged her into this, Max. Now, I'm here. And you're no longer a part of Stinton Group. This matter doesn't concern you." He juts his chin at the door. "Leave before I have you escorted out."

"Actually, there's something I need to discuss with Ms. Banner."

The tension in the room spikes to a dangerous level.

“You don’t have anything to discuss with her.” George Stinton pins Max with steely eyes. “Didn’t you renege all rights when you officially resigned?”

I gasp. So... Max isn’t in cahoots with his father.

He really cut off ties with Stinton Group and walked away?

“I might not be involved in Stinton Group’s affairs anymore, but this pertains to Ms. Banner and the contract.” He marches past his father, brushes the old man back and opens a drawer. Pulling something out of the depths, he lifts it to the light. “Before I left, I knew I needed to tie up loose ends.” He snaps the drawer shut and walks over to me. “Ms. Banner,” he places the document in my hands while staring me in the eyes, “I officially release you from your duties as the face of Stinton Auto. You have more than fulfilled your contractual obligation and as promised in the original contract, no one from Stinton Group is allowed to come near you again. I’ve also forwarded the compensation for your efforts to your bank account.”

My fingers close over the document, but I don’t look at it. I’m stuck staring at Max. On the phone screen, he’d looked as intimidating and dominant as ever. But up close? He looks... horrible. Like he hasn’t slept a wink in weeks. Dark bags hug his eyes and wrinkles that were never there before deepen around his lips.

“You can’t do that!” George Stinton sputters. “You have no authority. Ms. Banner made a contract with Stinton Group, not with you personally.”

“I had authority when I drafted the contract. And I had authority yesterday when I got this document notarized. The one who represented Stinton Group until,” he checks his watch, “three hours ago, was me.” Max turns and gives his father a hard stare. In quiet, cool tones, he growls, “You don’t get to tug her around anymore, dad.”

A flush spreads over George Stinton’s cheeks. “You think this will end here, Max? Do you think resigning from Stinton Group makes you any less of a Stinton? You can’t shift loyalties this late in the game. No matter what sweet nectar you think is between her legs, it won’t change the fact that you are and will always be a Stinton. You will always belong to this family.”

“I belong to myself,” Max says firmly.

My heart skips a beat.

He stands straight and tall, pushing through his exhaustion to fight his father.

For me.

I don't want my heart to flutter, but it does.

Clearing my throat, I step forward. "Mr. Stinton, I went along with your ridiculous kidnapping today because you are, technically, Beth's grandfather. However, if you come after my child, I will stop at nothing to hunt out every dirty deed you've ever done in your life. I will plaster it over the newspapers and online and on every hilltop I can find. You made me into a star. You made me Stinton Group's darling, and I will use the fame you gave me to rip this company to shreds, even if it means I get burned in the process too."

His eyes almost bulge out of his head.

He looks like he wants to throw a stapler at me.

I hold my ground. "I'm going to assume this talk about 'owning me' is over," I flap the new contract the way he did the old one, "since you love and respect legal documents so much, I'm sure you're not going to contest this."

Chest heaving, George Stinton stalks past me and stops in front of Max. "We'll talk about this later."

"No, we won't." Max frowns. "We have nothing more to talk about."

George Stinton laughs, but it's devoid of all humor and joy. He points a finger at me. "Don't blame me for what happens next."

"Is that a threat?"

"Just wait and see."

I scowl as he flees the office like the coward he is.

Silence descends, swift and heavy.

I look into Max's eyes.

He saved me yet again.

My heart is pounding and I'm grateful, but I still taste the burn of his lies on my tongue.

Nothing's changed.

He still lied to me.

And I still don't trust him with my daughter or my heart.

CHAPTER 20

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THE RUNAWAYS

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MAX

HILLS CALLED me crazy when he heard my plan to resign from Stinton Group. Then he called me a lovesick fool when I told him how I'd protect Dawn from my dad.

As he sat there calling me three different kinds of idiot, all I could do was laugh. Because what else could I do? Break down in tears? I've done that. Or something close to that. Those nights I spent with beer as company and the stars practically flaunting memories of Dawn in my face, I got as close to insanity as I ever had before. Now, it's either laugh at the way love utterly destroyed me or cry a river about it.

And I'm not the kind of man who goes around bawling my face off.

"This changes nothing," Dawn says to the stillness of my office.

My old office.

It's no longer mine. She's not mine either.

And I get that ridiculous feeling to laugh again.

The crazy mechanical bull that is Stinton Group never managed to buck me off, but now that I'm up against Dawn Banner, I get tossed out of the saddle in less than three seconds.

It's crazy that such a little thing could crush me so totally.

How confident was I?

How arrogant that I thought I could always bend the world to my will?

I used to think that, once I had money, I had everything.

I used to think that, once I could keep my hands on Stinton Group, mom would be proud.

Screw that.

I know mom wouldn't be happy about the way I treated Dawn.

She'd have batted me upside the head for lying to her.

Two things Vanya reminded me of when she called after the press conference. Turns out, she'd been milking Hills for information. My best friend is loyal to a fault, but he had no chance once Vanya started charming him.

"Are you insane, Stinton? How could you treat a woman—no, how could you treat a human being like that? It was Dawn's choice to make. You

shouldn't have been anywhere near her. Sending lawyers? Trying to manipulate her? Are you insane? I don't care how many years have passed. That was low-down dirty. Of course she'd be pissed off at you. And to make it worse, you acted like you cared about her daughter when, if you'd gotten your way, her kid wouldn't even be here."

Sobering words.

A kick in the teeth, actually.

I went too damn far sending those lawyers. Made the mess even worse by lying to Dawn about it when she asked me.

It's like I've been pulling a rubber band tighter and tighter with every stupid move. It rightfully snapped back and stung me in the eye.

I don't have a reason to cry out in pain.

All I can do is man up and take it.

"How did you know your dad was trying to corner me?" Dawn arches a trim brow. Sunshine dances over her dark skin and in the tight curls spiraling out of her bandana.

My fingers itch to touch her.

I tuck them into my pockets instead. "Hills called me. I almost caused a three-car pile-up getting over here."

Her lips don't twitch. Her eyes don't soften with amusement.

She still sees a monster when she looks at me.

Still sees the man who lied to her.

It's funny that I'm so helpless in the face of my obsession with her.

I'm so crazily in love with this woman that it's rendered me completely speechless.

Whether that's poetic justice or not isn't my place to say.

Dawn tilts her chin. Folds her arms over her chest. "I have to know. You didn't resign because of me, did you?"

"Yes, I did."

Her throat bobs even as she tries to fight her surprise.

I step closer to her. It's the wrong move. I'm instantly flooded with her beautiful scent—flowers over engine oil. If I could bottle it and carry it in my pocket for the rest of my life, I'd die happy.

"That was stupid of you. Giving up Stinton Group doesn't change anything between us."

It hurts. Damn. She's blunt to a fault.

I knew that, but still...

“Stinton Group isn’t important to me. You are.” My eyes slide over her face. “This is the bare minimum, Dawn.” I gesture to where dad was standing. He was trying to bully Dawn into doing his bidding and, if Hills hadn’t let me know, he might have succeeded. “I don’t expect... I don’t even remotely think—that what I did today measures up to how I hurt you. I don’t expect a thing from you, but I do want to make something clear.” I hover over her because this is important. Because she was brutally honest with me which gives me the right to do the same. “Eight years ago, I was willing to sacrifice you and Beth for the company. Now that I’ve met you, I will sacrifice the company in a heartbeat for you.”

“You expect me to say thanks?” She’s doing that thing again, where she’s being loud to hide the fact that she’s not being honest.

My fingers beg to touch her cheeks, but I keep them at my sides. “I already told you. I don’t expect anything from you. I freed you from the contract because it’s the right thing to do. It can’t ever make up for the damage I caused, but I will not allow you to be held captive by Stinton Group. Not when all you wanted was to be free of us. You earned this. You can walk away without looking back, Dawn.”

It’s killing me.

I don’t want her to give me those broken eyes. I don’t want to see pain rising to the surface of her face.

“I trusted you.” She looks up at me. “I trusted you and you lied to me. I wish you could do or say something to fix what you broke, but you can’t, Max.”

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t have given up Stinton Group,” she croaks.

I can’t help it. I brush my finger against the tear that falls down her cheek. “I found something that I love more than the company.”

Her eyelashes flutter and she wets her mouth. My stomach tightens into knots when I see her tongue darting over those dual-toned lips. The fact that I had the honor of kissing them isn’t lost on me. The fact that I had the honor, the absolute *pleasure* of being in her company is something I will never forget.

Her mouth opens and then closes tightly.

She squeezes her eyes shut.

I can tell that her feelings for me haven’t gone away.

Mine sure as hell haven’t.

But I can also tell that she's not going to give in to those feelings even if they're pulling at her. She's Dawn. She's the impenetrable female mechanic with her head on her shoulders. She doesn't make stupid, impulsive decisions. And she doesn't wait for someone to betray her twice.

You get one shot with her.

And I blew mine.

Her brown eyes flick up and she stares at me. I can see her pain. See that I've totally destroyed her. The part of her that wants to run into my arms isn't the side with power. And it's killing her. It's torturing her.

Because, even after everything, there's still a connection between us that refuses to be ignored.

It's devastating to see her like that. To see her struggling.

This woman ran into my iceberg of a heart like the *Titanic*, and I dragged both of us into the unforgiving waters. If one of us is going to survive this, it's going to be her. It has to be her.

"I can't do this." She sniffs and turns her face away from me.

I know what she's saying without even hearing the words.

She can't because...

I'm still a Stinton.

I still sent those lawyers.

I still lied to her.

"I'm leaving now." She straightens her shoulders and lifts her chin. "Goodbye, Max."

It's a gunshot to the chest.

And I realize that this is what death feels like. The sense of loss is beyond anything I've ever experienced.

"Goodbye, Dawn." My tone sounds defeated even though I tried to hide it. I watch her walk away and feel my chest crack in two, from the bottom to the top.

Standing in the office that I no longer own, surrounded by the hollow silence that's especially prevalent now that Dawn's gone, I realize how little the empire I've built is worth. I've been a fool chasing things that never mattered and I opened my eyes too late to the things that did.

It's over, Max.

I shake my head and march out of the office.

Hills steps in front of me, carrying a box filled with his things. He gives me a pointed stare. "What now?"

“Dad fired you?”

“I wasn’t going to wait around for that. He knows who called you today.” Hills snorts.

“Thank you.”

“Hey, I might not understand what you see in her, but if she’s under your protection, she’s under mine too.”

I slap his back.

He walks with me to the elevator.

My receptionist stands and follows me too.

I arch an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not working for Trevor.” Her lips scrunch. “I’d rather take my chances with unemployment.”

My brows knit together. “I’ll put in a word with HR and move you from this department.”

“Will they listen to you?” Hills asks.

This office used to be my domain, and these people used to be my employees. Dad wants to give it all to Trevor, but simply handing over the company isn’t a matter of papers and signatures. It’s about relationships and people. I’ve made connections of my own. I can handle getting my receptionist moved out of my brother’s line of sight.

“Don’t bother, Mr. Stinton.” She shakes her head. “I’ll take a vacation until you come back.”

“There’s no coming back.”

“Are you serious?” Hills glances at me. “There’s no plan?”

“No plan. I meant what I said today. I’m officially done with Stinton Group.”

“What if Stinton Group isn’t officially done with you?”

I stiffen when I hear my brother’s voice.

Hills bristles.

My receptionist rolls her eyes, walks behind her desk and starts packing.

I face my brother, my chin up and my fists ready.

Trevor stops directly in front of me, his eyes on fire. “What the hell was that dog and pony show today, Max? What do you mean you’re resigning from Stinton Group?”

“Dad only saw me as a manager. We both know you’re the one he wants to pass this business to.”

“I don’t want it. How many times do I have to make that clear?” His voice reaches that whiny pitch it did when he was a kid. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. You do all the hard work and I get to do what I want. Why are you messing up a good thing?”

For the first time, I look at my brother and see the damage I was doing to him. In the name of Stinton Group, I never truly called him out on his self-destructive behavior or made him face up to his mistakes. I thought I sacrificed myself for Stinton Group, but I actually sacrificed my brother on the altar too.

Squeezing his shoulder, I nod. “You’ll figure it out.”

“I really won’t,” Trevor says desperately.

I loosen my tie and start to turn away. Then I remember something important and whirl back on him. “Don’t think that Dawn and Beth are free rein because I’ve taken my hands off Stinton Group. They are still under my protection.” I step closer to him and lower my voice to a threat. “If you go near them—”

“I won’t. I won’t.” He runs a frustrated hand through his hair. His eyes are wide and shaking. “Damn, Max. I can barely handle myself. How am I supposed to take care of a kid?”

Frowning, I turn back to the elevator. “Good luck, brother.”

“Max, wait!”

Hills picks up his box and follows me into the elevator. My receptionist runs in too, her left shoe slipping off like Cinderella.

“Here.” Hills swipes it up and offers it to her. She shoots him a grateful look.

Trevor’s frantic expression is the last thing I see before the doors close.

Hills taps his fingers against the box. “You think he’s gonna stay away from them? Beth is, legally, his daughter. There’s no reason he can’t demand his parental rights. No reason your dad won’t use those rights to manipulate everyone to the best of his abilities.” He frowns. “And it’s not like you have the power to stop him anymore.”

“That’s not true. Just because I’m out of Stinton Group doesn’t mean I left their secrets behind. I have the power to completely detonate the company with one interview.”

“Would you?”

“I’m willing to go down if it takes dad down too.” I pause and remember that Dawn said the same thing. Now I’m even sounding like her.

“Dad knows that Trevor’s a ticking time bomb, and I can use it against him.” I rotate my shoulders. “He’ll leave Dawn alone if he doesn’t want a war.”

“Hm.” Hills grunts.

“You don’t think it’ll be that easy?”

“Your dad doesn’t like to lose. Now that he doesn’t have a leash on you, he won’t ever be able to put one on Trevor. You were the only one who could handle your brother. Now that he can’t control either of you, he’s like a cornered rat.”

“His teeth aren’t sharp enough to bite.”

“You’re being cocky about it, but I don’t think you have the right to be smug. Your dad loves legacy and bloodlines and Stinton Group way more than you do. It makes me nervous. What will a man like that do when he’s backed in a corner?”

* * *

I FIND OUT THE ANSWER THREE DAYS LATER.

One glance at the daily headline while I’m brushing my teeth has expletives flying out of my mouth.

TREVOR STINTON BACK FROM THE DEAD WITH A SECRET LOVE CHILD

I tap on the article and, there in black and white, is Beth and a whole damn exposé about Trevor and Dawn’s short-lived but ‘passionate’—according to the article—relationship.

My toothbrush clatters to the sink.

I shoot like a rocket for the door, not bothering to change out of my T-shirt and pajama pants. Sticking my phone to my face, I call Hills immediately.

He answers on the first ring and I have to wait until his potty mouth drops all the four-letter bombs that he can muster without taking a breath before we can have a conversation.

“It’s another dirty, low-bred tabloid.” I hop into Black Beauty and press the button to start. My phone automatically pairs with the car’s speaker system. Since Jefferson’s an employee of Stinton Group, I no longer have a chauffeur. I’ve been acclimating to driving myself around everywhere now.

I have enough money to afford hiring two drivers if I wanted, but I'm glad to be behind the wheel again. I've found a new appreciation for Black Beauty and all things auto related. Besides, I haven't left the house much in the past three days. I've been taking a vacation... which means I've been trying to work and then telling myself I should stop for thirty-six hours straight.

"I saw that. Has your dad's fingerprints all over it." Hills's voice is thick with annoyance. "What the hell is he thinking throwing that article out there? The last I heard, the board was trying to keep Trevor out of the public eye. They don't agree with the troublemaker of the family taking on anything."

"I heard the same," I arch an eyebrow, "but the board hasn't said anything to me since I resigned."

"Of course they wouldn't. Those bozos would never admit that the kid they treated like crap for all of his life was actually making them globs of money." He laughs. "You might be gone, but it's clear that you're still the best choice."

"I'm not going back, Hills. I'm never going to be a pawn of my father's again."

"I'm letting you know that just because Stinton Sr. is *trying* to push Trevor down everyone's throats, it doesn't mean they're swallowing."

I cringe at his analogy. "Thanks for the visuals."

"My point is *nobody* wants Trevor at the helm of Stinton Group. Including Trevor himself. The stocks crashed and burned the day you announced you were stepping down and it's been a flaming pile of garbage since the article started catching heat. If you were planning on making a dramatic reintroduction—"

"Stinton Group has done too much damage." I think of Dawn and her tearful eyes as she looked at me. "It'll always be associated with bullying and corruption."

"You're doing this for Dawn?"

"Hills." I yank on the wheel and slide into the next lane.

"Max, wake up. She's not taking you back."

"I know."

"Then why bother?"

"Because I love her, man." With a crushing, incapacitating love that drives me to my knees. "What else am I going to do?"

“Not be a total punk about this?” he yells. “If you can’t live without her, why are you trying to? Why aren’t you *doing* something. If you’re in this much misery by yourself, do you think it changes anything? No, it doesn’t. She’s just living her life and learning to live without you.”

“It’s what she wants.”

“No, it’s what she thinks she wants. Look, I saw you two together. I’ve never seen you laugh the way you did when you were with her. Never saw you smile that big. Not since your mom died. If you can’t move on, then don’t allow her to either. Send her flowers. Send her a freaking live-in housekeeper. Keep taking your car to her auto shop. Don’t stop bothering her until she gives in.”

“That’s exactly what I can’t do, Hills.” Does he think I wouldn’t want to? I still have that PowerPoint presentation and spreadsheet of all the things I wanted to do for Dawn. I’ve driven past her house over and over, thinking about knocking on her door and begging her to give me another chance.

I’ve rejected it every time.

Pressuring her to do something she doesn’t want to is what got me into this mess in the first place.

She already said she didn’t want me around.

She already said I can’t fix it.

“Look, I’m not going to argue about this anymore.” I pull the car into the lot of Hadyn’s company. King Media is a giant marketing and media conglomerate. If anyone can out these flames or point me in the direction of someone who can, it’ll be Hadyn.

“Fine,” Hills grumbles. “What can I do?”

“Find Trevor. Get him to make a statement and take responsibility for once in his life. If the spotlight wants a sacrifice, let it be him. I want him catching all the attention. Beth and Dawn’s privacy must be protected as best as we can.”

“Lawyers?”

“We need to find a firm. Stinton Group’s legal team isn’t ours to wield anymore.” I fling myself out of the car and charge through the giant foyer of Hadyn’s company.

People stop and give me weird looks.

I ignore them. So what? They’ve never seen a man in a T-shirt and flannel pajama pants?

Hills exhales. “Even if we try, it might not make a difference.”

“I told you. I’m not doing this to get her back. She’s in this mess because of Stinton Group. It’s my job to get her out of it.”

“Fine. I’ll get a location on your brother, but I can’t guarantee I can convince him to do anything.”

“Threaten him if you have to. I’ll work on suppressing the news about Beth. It’s best if this article doesn’t go viral.” I hang up, nod to the security on the top floor who all know my name, and stalk into Hadyn’s office.

He sets his phone in the cradle, his eyes dark and his lips firm. He’s not goofball Hadyn when he’s sitting behind that desk and I’ve never been more grateful for that.

“I know. I’ve already got a team working on hunting down the tabloids. Do you need a recommendation for a cutthroat lawyer? I use him to get out of all my defamation suits. He’s never lost a case.”

I grin at the man who’s more of a brother to me than Trevor. “What can I do?”

“Hands-on?”

“When it’s about Dawn and my niece?” I give him a pointed look. “I’ll do anything.”

* * *

THE BEAUTIFUL THING ABOUT A BROTHER WHOSE DIRTY DEEDS continuously fall prey to the gossip mills is that his behavior is no longer sensational.

Immature Heir Gets Woman Pregnant Eight Years Ago. Finds Out After Being Dead is a really great headline, and I even applaud the tabloid team who pitched it. Unfortunately, another crazy story about the privileged making stupid decisions is no match for the bomb that Vanya allows us to throw.

Mysterious Cookbook Guru Reveals Her Face

With the help of Hadyn and his team, we flood the internet with Vanya’s reveal, burying the buzz about Trevor under layers and layers of Vanya’s photoshoots, interviews, and media junkets. She’s a hot topic and it explodes way bigger than we expected, spreading over the nation and snowballing to the point that we can’t control it anymore.

It smashes Trevor's article so resolutely that, by the time the lawyers shut the tabloid's doors, there's barely a squeak. The effort almost feels like over-kill. Almost.

I'm glad Vanya's superstardom was enough to win this fight.

Although the negative comments piling up under her posts is worrying.

Hadyn curls his fingers into fists. "I'm going to sue them. I'm going to sue them all." He tears at his tie.

"Don't read the comments." I fish the tablet away from him.

He pins bloodshot eyes on me. "What's wrong with a plus-size model advocating for healthy eating? Are people insane? Do they have nothing better to do than complain about absolute crap?"

"Look, Vanya knew this would happen. She's prepared for this or she wouldn't have given us the okay to release the article."

He hisses through gritted teeth. "Vanya acts like these words don't hurt her, but it's just a mask. She pretends to be impenetrable when, deep inside, she gets bruised every time. It's infuriating." He tears his fingers through his hair.

His words make me think of Dawn.

I lick my lips, lean over the desk.

My heart has a hollow ache. Even though we managed to keep the article mostly under wraps, I'm sure many people have seen it. People around her. People around Beth.

Are they okay?

Is Beth okay?

Is she asking questions Dawn finds hard to answer?

After I leave King Media, I drive by their apartment and stare up. I wish I had the right to go up there and comfort Beth. I wish I had the right to hold Dawn, tell her everything's going to be okay and she doesn't have to blame herself. Doesn't have to be strong on her own.

But all I can do is stand on the outside like a lunatic and then drive away from the only family I've ever wanted.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, I DREAM THAT I'M TAKING BETH AND DAWN ON A PICNIC.

And when I wake up, I almost wish I could force myself back to sleep, grip the edges of that dream and drag it over me like a blanket.

My steps are aimless when I head into the kitchen.

I'm heavy and torn.

My phone is blowing up. Full of concerned friends who are more annoying than a cactus caught on my shirt.

There are texts from Vanya.

Three calls from Hadyn.

Five from Hills—the overbearing mother hen that he can be.

There's a text from Darrel asking if I need to talk.

I check the time and blink. It's still strange that I don't have a hectic schedule and a hundred meetings to attend. Stinton Group has been my sole focus for so long that finding my footing without it is proving a bit difficult.

I know I just have to find that one *thing* that will spark a fire. And I have the money and opportunity to take my time.

I'm making my coffee when my phone rings.

I expect it to be another concerned call from my friends.

But it's from an unknown number.

Strange.

I ignore it.

Until my phone pings.

UNKNOWN: Mr. Stinton. This is Elizabeth Banner. Can you please meet me at the ice cream shop near my school? I need to talk to you.

My eyes bug.

I check the time and then check the message again.

Isn't she supposed to be in school?

Why is Elizabeth texting to ask me to meet?

My first thought is of Dawn.

As if she can read my mind, Elizabeth sends another message.

UNKNOWN: Come alone.

It sounds more like a kidnapping ransom than a text from a seven-year-old girl.

I call the number, but she doesn't pick up.

A whirlwind of thoughts crash through my head as I hurry to get ready.

What if this is a trap?

What if dad is so ticked off after his plan was smashed to bits that he hired goons to beat me up?

Even so, it's worth the risk. Just in case Elizabeth really needs my help.
I drive to the ice cream shop, my heart in my throat.

The bell above the doors jangle when I walk in. My eyes sweep the display case filled with sweet flavors, jumps over the mostly empty chairs, and finally lands on the table filled with three children.

I lean back in shock.

Elizabeth is sitting between Micheal and Bailey, Darrel's sons. Bailey—I recognize because I saw him at the gym. Micheal is older. He's got a severe expression and thick eyebrows hunkering over his eyes. He looks at Beth every few seconds as if to make sure she's okay. Bailey is holding Beth's hand tightly.

Both the boys look like solemn bodyguards with pale skin and alert eyes. Elizabeth sits between them, the queen of the pack. Her chin is raised and her gaze is locked on the parking lot.

I step forward and she notices. Beautiful hazel eyes flash on me and then fill with relief. She scrambles over Micheal, hops to the ground and comes flying at me.

My heart gets slapped out of my chest when she makes impact.

I hold her in my arms and I swear it's like I'm holding my biological daughter. It doesn't matter that she's Trevor's. Doesn't matter that Dawn and I aren't even talking right now. This little girl is too precious for me to let go.

Her tears soak my shirt. "Is it true? Is it true that he's my dad?"

Micheal and Bailey clamor from the table. They stand near it, hesitant. Not sure if they should drag Beth away from me or let her continue.

I look up and give the boys a thin smile. They seem to relax a little, though Micheal is still watching me with distrustful eyes. He's clearly the more reserved and calculating of the two brothers. I bet he was the one who tried to convince Beth against her plan and then went along with it anyway because he saw how much it meant to her.

Or maybe I'm projecting because I see a lot of myself in him.

Beth sniffs and pulls back. Tears streak her light brown face.

I wipe it for her, scrubbing my thumb gently over her cheeks. "Yes, he is your dad." I watch her bottom lip tremble and my heart shatters. "Beth, I know this is all very confusing, but I want you to know that your mother loves you very much. And..." I choke up. "And so do I. Nothing is going to change that, alright? Ever."

“I don’t know that man.” Her bottom lip trembles. “I saw his picture and he looks like a stranger. I don’t know him. I’ve never seen him before.”

“Hey.” I lift her chin. “It’s okay. Sometimes, relationships can be... complicated. But you know what’s not complicated?”

She sniffs. “What?”

“How much your mom loves you.” I give her a gentle look. “She’s probably really worried about you and how you’re taking the news. Have you talked to her?”

“I couldn’t.” Her eyebrows tighten. “Mom said my dad was dead. She lied to me.”

I wince. Beth’s thunderous expression is a mirror image of Dawn.

“I know you want to be mad at your mom, Beth.” I grip her arms and squeeze lightly. “It’s okay to feel what you feel. But I want you to think about this. Your mom brought you up all on her own. She worked like crazy so you could have a good life and she did it by herself. No one was there to help her. No one was there to pat her shoulders like I’m doing to you now. No one could tell her that everything was going to be okay.” I lean closer. “You can be angry with her for lying, but don’t forget that she’s the one who stayed with you and protected you even when it was really hard for her. She’s probably really upset too. And she’d be worried if she knew you weren’t in school.” I raise my voice at the end and point a stern look in Bailey and Micheal’s direction.

Bailey swings his gaze around and pretends to whistle.

Micheal doesn’t flinch and looks me right back in the eyes. The little punk.

“Everything’s going to be okay.” I pull her in for another hug. “I swear.”

She presses her little arms around me. “Thank you, Mr. Stinton.”

“Come on.” I hold her hand in mine. “Let me take you kids back to school.”

She nods, her expression lighter and her eyes drying up. “Um...” She bites down on her bottom lip. “Can we not tell my mom about this?”

“I don’t know.” I scrub my chin. I’ve gotten into trouble keeping secrets from Dawn before. I don’t want a repeat of it.

“Please.” Beth hits me with the puppy dog look.

Crap.

I always wondered why dads spoiled their little girls rotten.

I guess this is why.

“What’s important is keeping you safe,” I whisper. “Now let’s get you to school.”

“Thank you... Mr... um, should I call you uncle?”

“Right now, Beth, you can just call me Max.”

* * *

A SLOW, SIMMERING FURY BUILDS IN MY VEINS AFTER I DROP THE KIDS OFF at school and it clings to me when I point the car back home.

Beth’s tears are still drying on my neck. Her little world has just been torn apart and it will never be the same.

We might have scrubbed the momentum of her birth story off the internet, but it will always be there, like a snake coiled in waiting. It will always have the power to bite her, confuse her. Follow her through to college, to her first job, maybe even to marriage. A scandal that she will never be able to shake loose. A complex family secret cracked open for the world to see, to laugh at, to judge.

My gut churns and, halfway home, I yank the steering wheel and turn the car around.

When I kick down the door to dad’s office, he looks surprised. What? Did he really think he could touch Beth and I’d sit back and accept defeat? Or did he think that because I didn’t confront him immediately I would never do it?

I stalk over to his desk and slam both my fists against it. “I was willing to give up. I was willing to give everything to you. I even considered offering to train Trevor for you so he’d take better care of the company.”

His face gets pale.

His jaw drops.

Then a mask of indifference falls over his face and he laughs. “I don’t need you anymore, Max.”

“I don’t care what you need. You went after my heart. You went after my people. You took something precious from them, so now I’m going to take *everything* from you.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

I straighten and look down at the man I used to snivel and squirm for. The man whose ‘I’m proud of you’ or ‘I love you’ would have meant the

world to me.

As I watch him, I realize why mom tried so desperately to get me away from Stinton Group when she found out what they were turning me into.

And I realize that I'm going to have to disappoint her one more time in order to protect what's mine.

"I'm taking Stinton Group," I say calmly. Coldly.

A flare of distress erupts in dad's eyes. He tries his best to hide it, but it leaks out in his shaking voice when he croaks, "You can't do that."

My smile is cruel and I unleash it on him. Let him see the beast he created. Turning for the door, I call softly over my shoulder, "Watch me."

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CHAPTER 21

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DOUCHEBAG AWARDS

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DAWN

I'D LIKE to give the 'Douchebag of the Year' trophy to Max, but seeing that explosion of headlines about my one-night stand with Trevor pop up three days ago...

No, that 'Douchebag of the Year' trophy definitely belongs to Max's dad.

I've noticed interest in the article has toppled since last week, but the damage has been done. Everyone who knows me personally now knows the truth of Dawn's birth.

It's not just mortifying, it's also exhausting. My dad's old mechanic friends have been making a scene online, typing publicly under the articles and threatening Trevor's life. My old friends from out-of-state have been calling me, eager to hear the details.

Even strangers in my orbit want more.

When I walked into the PTA meeting last night, the room went deathly silent. The kind of greedy silence that tells me there are questions floating in everyone's minds and they're practically drooling for answers.

I can handle everything that comes my way.

I'm an adult.

It's true I opened my legs for a man I barely knew. It doesn't matter why I did it. Doesn't matter that I was reeling from dad's death and I needed something to numb the pain.

It happened.

All people can see are the results.

And you know what? No matter how hard life has been as a single mother, I wouldn't trade my daughter for anything.

Unfortunately, Beth hasn't been responding well to the comments. She's gotten frosty with me. We barely speak around the dinner table. When I drop her off at school, she wears her headphones. She doesn't look at me when she mumbles a goodbye and runs to meet Bailey on the school steps.

It's like getting locked in the cold, and what's worse is that I wasn't expecting it. I assumed that my baby girl would always come to me if she had an issue. I thought that we would weather any storm together.

We're a unit.

We're a two-woman army against the world.

Beth's retreated into herself. I'm torn between insisting that we work this out and giving her space.

I check my phone, taking a break from fiddling with my car.

Sunny and Kenya are checking up on me. I text back that I'm okay.

Those two women have been a constant source of support since the news broke out, always there to talk if I need to and checking on me every day.

I feel especially sorry that Sunny's worrying about me when her wedding to Darrel is so close. I'm sure she has bigger things to fret about and yet she always makes time for me.

I sigh heavily and reach for another tool. Although tons of garages have been clamoring to work with me, I've spent my free time hunkered in the apartment garage, trying not to think about Max.

He's been tugging on my mind, no matter how hard I try to forget about him. Our love was an illusion, but the feelings I had were real. Tackling them into a box that I can shove away is my priority.

Besides, Max's compensation for my time as the face of Stinton Group made sure I could retire tomorrow and not have to worry about money again.

It's guilt money.

Obviously.

I thought of returning it to him, but I didn't. And why should I? I worked my butt off as the face of the company. Dealt with rude hosts, lights being shoved in my face to the point that it's a wonder I'm not blind. Not to mention, the complete and total infringement on my personal life.

Besides, I don't have the energy to fight with a Stinton—not Trevor, not George, and certainly not Max.

As if my mind conjured him, my phone starts ringing and the screen reveals Max's number.

My heart snaps to attention.

No matter how much I tell myself that he's a sick hunter who feeds on the bones of his prey, I can't release the tiny glimmers of charm and kindness that he revealed when we were together.

Against my better judgement, I pick up the call.

For a second, there's no sound.

Just his breathing.

Oof.

I tilt my head back, close my eyes and breathe with him.

My heart aches and twists and cries out.

His reign of terror ripped through my life eight years ago, but I wasn't miserable when I was with him these past few months. Not until after I found out what he'd done. Not until after he lied to my face about it.

Before everything fell apart, I was... happy.

For me, those feelings, those moments of laughter and joy, were *real*.

Max clears his throat and it jars me out of my moody thoughts. "Dawn."

I close my eyes when I hear my name in that soft, husky tone.

With a frown, I dig my fingers into the phone and wrap myself in a cloak of anger. It's the easiest emotion to default to. It's the only way I can act stronger than I feel.

"Why are you calling me, Max? I thought I told you to keep your distance."

I stab the dagger in his throat as if I don't care about the damage, but I cringe the moment it makes impact. It's like I can see the hurt coursing through his cobalt eyes. I can see his brows tightening and his lips turning thin and tense.

My head throbs angrily and, this time, I don't have anyone but myself to blame.

I'm gutting him to survive, but every time I swipe my claws over him, I start bleeding too.

It hurts worse than I can say.

But this isn't Romeo and Juliet.

Max Stinton will always be the dirty bastard who sent lawyers at me. Who tried to manipulate me into getting rid of my baby.

No matter what I have to do, I'll keep him in my rearview mirror. Soldier on. Find a way to pretend the prince of Stinton Group with a dark vortex for a soul doesn't exist.

From the very first time he gave me butterflies to the moment our relationship imploded in front of me, I'll swipe him clean from my mind. Punch the reset button. Find happiness again.

"I'm going to hang up now," I say stiffly.

"Wait." He pauses. "I debated whether I should tell you this, but I really don't want to keep any more secrets from you, Dawn."

I stiffen. “What are you talking about?”

Is there something else? Is he responsible for some other tragedy or injustice in my life that I don’t know about?

“It’s about Beth.”

Now he has my full attention.

“She called me... yesterday.”

“What?” I take a frantic step forward before realizing that I don’t even know where I’m supposed to go. “How did she get your number?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t discuss that. She asked me if the rumors about you and Trevor were true.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and groan.

I’m dying on the inside. Every single part of me takes a painful, shuddering breath. Why would Beth run to Max, of all people, for assurance? I’m right here. I’m... I’m her mother.

“I told her how much you love her.” Max’s voice is gentle as if he can sense that I’m spiraling. “We had a short conversation and then I took her back to school—”

“*What?* She skipped school and ran away to talk to you?” I fling my arms out.

My daughter’s seven. She’s not supposed to be roaming the streets on her own. What if something had happened to her?

“She wasn’t alone. She had... assistance.”

“Bailey and Micheal.”

“I will neither confirm nor deny that.”

If it wasn’t *my* child and if it wasn’t Max Stinton, I’d probably find amusement in his sorry attempt at keeping the kids’ secret.

As it stands, I can barely breathe. Flapping my arms at my face, I try to offset the heat of frustration climbing through my body.

“I need to go,” I hiss.

“Okay.”

We both stay on the line even though it’s clear the conversation is over. I’ve obviously lost my mind.

“Dawn?”

My throat tightens when I hear my name again. He’s so tender with it. It makes me want to ugly cry.

But I steel myself against his charms. “What?”

“Go easy on her, will you? She asked me to keep it a secret and I’m breaking her confidence because I believe it’s the right thing to do. But this is a really confusing time for her.”

“I’ll handle my own daughter, Max,” I snap.

He goes quiet again.

I breathe out and realize that I never would have known a thing if he hadn’t told me.

Hanging my head, I squeeze out the words. “Thank you... for letting me know.” I don’t wait to hear his response. Yanking the phone from my ear, I hang up and then pace the garage.

Time crawls while I wait for school to be out. I’m in the pick-up lane fifteen minutes early, waiting for Beth.

When I finally see her walk out with Bailey, I crack the door open, plant my foot on the running board, and launch myself up so my face is above the roof of my truck.

Beth sees me and stops in her tracks.

I narrow my eyes. “Get in the car. Now.”

“Ms. Dawn.” Bailey’s voice has a nervous tremor. “Uh... can Beth come home with me today? Dad asked us to help them choose a cake for the wedding.”

“Thank you, Bailey.” My tone is as stiff as a board. “But Elizabeth is coming straight home today.”

My daughter pushes out her lips and stomps to my car.

Beth fastens her seatbelt. “Why did you yell like that? It was so embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?” I train my eyes on the road. My temper spikes the more I think about her rummaging through my phone for Max’s number and then *sneaking out of school* to meet him. “What’s embarrassing is a daughter who skips class and goes off to meet strangers.”

She pushes up, frowning at me. “Did Bailey squeal?”

“It doesn’t matter who told me.” I grip the steering wheel tighter.

Her jaw drops and she actually looks hurt. “It was Max?”

I throw the car into a parking spot in front of our apartment. With the engine still running, I turn to my child. “Beth, you broke so many rules I don’t even know where to start. First of all, going through my phone is a deep invasion of privacy. Second, you do not *ever* leave your school compound without supervision. I don’t care what the reason is. You stay

there where it's safe. And third, you are not to contact Max Stinton ever again, do you hear me?"

"Why not? At least he doesn't lie to me," she yells.

My head is about to explode. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're a liar." Tears filling her eyes, she pops her door open and takes off at a sprint into the building.

I groan aloud, slap my hand against the steering wheel and then scramble after her.

My footsteps thump the ground.

Beth's pace increases when she hears me coming.

Even though we're both petite, I'm still taller than her and I catch up with her in front of our apartment door. Gripping her arm, I lurch her to a stop. "You do not walk away from me, young lady. Don't you dare be disrespectful."

A door up ahead creaks open.

One of our neighbors pokes his head out.

Even though I want to scold Beth into the next century, I suck the words back, throw our apartment door open and march her inside.

The moment I slam the door shut, I whirl on her. "I know this is a very confusing time, but that doesn't mean you get to throw rules out the window and act like I didn't teach you better."

"You told me my dad was dead, mom." Her eyes flash with anger.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. She's got me there. "Look, there are some things you'll only understand when you're older."

"So it's okay to lie to me because I'm a kid? How fair is that?" She pins her lips together and gives me another frustrated look. "Why didn't you tell me Trevor Stinton is my dad?"

"Because..." I suck in a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart, "he... we met when we were young and in a bad place." I blink rapidly. "We were so immature—"

"I looked him up." She purses her lips. "Mom, he did a lot of bad things. Is my dad a bad person?"

I lose it when I see the first tear slip down her cheek. Rushing to her, I wrap her in my arms and pull her close.

She gives up the fight and cries into my shoulder. Beth is so small and fragile. She acts tough for her age. Maybe because we both had to be tough to survive. But it's my fault for forgetting she's just a kid.

“Sweetie, I’m sorry.” I brush her curls away from her face. “Your dad got himself into a lot of trouble, but that has nothing to do with you.” I ease back so I can stare into her eyes. “You are the most amazing little girl in the world.”

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“Sometimes, people just don’t see what’s good for them. That’s not your fault. That’s his.” I rub her shoulder. “Why didn’t you come to me and talk about what you were feeling? I was so worried that things would be hard at school. No one is bullying you, right?”

She shrugs sadly. “Casey Anderson said I never should have been born.”

“What?” Rage sweeps through me. “Beth, I am *never* going to regret what happened with Trevor Stinton because it gave me you. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. Whether Trevor sees that or not, it doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“What about Max? How do you feel about him? Do you like him?”

“Why are you talking about Max?” I shake my head. “Look, Max did a bad thing a long time ago. You can’t trust him.”

“Is Max still doing bad things?” She gives me a challenging look. “And is he sorry about it?”

My mouth opens. Closes. “Elizabeth—”

“You make mistakes too.” She points out. “Why are you still angry at Max if he’s sorry and if he’s not doing those bad things now? That’s like me being angry at you for what you did back then too.”

My eyelashes flap up and down.

So much for thinking that my seven-year-old was too young to understand. She understands way too much.

I clamor to my feet. “Let’s get back to the point.”

“Mom, if Max—”

“No more talk about Max,” I shriek. And then I lower my voice. “If you have any questions about Trevor Stinton, I’m going to answer them.” Placing my hand on her shoulder, I put on a strained smile. “From now on, I won’t keep any more secrets between us. In exchange, you have to promise me that you won’t do anything as dangerous as what you did yesterday. And you don’t keep secrets either.”

She studies me for a long moment. Then she nods. “Okay.”

I give my daughter a hug and a kiss on the head. Then I lead her to the kitchen. “How about I cook tonight?”

She groans. “I’d rather get pizza.”

I narrow my eyes at her. *The little smart mouth.*

As I get my phone, I start thinking about Beth’s words.

My smile wobbles.

You made mistakes too. Why are you still angry at Max?

I want to move forward, but it can’t be that simple to forget what Max has done, can it?

* * *

AFTER DROPPING BETH OFF AT SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY, I UNCONSCIOUSLY drive to my old garage. When I realize what I’m doing, I yank on the steering wheel and make a U-turn, heading back home.

That’s embarrassing.

I guess I have too much free time. Starting today, I’ll seriously take a look at all the job offers I’ve received and decide on my next course of action. Maybe I might even take a job in another state. That way, Beth will be able to start clean without all the Trevor Stinton gossip surrounding her.

Sure, it’ll suck to leave Bailey and Micheal behind. I’ll miss Sunny, Kenya and Mama Moira too, but it’s not like we’ll lose touch completely. There’s still internet and video calls.

Admit it, Dawn. You’re running.

I ignore that voice in my head.

I’m not running.

Even if I was, there is no shame in retreat. I’m not moving on from Max Stinton while living here. I still can’t stop thinking about him, even though I know I shouldn’t. It kills me that he stepped down from Stinton Group because of me. I’m waiting—looking—for news that he took his seat back.

It’s unhealthy.

A fresh start will give me a better chance to scrape him out of my heart.

I head up the stairs to my apartment, more determined than ever.

Then I stop short.

There’s someone waiting outside my door.

Is that...

Oh crap.

It's Vanya Beckford also known as Vanya Scott.

Deep breaths.

One, two. One, two.

Is she real?

I almost stumble when she turns around and a supermodel smiles spreads on her supermodel face. "Dawn, hey. I was wondering why no one answered when I knocked."

"You're..." I point at her, my jaw slackening. "You're here. Outside my apartment."

She laughs and I swear, even her laughter sounds dainty and high fashion. I didn't even *know* laughter could be high fashion, but there you go.

"You saw me at the school gym that day." She arches an eyebrow.

"We didn't have time to be introduced. You had to give your speech, and you left so quickly." I draw near to her, still looking up in awe.

She's as tall and regal as an Amazonian woman. Her generous curves are scooped into a red, sequined dress with the corset on the outside. It shows off her wide hips and the dramatic curve of her waist. Zebra print heels complete a look that would seem garish on anyone else but is perfect on Vanya.

"Oh." She flutters her thick eyelashes. "You're right." Putting a hand to her lips, she gives me a sweet smile that every corporation in the world would gladly hand over millions to photograph. "I'm sorry. I've heard so much about you that it feels like I know you."

Oh, boy.

She knows me through Max.

Which means she's here because of him.

The reminder slaps me in the face and sucks the joy of meeting a real-life celebrity straight out of my bones.

Vanya pats at her stunning pixie cut. Her long, slender fingers are dripping in delicate rings and red coats her triangle nails.

Resting one delicate hand under her chin, she gives me a patient gaze. "Can I come in?"

"It depends. Did Max send you?"

"Oh, he *wishes* he could send me anywhere." She tosses her head and shows off the perfect cut of her chin. "No, I'm here because I want to be."

I fight with my feelings of starstruck awe and try to think rationally. She's on Max's side. That much was clear from the moment I saw them walking into the gym together.

And though I don't pick up romantic feelings between either Vanya or Max, I'm also aware that Max treasures her as a friend. He wouldn't let her close if he didn't.

Vanya pops an eyebrow. "Well?"

I shrug and let her in. How often does a supermodel stop by for a chat? Especially a supermodel with a body positivity message that I really admire.

Vanya's eyes survey my living room sharply, but her gaze softens when it lands on a picture of me and Beth.

"Your daughter's so cute. I thought so that day at the school gym too. She takes after her very beautiful mother."

"Thank you."

Vanya chuckles. "Why do I get the feeling you don't believe me?"

"Oh, I'm no supermodel," I stammer. I'm not usually taken aback by a compliment, but come on. This is a woman whose beauty is what pays her bills.

I glance over her—gently wavy hair, perfect makeup, long nails and that dress. She's the very definition of desirable and feminine. I wouldn't even begin to compare myself to her.

"I'll be honest. I didn't respect models until I had to do work for Stinton Auto. Getting in front of that camera is tough. I had no idea what I was doing."

"Right. Well, I wouldn't know what to do if my car ever broke down. I think you're amazing."

I chuckle. "Wow."

Her eyes glitter. "Look at us, fan-girling over each other."

I smile, but it's tinged with caution. "I'm assuming you don't make personal visits to all your fans."

"No, I don't." She clasps her fingers over her knee, the polite expression dropping into a more intense one. "I'm here to talk about Max. Specifically, you and Max."

I bristle. "And why do you think you have any right to speak about that topic?"

Her eyes brighten with amusement. “Wow. He told me you were blunt, but I didn’t expect you to be so likable while you inflict your damage.” She tilts her head. “No wonder he fell so hard for you.”

“Ms. Beckford—”

“Don’t stop calling me Vanya, Dawn. We’re on the same side of this fight.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. There’s no fight. Max and I came to a mutual decision to break ties—”

“Mutual?” She snorts. “I’ve known Max since his mother was the receptionist at Hadyn’s racetrack. He’s always been that kid with the chip on his shoulder. Really serious. Really intense. But I’ve never seen him focus on any woman the way he focuses on you. It’s like he has tunnel vision. All that attention and care that he gave to Stinton Group, he shifted to you. It’s like seeing a completely different person.”

I gulp.

“Look, I know I don’t have a right to meddle, but I’m going to anyway because Max is my friend and I really hate seeing him in pain. The truth is, he’s been miserable without you, Dawn.”

I gasp sharply.

Vanya’s frank brown eyes lock on me. As much as I want to flinch and glance away, I force myself to meet her stare.

“If Max is having a hard time, it’s probably because he gave up Stinton Group. Maybe, instead of visiting me, you should try to convince him to go back to where he belongs.”

“It won’t work. Losing you messed him up way more than losing Stinton Group did.”

Her words are pummeling me in the chest.

“I’ve never seen Max lose his cool. Not once. He’s that guy who always has to be perfect. Who always has to be in control.” Her voice doesn’t waver. Instead, it thickens. “But after he had to walk away from you, he looked like a car spinning its wheels. All the right motions, but no forward momentum. You broke the great Max Stinton. You turned the killer wolf into a loyal dog who just wants to follow you around and protect you and Beth.”

My eyelashes flutter.

I’m trying so hard to keep my cool, but it’s impossible.

“Okay.” Vanya leans back with a satisfied smirk on her red lips. “Okay, that’s what I was hoping to see.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you were fine, if it looked like you truly believed Max being gone from your life was better for you and your daughter, I would have walked away and not said another word.” She points at me, her red nails shining in the sunlight. “But it’s all over your face. You’re as broken as he is.”

“I can’t trust that I know who the real Max is,” I admit hoarsely. Maybe it’s because she’s a stranger. Or maybe it’s because it still feels like a dream that someone as famous as her is in my living room, pleading with me on Max’s behalf.

But I find myself being honest.

“I didn’t realize it at the time, but one of the reasons I broke down when I found out the truth was because I couldn’t believe what I’d seen of Max wasn’t real. It *felt* real. I mean, yeah, I saw the terror that he could be. I saw the darkness. I saw him being cold and brutal. But when he stood up for me, when he was gentle with me, when he protected me and Beth, I thought I was seeing a part of him that he didn’t show to anyone else. And I started to show him parts of me I hadn’t shown to anyone either.” My throat hurts to swallow. I’m amazed my voice is so steady. “We were close to something. Close to something real. It was devastating to be jerked away from that in the cruelest way possible. I feel like I can’t trust myself anymore.”

“I can tell you right now that Max doesn’t open up easily. If he let you in, it’s because he trusts you. If he allowed you to get close, it’s because he’s going to be loyal for life. Why do you think he only has, like, three friends when he’s got so much money? I’m not here to tell you what to do, but I want you to know that the person Max became when he was with you... that was real.” She tilts her head back. “What he did to you eight years ago was messed up. I’m not going to take up for him on that. But if you let go of all the things he did before, if you just focus on the man that he is to you *now* and not *then*, what do you see?”

“I see...” I close my eyes. “Happiness.”

“And?”

“Forever.” My heart is stuttering.

Vanya gives me a pleased look. “I thought so.” She tilts her head. “I really hope you don’t mind my interference. I had to do something or I’d go crazy. Max wouldn’t. That stubborn man was not going to come after you.

Something about not making the same mistakes and pressuring you to...” She waves her hand in a *yada, yada, yada* gesture. “Whatever. Typical man stuff. Shall I take you to kiss and make up now?”

“Wait.”

She groans. “Woman, what more does he have to do to prove he loves you? Max is so obsessed, he’s been watching out for you and protecting you behind the scenes.” She slides a finger over her forehead and leans back dramatically. “You won’t believe the way he begged me to help bury those articles. I couldn’t say no—”

My eyes widen. “Max buried the articles?”

“He worked without sleeping or eating to make sure it didn’t spread.”

Her words rip the last of my doubts from my mind. The evidence piles up in front of me like a car hooked up to a scanner.

Max gave up Stinton Group.

He ended the contract to protect me from his father.

He saved me and Beth from becoming international gossip fodder.

He’s *still* looking out for us even though our relationship’s over and he won’t get anything from it.

I launch out of my seat. “I have an idea.” My eyes slide to hers. “But I’m going to need your help.”

A slow, mischievous smile crosses Vanya’s face. “Go on. I’m listening.”

CHAPTER 22

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RACE FOR YOUR HEART

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MAX

DAWN, I'm taking back Stinton Group. I'm sorry.

My thumb hovers over the 'SEND' button, but I don't press. The truth is that Dawn will consider me a monster either way.

Isn't it better to let her keep thinking that?

Isn't it better if she believes I didn't mean it when I gave up Stinton Group and that this was my plan all along?

She can be angry and storm away and never look at me or anyone from Stinton Group again. She'll be the safest that way.

Still, it burns like hot oil to the face.

I stare at the text and agonize over whether I should send it.

Will it make a difference?

Will an apology matter at this point?

The back door rips open and Hills pokes his head in. "Max, what are you doing? The meeting's already started."

"Give me a second." I tap my finger against the phone screen.

He snatches the cell from me—now that he's technically not my assistant, he's gotten a lot more insolent—and checks the screen.

I swipe at the phone, but Hills launches up and holds it to the sunshine. "You're texting Dawn? Seriously? You know, for a second there, I thought you were stalling to make a dramatic entrance. I didn't know you were brooding like one of those sparkly vampires in the *Twilight* movies."

"You watched *Twilight*?"

"This girl I'm talking to is obsessed with it." He rolls his eyes.

I climb out of the car and snatch the phone from him. Scowling in his direction, I fix my jacket. "I'm not brooding. I'm contemplating."

Hills steps in front of me, his black eyes shining. "You should be focused on what happens next. This is a big move."

I watch the glee crawl over his face. He really enjoys watching things burn. Especially when it's this personal and deserved.

"This isn't a celebration for me, Hills. I'm crawling back to the very thing that Dawn hates. If I do this, it's a damn guarantee that we're over."

She struggled to get over the fact that I was a Stinton. She won't ever accept that I'm taking over Stinton Group officially."

"You're doing this to protect her. Come on, Max. Don't be an idiot. That much you can't explain in a text. You have to do it in person."

"She won't believe I'm doing this for her." I shake my head. "She'll think I'm making excuses."

"Is that why you're agonizing over a damn text?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. You're in love, you're in pain, and it's pathetic. If you'd listened to me at the start and sent flowers every day, at least you wouldn't be in this much agony."

"I'm perfectly fine," I bark.

That's a lie.

I'm a perfect wreck.

I'm just trying to tackle the challenge in front of me without falling apart. It's becoming predominantly clear that I'll have this hollow, Dawn-sized hole in my chest for the rest of my life. With each passing day, I still miss her like crazy.

"Mr. Stinton." Jefferson rushes out to me, tall and gangly. The giant smile on his face rivals the sun. "What are you doing here?"

"You'll know soon enough," I say firmly. Buttoning my jacket, I turn to Hills. "I'm ready."

He gives me a wolfish grin. "Let's do this."

I stomp into the lobby of Stinton Group.

Employees stop in their tracks to look at me.

All the chatter vanishes in a blink.

I easily ignore the watchful eyes that follow me as I stride to the elevator.

No one has to understand me.

No one has to approve of me.

I've only sought those things from one woman. I will become the beast, the monster, the *evil* she thinks I am to protect her.

Whether Dawn and I are together or not, that's all that matters.

The hallway leading to the conference room is familiar. I hear dad's voice from behind the closed doors, rumbling about the stock prices that have fallen so flat, they're practically dead-on-arrival.

“I know you’re all concerned about the money we’ve been losing, but I have it under control—”

“We’re not just losing money, George.” That voice belongs to Hilary. *“The banks are about to foreclose on this business. We’re in the red now. All the investments we’ve made in this company are being tied up and tossed to the dogs. Do you call this having it under control?”*

“This isn’t my fault,” Dad says as Hills positions himself in front of the double doors and grips the handles. *“Max left this company in such a mess...”*

I nod to Hills.

He nods back and wrenches the door open.

I step into the conference room casually, a hand in my pocket and my eyes alert. “Dad, it’s not nice to badmouth someone who isn’t here to defend himself.”

“Max?” Dad’s face goes pale.

Trevor, who’d been looking bored at dad’s right hand, brightens and sets his phone on the table.

I walk confidently inside. As I go, all the board members catch my eye and nod.

My mind flashes with a memory of our most recent conversation.

“Stinton Group was doing so much better when you were managing it, Max. Things were dire when Trevor came back. But they’re even worse now that your dad is trying to force Trevor into power. The banks are breathing down our necks and our employees are starting to revolt. We’ll lose everything if we keep this up. We’re prepared to do whatever we have to. As long as you can save Stinton Group.”

I catch Angelie Stinton’s eye.

She dips her chin in respect.

The people who’d shunned me—the bastard son of George Stinton, a product of his illicit affair—were all on their knees before me, begging me to take the throne.

It should have been a victory, but it was hollow.

I don’t need their approval.

Never have.

I wish I would have known that from the beginning. I wish I would have listened when mom tried to tell me.

Dad's lips protrude and a line of sweat covers his forehead. "Max, what are you doing here? You're not allowed in these meetings." He sticks his neck out. "Security? Who let this man in here when he's no longer a part of Stinton Group?"

I ignore dad's yelling.

Hills locks the doors so the rest of the hallway can ignore his yelling too.

I keep walking, maintaining my calm and unbothered pace.

"Max." Dad's voice trembles. He grips the arm of his chair. He's at the head of the table, where he always sits.

I stop in front of him, lean over and plant my hand on the surface of the table.

In a low, warning voice, I growl, "Get up, dad. You're in my seat."

Dad's face turns red. A vein pops out in his neck. "Have you lost your damn mind?" He sucks in a sharp, rasping breath. A desperate prey in the mouth of a snake, fighting against the inevitable. "You're the one who needs to leave. What nonsense is this?" His eyes shoot to Hilary. "I'm sorry. You know who his mother is. He must have gotten this overdramatic side from her."

My lips curl up cruelly. "What mom had was the sense to try and get me away from you." I tilt my head. "Unfortunately, she wasn't successful. And unfortunately for you, dad," I straighten and adjust my cuff-links, "you've managed to tick off every person in this room. They all expressed their dissatisfaction in very interesting ways."

"N-no."

I watch the realization dawn on dad's face and I wish I didn't feel so much satisfaction rippling through me. Maybe if he hadn't said that snide comment about mom, I would have felt a little sorry. Just out of respect for him as my biological father.

As it stands, I revel in his terror.

"I'd already inherited shares from my grandfather." I gesture to Trevor. "And my brother gave me his shares in exchange for cash."

"Best decision I ever made," Trevor yells.

Dad gives him a sharp look.

Trevor ducks his head.

"And," I gesture to the others, "each board member was willing to give up a piece of their shares and hand it to me in order to make me the

majority shareholder in this company.”

Trevor’s mouth is open and he’s practically lapping at the tension in the air. His eyes bounce back and forth. “No way.” My brother laughs. “These selfish bastards actually agreed on something that makes sense?”

“No!” Dad roars. He slams his fist on the table and launches to his feet so fast his chair skitters back. “This is *my* company. No one can say otherwise.”

“Actually, dad. This is *my* company now.” I lean forward and whisper in his ear, “I told you I would take everything from you.”

Dad trembles like a leaf in a hurricane. He whirls on his faithful backers. “Hilary, how could you do this to me!” Spittle flies from his mouth. “Angelie! Do you know how much those shares are worth? How could you just hand them over to this ungrateful pup?”

Angelie rises regally. “With you, all those shares would have been worth nothing. With Max, even the remaining shares I have will be worth a fortune. It was a very clear choice. I hope you understand, George. It’s just business.”

Dad’s hair sticks up as he runs his hands through it. Throwing wild eyes around the room, he looks for any smidge of support and finds none.

“I had a plan.” Dad’s voice trembles and he waves his arms in desperation. “I sold some shares. I have a buyer who’s willing to pump an influx of cash into Stinton Group.”

“That buyer was me.” I lean my hip against the table and smile. “Surprise.”

Dad’s eyes nearly bug.

Trevor snorts.

I wave a hand. “I was worried that, with all your shares, you would eventually try to make a comeback.” I tut under my breath. “And I couldn’t have that. Imagine my pleasant surprise when I saw you were willing to sell so much of your power, dad.” I shake my head. “You really should be more careful about who you do business with.”

Dad roars at the ceiling.

I let him scream it out. What else can he do but be noisy? His power has been taken away from him. All he can do is clang like an empty can kicked around on the street.

“You...” He sticks a finger at me. “You betrayed me. You betrayed your own family.”

“I’m protecting what’s important to me. If you had done that, maybe you wouldn’t have left so much damage in your wake.” I gesture to the door. “Mr. Stinton, your remaining shares are no longer enough to afford you a seat on this board. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” I pull the chair back to the head of the table. “Or be escorted out.”

Dad makes one more desperate sweep of the room.

No one looks at him.

No one offers him respite.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

He stomps out, throwing the doors so hard they bang against the wall. Retreat is his only option. At least he’s taking that path with grace. Although I’m playing hardball, I really didn’t want to have my own dad escorted from the company.

As the silence settles, the board jumps to their feet.

One-by-one.

Until everyone is standing.

Then they applaud.

“Congratulations, Mr. Stinton.”

“We look forward to see how you’ll bring Stinton Group back from the dead. Again.”

I nod and watch them file out.

When Trevor tries to leave too, I grab him. “You. Let’s have a talk.”

“I’m impressed, big brother. I didn’t know anyone could go up against dad and win. You don’t have to worry about me.” He snaps his jacket and smirks. “Just keep the checks flowing, keep me out of jail, and I’ll stay out of your way.”

I frown at him. “Trevor.”

He stops and glances back at me.

I steeple my fingers. “From this moment forward, I’m cutting you off.”

“What?” His eyes bug. “You can’t do that.” Stomping over to me, Trevor bawls, “I gave you my shares. In exchange, you always handle my business. That was the deal.”

“And that deal is over.” I rise to my full height and look down at my little brother. “From now on, you’re going to work for everything you earn. You’re going to do your community service. And if you get into trouble again, I’m not going to bail you out.” I set a hand on his shoulder. “But I will visit you in jail.”

His jaw drops.

“You’re my little brother. I love you. But I’m done cleaning up your messes.”

My phone rings.

I remove my hand from his shoulder and fish the device out of my pocket.

“Max, don’t do this to me!” Trevor yells. “Max! Maaaaaxx!”

Hadyn’s name fills my phone screen.

I nod at Hills, who gives me a pleased nod in return, and leave the boardroom. Putting the phone to my ear, I growl, “Nice timing. I was just thinking of heading to the track.”

The Stinton Group crown is officially on my head, but I can’t wait to toss it off. Just for a moment.

“Figured you might say that. Which is why I set up a little game. Wanna play?”

I laugh. Hadyn’s been like that since I was a kid running around his family’s racetrack.

I have a game. Wanna play?

These games have followed us into adulthood. Although the stakes are higher than lollipops and toy guns now.

“Yeah, what’s the prize?” I loosen my tie.

The sunshine feels good on my face.

“You’ll find out when you get here.”

I laugh and then turn to Hills. “You’re the second-in-command now, Hills. Can you handle things while I leave?”

“You’re not going to dive right in? There’s a lot to do.”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Stinton Group isn’t going to consume me any longer. Besides, I heard about this little skill called delegation...”

He laughs and salutes me. “I’ll hold down the fort.”

I nod, climb into Black Beauty and speed to the racetrack.

* * *

“YOU WANT TO PUT UP WHAT?” I BLINK, CERTAIN I’M NOT HEARING HADYN correctly. Or maybe too many hours arguing with his matchmaking mother have addled his brain.

All I know is that he can't be in his right mind.

"You're putting up your vintage car?" I blink rapidly, sure he's going to tell me I heard wrong.

"Yup. These are the stakes. Winner gets the other's most prized car *or* the loser has to grant them one wish. Could be anything. Whatever it is, they have to give it."

"I don't want a wish from you, Hadyn. I'm taking your car."

"You never know. I might take Red Beauty."

I snarl at him, "Not a chance."

"Are you in?"

I think about my beloved car. Then I calculate the chances of Hadyn winning this race. He's good, but I'm eager to get the jitters from taking over Stinton Group out of my system.

"Deal." I shake his hand. "Get ready to hand over your baby."

"In your dreams, Stinton."

I laugh. "You're confident you're gonna win?"

"I'm confident that even if you win, you're gonna ask for a wish."

My eyebrows quirk.

Hadyn slaps me on the back. "Go suit up."

I stalk into the changing room and try my best to not think about Dawn.

It's freaking impossible. She's not there in the lounge, her dark skin glistening like she's glowing from within. She's not there in the changing rooms, laughter filtering through the air. She's not there at the racetrack, in a suit. But my imagination paints her everywhere.

I'm almost glad that Hadyn is already in the car by the time I make it to the track. I'm not in the mood to smack-talk right now. I just want to drive. As hard and as fast as possible.

I slip into the car and my fingers tighten around the wheel. I wait until I see the flag drop and then I slam my foot on the gas.

Hadyn is right on my tail. The car engine roars, and I can feel the adrenaline rush of pushing a car to dangerous speeds. It's all about time and place. On the highway, this is a crime. But on the racetrack, the rules are different. The world belongs to high-speed fanatics.

At one point, Hadyn and I are neck-and-neck. For a second, I look into Hadyn's car and I swear I see a brown face instead of a pale one in that helmet.

Before I can take a closer look, Hadyn curves ahead of me and I slam hard on the brakes.

Damn.

I keep seeing Dawn everywhere. It's messing me up.

She's not here.

I grit my teeth and focus on catching up with Hadyn. There's no way I'm giving over Red Beauty. Not a chance in hell.

I finally close the distance between us on the last lap. It's neck and neck.

Sweat rolls down my face.

The engine roars and the car trembles beneath me like a tiger itching to unleash its power.

I shift gears and tear ahead of Hadyn, flying over the finish line in a clear victory.

At the annex, I wait for Hadyn to show up so I can rub the loss in his face. I won't let him punk out on his promise. He offered his vintage car, and I'm taking it. I'm going to park it right next to Red Beauty. She was getting lonely anyway.

Footsteps crunch behind me. I whirl around, a teasing word on my lips, but it dies an immediate and violent death when I see someone way smaller and way slimmer than the giant media mogul striding toward me.

Before I've gotten a good look at her eyes, I know it's Dawn. Just by the way my heart is speeding up. It's confirmed by the way she walks, that subtle back and forth motion of her hips that drives me insane.

She tears the helmet off her head and her afro explodes in all it's gorgeous, voluminous glory, reaching for the heavens like it belongs with the puffy clouds.

Her face is shiny from sweat, but nothing glistens as much as her dark brown eyes.

She's in front of me.

Holy crap.

She's really in front of me.

"Hi, Max." Her voice is quiet and sultry and everything dreams are made of.

I remain in place, staring her down and hoping with everything in me that this isn't a dream. If it is, I don't ever want to wake up.

“We had a deal. Loser either gives up their car or grants you one wish.”
She tucks the helmet in her side. Glides toward me like a freaking vision.
“So what will it be?”

I blink rapidly.

The realization dawns and, with it, comes a magnificent wave of relief, joy and love.

I can’t believe I ever treated this incredible, beautiful, amazing woman as a pawn. How could I have hurt her? If I could go back and sucker punch the me from eight years ago, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

“Max.”

The way she calls my name is like a song.

Her lips curve up at my speechlessness and the sight of her smile kicks my heart into space.

No wonder I couldn’t banish thoughts about her.

No wonder she whispered through my every waking moment and in all of my dreams.

I belong to her.

She took ownership of me with far more finesse and with way less mercy than I did of her.

“I choose...” My voice is hoarse and scratchy, “grant me a wish, Dawn.”

She steps toward me. Tilts her chin all the way up.

Anticipation charges the air.

My pretty little mechanic.

The spitfire who demolished me.

I can’t help the way my smile flits across my face as she bounces on the tips of her toes. Thick eyelashes flutter. “Tell me your wish and I’ll grant it.”

She’s an angel come to earth.

Damn.

I’m going to combust with the force of the adrenaline rushing through me.

How did I live without her for so long?

She’s so stunning it’s like I don’t even deserve to look at her. Like it’s a privilege I have to earn.

“Max.” She sets her dark, slender hands on my chin. Her callouses rub against my scruff. The hint of her perfume—flowers and engine oil, soft

and firm—it's addictive. It's way better than I remember.

Dammit, yes.

You'd better believe I'm thinking good and hard about this wish. If I could have anything, *do* anything to Dawn Banner, what would it be?

Her voluminous afro is as unruly and unapologetically loud as she is. The comb earrings draw attention to her slender shoulders in the stark white racing suit. Her lips—

Have mercy.

I fasten on those dual-toned lips and I'd probably trade my left lung to taste them again. No, not just taste. I'd suck and nip and devour them until the sweetness of her is ingrained in me.

I shuffle my feet. Tell myself to say something.

Impossible.

The sunshine glimmers in her eyes and in her dark skin.

They're glowing.

She's glowing.

And she's looking at me with all her defenses down. It's a look she's never given me, not even after I confessed how I felt about her.

Beautiful, stunning, mine.

Mine.

What do I want from Dawn Banner?

Something climbs to the tip of my tongue but when I drag my gaze back to her eyes and let the moment settle on me, the answer becomes clear.

I shift toward her and lean down. "Forgive me."

Her eyelashes flutter. It's clear she didn't expect that.

I wait for her to say something while my heart thunders in my chest, but all she does is stare at me, lips parted and eyes boring through to my soul.

Is that too much to ask? Is she still angry? Would she rather throw me on the racetrack and run the car over me than give me that?

I hold my breath until my lungs threaten to explode.

And then it nearly does when her eyes soften and her luscious lips curl up.

She smiles at me.

And the sight of it literally rips the breath out of my body.

"I forgive you, Max. I..." Tears glisten on her lashes. "It took me this long to admit it because I was struggling with feeling like a hypocrite. I was so ready to hate the person behind those lawyers, but because it was you, I

couldn't do it. I couldn't hate you convincingly and I was ashamed of myself for breaking my own rules."

"It was my fault," I croak. "You had every right to hate me."

"I'm cautious by nature." She nods. "And I was scared. But I realize that you're not that man anymore. Everything you've shown me was telling me I could take the risk. I could trust that the side you'd shown me was the real you. The one that would stick around." She touches my face reverently. "I forgive you, Max."

The heat shimmering through my throat, burning in my chest and slinging through my veins feels a lot like gratitude. Taking Stinton Group today didn't matter at all. Not as much as holding this beautiful woman in my arms and feeling her love wash over me.

I hug her tight. She feels so right against me. Soft and warm and tiny.

Dawn.

I thought I'd have to live without her.

That future scared me more than I'd like to admit. It was bleak and lifeless. But now all the color's returned.

"I have a second wish," I murmur in her ear.

She pulls back. "You only get one."

"Technically, you'd already given me that one. So I should get a new wish."

She scrunches her nose. "Always trying to find a loophole. You really are a Stinton." But then she smiles brightly and I realize she's just teasing me.

It's in that moment that I realize Dawn sees me. She sees everything and she accepts me for the gruff, stubborn, sometimes clueless man that I can be. She sees it and she makes me better.

"My real wish—"

"You already got a wish—"

"Marry me."

She freezes. I can feel her heartbeat quickening against me. Her eyes stray to mine, chocolate pools glistening with shock and happiness.

My life was utter madness without her. It's like I've been spinning out at a crazy speed and now everything is right. Everything is falling into place.

"Is that a legitimate wish?" She arches an eyebrow.

"You did say I could ask you anything."

“You’re asking for forever.”

“You already own mine.”

Her lips quirk.

“I wish I could tell you I’ve changed completely, but I’m still stubborn to a fault. I can’t help it.” I slide my fingers over her dark cheek. “I’m still not afraid of the darkness, not if it’ll protect you and Beth. And I’m not...” I falter. “I’m not free from Stinton Group.”

“I know,” she whispers.

“You do?”

She nods. “Vanya told me. She told me everything.”

I grit my teeth. My friends really can’t keep their mouths shut.

Dawn smiles. “You realize this isn’t a very convincing proposal, is it? I’ve only heard all the reasons why I *shouldn’t* marry you.” She tilts her chin up. “You haven’t given me the reasons I should.”

I tighten my arms around her. “Because I’m truly, deeply, crazily in love with you, Dawn. I want to protect you and Beth with my life. I want to hand you tools while you work on your car and out all the fires you set in the kitchen when you try to cook.”

“Hey, that only happened once.” She pouts.

“I want to be the reason you face the world boldly. I want you to take risks because you know I’ll catch you if you fall and I’ll ruin anyone who crosses you. I want you to be soft with me, only me, because I’m that place where you don’t always have to have your guard up. I want to cherish you and love you for the rest of my life. I didn’t think I would ever love someone more than I loved Stinton Group, but you showed me I was wrong. And now you have to take responsibility.”

“Oh, I have to?”

“I don’t make the rules.”

Her smile crashes with mine as our lips meet in a kiss that twists my heart like a wrung-out rag.

The sweet lips that caught my attention from the very first time I saw her hold me captive, locking me in an intense rush of heat that spills through every inch of my body.

She’s soft and firm and mine.

Mine. Mine.

I never thought I’d have this privilege again.

Never thought she’d give me another chance after what I did.

Now that I have her, I'm going to do everything I can to lock her down. I'm going to make her so happy that she never even *thinks* of leaving me to suffer in that agony of a life without her again.

She breaks the kiss to catch her breath. I plant my lips on her forehead because I still haven't gotten enough of her. I don't think I ever will.

I hear the sound of cheers and spot Vanya and Hadyn across the annex. Hadyn gives me a thumbs-up and Vanya yells, "*It took you long enough!*"

"Looks like we have some cheerleaders," I murmur.

"Yeah. Vanya came to my house personally. She was a big part of helping me change my mind. Hadyn too. He helped set everything up today."

"I'll have to thank them somehow." I nod at my friends.

Dawn looks up at me, stealing my attention. "About that marriage proposal, I'll have to warn you that I'm not that much different either. I'm not easy to get along with. I'm stubborn and set in my ways. I don't trust easily and I don't jump if someone tells me to. I share my opinions in whatever ways they come to me and I can be blunt and insensitive."

"On second thought, maybe I should take that proposal back."

She smacks me in the shoulder.

I laugh and stare down at her. What does pride have on love? What does money and power have on love?

Nothing.

Nothing compares to this feeling.

"You're the first man who ever got past my sharp edges. You're the first man who saw me, the real me—in grease-stained over-alls and obsessed with fixing cars, and called it beautiful. You never stopped calling me beautiful. I don't have to pretend with you. I don't have to feel less than because my hands are calloused and I don't wear dresses or like girly things. You told me you love these hands. And now I'm telling you that I love you," Dawn whispers.

"What?" My eyes widen.

"I love you, Max."

I'm trembling, absorbing those words with all my being.

The woman I adore loves me back. It doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel deserved.

I'm grateful.

I'm speechless.

“And my answer is yes,” she adds breathlessly.

My heart almost explodes with relief.

A two-ton canon ball to the chest wouldn’t have taken me out this hard.

“Yes?” I bark out a laugh.

I can hardly believe it.

She laughs louder, her fingers curling into my shirt. “But,” she stops me before I can lift her and spin her, “you’re going to need Beth’s permission too.”

I’m nervous about how Beth will take it, especially since she knows that Trevor is her real dad and I’m her uncle.

But I shouldn’t have been.

“Are you *flipping* kidding me! Yes! Yes!” Beth shrieks later that night. And then she flings her little body at me and gives me a hug. “I’ve been telling mom to do this for *ages!*”

I laugh and hug my sweet Beth.

My little girl.

No matter what her birth papers say, she’s mine too.

Her eyes bigger than dinner plates, she scrambles back. “I have to tell Bailey and Micheal. They’re gonna freak!”

I laugh.

Dawn cuddles against me. “So... that went well.”

I lean over and whisper, “You ready to sign another contract with me, Ms. Banner?”

“As long as we *both* decide on the terms this time.”

“Deal.” I bring her close. And then I kiss her until I see stars.

EPILOGUE

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DAWN

MAX STINTON IS a heartthrob in a suit. There I've said it.

We're at Sunny's wedding. And yeah, everyone's eyes might be on the absolutely, mind-blowingly beautiful bride that's currently sniveling through her vows and ruining her makeup. But I mean, if anyone's going to look dashing with mascara running down her face, it'll be Sunny Quetzal.

And sure, Darrel Hastings doesn't look *half* bad in a suit.

Okay, he looks great with those broad shoulders and green eyes that turn into flickering infernos when he looks at Sunny.

Their romance started in high school, at least on his side. And it's stunningly clear that this day is all of High School Darrel and Adult Darrel's dreams come true.

I'm happy for them.

Really.

And if I didn't have a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed *hunk* flirting with me from the front row, I'd probably be more focused on my bridesmaid duties.

As it stands, Max Stinton is sitting next to my little girl, stealing all my attention and making it pretty darn hard to remember I should be listening to Sunny and Darrel's achingly romantic vows.

Max tilts his head to the side, capturing my attention again as he mouths, "*I love you*" and—oh well—I'm sure I can observe the details of the wedding from pictures. This is a high-society event. It'll be plastered all over the internet by morning anyway.

My eyes completely focus on my fiancé as he smirks at me. Even though he looks like the same cutthroat billionaire, a lot's changed behind the scenes—most notably, Stinton Group has become the poster boy for charitable acts.

Max and Hills just opened Stinton Foundation—an organization that helps single mothers from low-income neighborhoods take care of their kids, find employment, and get whatever help they need.

I'd call that absolute irony.

Max calls it reparations.

I don't think he's trying to make up for what he's done in the past as much as he is trying to build a new legacy for Stinton Group to leave behind.

And I, for one, am absolutely proud of him.

"Sexy," he mouths again, winking at me.

Heat brands my face as I imagine my fiancé sweeping me into a dark corner sometime tonight.

I stick out my tongue.

He winks as if he knows he has me flustered.

And I start sweating because he's good for the threat.

As much as I like to argue with him, I'm in love with Max's giant... ahem... ego. That cockiness of his hasn't faded. It's just pointed in other directions—like the pride he takes in making breakfast every morning because Beth prefers his cooking over mine. Or the fact that he'll pick her up from school in Red Beauty just because she asked.

When Max Stinton said he loved me more than Stinton Group, I thought those were just words. Romance can make a man's speech as flowery as a poetry book. I figured, like bubbles, we'd settle into a normal pattern of give and take the way most relationships do.

Boy, was I wrong.

Every day with Max has proven that he doesn't do anything halfway. When he said his love for Stinton Group was nothing compared to his love for me, it was a measurable vow and a real-life reflection of his feelings.

The same way he chased that company, woke up every morning thinking of that company and did everything in his power to see it thrive—yeah... we get that treatment now.

To say he's intense would be an understatement.

But I absolutely love that obnoxious rake and all the ways he barrels into my life to try and make it better.

Even if we butt heads along the way.

"Do you, Sunny Quetzal, take Darrel Hastings to be your lawfully wedded husband?" The officiant drawls.

I glance at Max again and find him looking at me. His handsome face is softening into a smile that says 'we're next'.

And I can't help the way my knees go weak.

Oh yeah.

Max Stinton has my heart so tangled up that I'll probably never find a way to separate myself from him.

After he proposed at the racetrack and got Beth's approval, he took us ring shopping and proposed again, at the farmhouse. In front of all our friends.

It was absolutely perfect.

And so him.

Only Max Stinton would go overboard and propose to me *twice*.

As if he needs that confirmation that I really meant it the first time.

Of course I want to marry this man.

No one else has ever made me feel so safe, so feminine. So loved. I haven't had to change a thing about myself and there's such freedom in that. In being able to share the parts of you that you don't share with anyone else.

This man, with his dark hair and icy-blue eyes and intimidating jawline is all mine. Only I get to see the way he dotes on my daughter. Only I get to see him unravel when Stinton Group hits a rough patch or when his brother gets himself plastered all over the news for crashing a car under the influence. Only I get to hold Max Stinton's heart.

* * *

LATER, I GET TO HOLD A WHOLE LOT MORE OF HIM AS MAX DELIVERS ON his promise to sneak me away from the wedding.

The stars giggle and blush as we fumble with our clothes. The metallic clank of a zipper dripping down chases away the songs of toads and cicadas.

I can't breathe.

Not when Max is doing everything possible to steal my oxygen and claim it as his.

Our fingers reach for each other in a desperate clash. The tree shakes with every bump of our bodies, raining leaves and flowers over our heads as if we're in an alternate universe. A fairytale world where we can reach out and touch the stars.

And I see a ton of them when Max growls an order into my ear and my body explodes.

Everything goes white and I rake my nails against his back to keep myself tethered to my body. I gasp out. And then I breathe in sharply. Smell gardenias and freshly cut lawn and Max's intoxicating cologne. Smell the scent of us and the bitter tang of sweat.

And it's perfect.

Max kisses me solidly, smothering the sounds of my moans. My name falls off his lips and I quiet that in my own way, watching his face shift into an expression reserved for me.

We hold on tight to each other.

It takes a long second for the world to right itself.

The moment it does, he taps my leg. I unwind my heels from his waist and he sets me back daintily on the ground like I'm a princess in the olden days.

That's another thing about Max.

It doesn't matter to him that I know more about cars than he could ever hope to. It doesn't matter that I routinely watch videos of other mechanics fixing cars before I go to bed at night. Doesn't even matter that I smell like engine oil most of the time.

He always, *always* treats me like a beautiful, fragile woman.

And I don't think I'd appreciate anyone else doing that.

It's only because it's Max.

It's only because I trust him.

The back of my dress is dirty from where I'd been pinned to the tree. Max brushes me off after he puts his clothes back in order.

My heart slams against my chest, and I can't stand straight even as I push my dress back over my legs.

He looks at me and smiles. "I love you."

"I love you." I reach out to fix his collar. There's a lipstick stain on the edge of the crisp white cloth. "I've been thinking about what you said about taking over Stinton Auto."

"You want to discuss this now?" He glances out at the wedding reception. We're far enough away that all we can see is the light from the canopy tent over the tree line.

The faint music barely carries on the wind. Beth is somewhere in the wedding crowd, getting into mischief with Micheal and Bailey.

My mouth presses together. "I still think I'm not cut out to lead the franchise—"

“And I disagree. I think you’re perfect for it.”

“Or maybe you want to keep me away from fixing cars,” I tease.

“I want to keep you from getting hurt.” He steps toward me. “But I love when you repair cars. You’re in your element and it’s hot.”

My shoulders slump. “But do you really think I can do it?”

He reaches out, wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. “If I really thought that you couldn’t handle it, I wouldn’t be so confident. If you had any objection other than feeling inadequate, I would choose someone else immediately. But you’re the best mechanic I know and I would love to see technicians of your caliber in all the shops. You shouldn’t be ashamed of what you can do and you shouldn’t second-guess yourself either. You’re capable and talented. You have something to offer this industry and I want to pave the way for you to do it.”

I rest my head against his chest. “I’ll consider doing a test run. *One* franchise. But only on a freelance basis and I’m going to charge you a steep contract fee—”

He kisses me roughly. “Baby, do *not* talk business right now or I’ll fling you against that tree again.”

I shake my head. “I’m serious, Stinton.”

“So am I.” He winks and then he leans his forehead against mine. “Thank you for doing business with me again. I know that you’re trusting me, and I’ll make sure I don’t ever lose that trust again.” He touches my face reverently. “You are the light of my world, Dawn Banner. I will do everything in my power to make sure you shine for the rest of your life.”

I sigh. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“I’m the one who should be asking that question,” he growls. “I’d like to know how I got so lucky? And I’m not just talking about what we did against that poor tree.”

I snort out a laugh.

Max looks down at me and smiles.

This man—this gruff, pigheaded, absolute fiend of a boss who once had a heart made of ice has somehow transformed into the man who values me with his entire life.

In his arms, I’m at peace.

I’m accepted.

I’m allowed to be weak and strong and vulnerable and firm.

I'll be forever grateful that I fell in love with the overbearing workaholic and the secret softie that is Max Stinton.

* * *

"WILL YOU HAVE A BIG WEDDING?" MAMA MOIRA ASKS OVER THE CHEERS of the kids who are seated on the floor of the farmhouse.

"I don't think so." I link my fingers with Max's. Although Trevor hasn't shown his face in front of me, the fact is that his name is still linked with mine online.

If we have a big hoopla wedding with tons of guests, the media will converge like a pack of vultures. And then Beth will be thrust into the spotlight as the tabloids, once again, try to turn this 'love triangle' into tomorrow's headline.

"I'm thinking of something quiet and intimate," I add.

Mama Moira claps with glee. "Yes, I get to plan another wedding." Then she hesitates. "I mean, if you'd like, Dawn baby."

"I would love that." I squeeze the older woman's dark hand. It's soft and warm.

Kenya, who's snuggled in Alistair's side, suddenly sits up straight, her eyes pointed on her daughter Belle. "What is this I see? Did someone just beat my kid in UNO?"

"What can I say?" Elizabeth lifts her shoulder. "I'm that good."

Belle frowns. "Next game. *Monopoly*."

"No, no *Monopoly*." Alistair's voice is firm. "Families have broken up because of that game. And you kids are already too competitive."

"We can handle it," Bailey says, lifting his chin. His glasses slide down his nose and he shoves it back up with his pointer finger.

Ms. Hansley, Bailey and Micheal's live-in nanny, waddles into the room carrying a tray of powder buns. "Snacks anyone?"

"These are delightful." Mama Moira bites into one and moans. "I can't share any more Belizean recipes with you. Your food is tasting better than mine."

"Never." Ms. Hansley laughs.

I feel eyes on me and glance over to find Max staring again. I've gotten used to it and just smile in return. "What?"

“I love you.”

“Okay.” I snort. “Now is the best time to mention that?”

“I never knew what family was before I met you.” His eyes trail through the room and land on everyone here. Even though Sunny and Darrel are away on their exotic honeymoon trip, it almost feels like they’re here too. Max glances down, the cold mask dropping to reveal the bleeding heart underneath. “I wouldn’t have been able to see it or appreciate it if it wasn’t for you.” His fingers curl over my hips. “Thank you.”

I kiss him.

Mama Moira clears her throat. “Save some room for the Lord.”

I laugh into Max’s mouth and back away from him, respecting Mama Moira’s farmhouse rules.

Although I do wonder how she’s going to handle Darrel and Sunny when they come back from their honeymoon. Those two are all over each other.

Max’s phone rings at that moment.

He glances down and then gives me an affectionate look. “It’s Hadyn.”

I wave him away.

He slips into the kitchen and I turn my attention on Bailey and Micheal who are each trying to convince Beth to exchange her car piece and offer it to them.

“I’m the car.” Beth folds her arms over her chest. “I’ll always be the car. You choose something else.”

“What?” Max’s voice hisses from the kitchen.

It’s not loud, but it’s severe enough that we all take notice.

Clamoring to my feet, I launch myself into the kitchen. My heart is in my throat and all the worse-case scenarios breeze through my mind.

Is it Trevor Stinton finally getting himself into the kind of trouble that’ll lock him away for life?

Is it George Stinton, crawling from the ruins to try to wreak havoc again?

Is something wrong with Stinton Group?

Max spins to face me, his blue eyes wide and his lips tense.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper, stepping into him and placing a hand on his back.

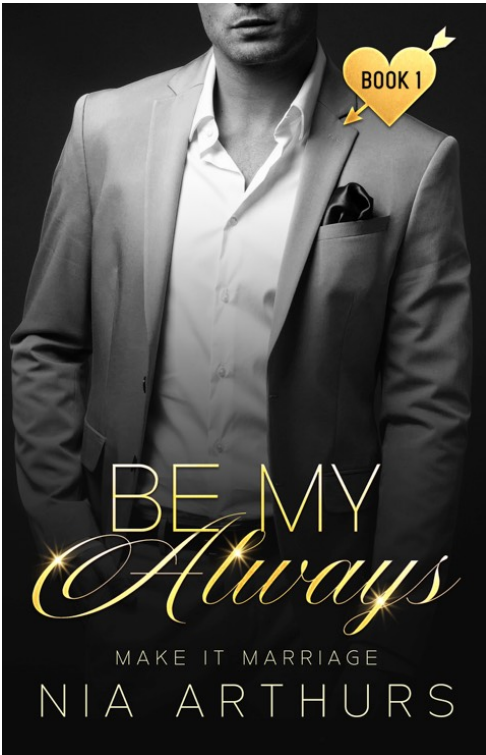
“That was Hadyn.” His voice is a gruff tone.

I blink rapidly. “What happened?”

“He and Vanya just got married.”

* * *

THANK YOU FOR READING *COCKY ROMANCE*. IF YOU ENJOYED THIS BOOK, you’ll also love **BE MY ALWAYS**—a BWWM romance about a jaded matchmaker and the gorgeous billionaire who falls hard for her.



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KAYLA

THE LIFESTYLE REPORTER has a thing for smirking.

Or maybe he's just trying hard to hold back a laugh.

He clutches a thick tablet in his pudgy grip like it's an extension of his very self and slouches in his chair.

As if he doesn't care.

As if we're not mid-interview.

I tap my nails against the back of my phone.

Try and fail to tamp down my rising irritation.

To hell with this journalist-exposé-wannabe who thinks my life's work is beneath him.

If I hear one more condescending question...

The smile remains on my face despite my rising irritation.

Media interviews are a part of my job whether I like it or not.

Whether this journalist is a prick or not.

I keep my voice level. "Matchmaking is *still* relevant."

"In this age of online dating?" He smirks again. *Yeah right.*

"I help people make real connections." My gaze slides over his overtly skeptical expression. "Even jerks who'd be better off staying single."

The insult flies way over his head.

Disappointing. I was hoping to piss him off and cut this boorish interview short.

I'm so done with this guy's B.S.

"Love can't be manipulated by strangers."

Shows how much he knows.

Manipulation is the name of the game. My mission is to cut through the screen-savers, the lies, and the catfishing and get to the meaty stuff.

“Feelings can’t be controlled, but intimacy between like-minded people can lead to love. Our strategies have proven that.”

“Strategies? Care to share?”

I look at him with a frown and toss my hair over my shoulder. “If I told you trade secrets, it wouldn’t be good for business, now would it?”

“I guess so.” He laughs. A high-pitched, yapping sound.

Damn, he’s annoying. It’s difficult to stay seated and professional.

My fingers clutch the handles of my chair. I start to push up. “Is that all?”

“One more question.” He tilts his head to the side. Drops his eyes to my ring finger.

I know what’s coming.

Why do they always go for the jugular in these stupid interviews?

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I play dumb.

“Have you found love?”

“I don’t plan to.”

His face wrinkles in confusion. A matchmaker uninterested in her own romance? I understand. I’m not exactly fitting the stereotypes here.

But at least I got him to drop that stupid smirk.

I feel a pair of eyes barreling into me. From the corner of the room, Venus crosses her arms. *Don’t mess this up.*

Though my fellow matchmaker and friend isn’t actually saying anything, I can hear her loud and clear.

A wave of annoyance washes over me. Venus is much better at these inane conversations than I am. And she actually enjoys them too.

Too bad I’m the one suffering.

Interviews are supposed to be a reward for good performance. Something I’m guilty of. Highest number of matches three years running. Whispers around the office claim I’m Cupid.

It’s dumb.

And untrue.

I don’t fly around in diapers trying to impale my clients with arrows.

As much as I’d want to do that sometimes.

Impale my clients, not wear diapers.

If I don’t watch myself, Venus will catch up to my record soon enough and then *she’ll* be the one in this chair.

I'm sure she's looking forward to it.

I used to at one point.

When I'd first started the job, young and starry-eyed.

Before Drew...

Well, I definitely won't discuss that here with this ignoramus.

I shoot the reporter an innocent look. "Everyone is different, but my personal beliefs have nothing to do with our results. We have enough satisfied clients to prove we're on the right path."

Venus flashes me a thumbs-up from the sidelines.

I barely restrain the eye-roll.

When will the torture end?

The guy leans forward, intrigued.

Not now, obviously.

He slants me a smile. The first genuine one since I sat down beneath the blaring lights and introduced myself as a matchmaker. "How does it feel, giving women their happily ever after without getting your own?"

"Who said marriage is the only happy ending a woman can have?"

"If it wasn't, your company would've gone bankrupt long ago."

"Maybe people are just tired of hook-up culture."

"Casual sex is on the rise."

"Getting naked with a man for one night does not translate to a lasting, solid relationship."

He arches an eyebrow.

I quirk my lips. "You want to talk statistics, let's talk."

"It sounds like you're getting defensive."

"You're missing the point."

"And that is?" He leans forward.

My eyes narrow. Last I checked, this was an interview, not a therapy session. I've been through enough *'so how do you feel about that'* moments to recognize when someone's prying.

Damn him.

And damn his silly little magazine that's clinging to relevance too.

But I can't say any of that. I'm getting paid to promote my company and I won't jeopardize my position because of this twat. "The point is... Make It Marriage isn't a hook up service. We don't use algorithms to sort through a million dating profiles. We help real people make real connections. My happy ending is wrapped up in theirs."

He stares me down. Searches for signs of a crack he can exploit.

I hold steady.

Meet his gaze.

He backs off. Surrenders with a nod. "How noble."

I shrug.

"Thank you for the interview, Ms. Montgomery. It's been a pleasure."

Liar.

"I had a lot of fun."

Okay. So maybe that's the pot calling the kettle black.

He extends a hand.

I shake it firmly.

He holds on when I try to pull back. Barely-there lips curl into an oily smile. "If you're free after this—"

"I'm not." I yank my hand back. Subtly wipe it against the side of my red pencil skirt.

It won't be the first or the last time a male interviewer asks me out after learning I'm a single matchmaker. It's like a primal side of men awakens when they hear those words. Grunts of *conquer, conquer* echo in their head.

Lord, I hate it.

I hate all of it.

"Kindly see yourself out from here." I rise from the chair and move to the door.

It's bad manners to leave before the journalist, but I don't have the patience to endure another moment.

A quick, staccato rhythm—stilettos bashing hardwood—tells me that Venus is following. The rhythm quickens. She's behind me. Then in front of me, shooting me a dark look with equally dark eyes.

I try to lengthen my stride.

Doesn't work.

Wavy reddish-brown hair slaps her back with each quickening step. "Did you have to shut him down like that? Now the last thing he'll remember is your attitude."

"I don't owe him a date."

Venus glances over her shoulder at the door I just vacated. We have an interview room here at the agency. It's small and cramped and not very welcoming, but it's not used for anything else.

Her gaze returns to me. "I'm not saying you had to accept. Just... cut him some slack. He shot his shot."

"A severe miscalculation on his part."

"Men like to fix things."

"That's assuming I'm broken."

"And?"

"I'm not. I like being single. It's ten times better than being in a relationship."

"Says the woman who sets people up for a living."

"I never said I was uncomplicated."

Venus huffs. "You're such a Scrooge. How the hell are you so successful?"

"Luck?"

"Maybe you really are Cupid."

I groan. "Don't you start too."

Venus chuckles. "He might be on to something. When was the last time you've gone on a date?"

A date?

An ache springs to life in my head.

A hammer against my skull.

It's immediate.

Painful.

I flinch. "No."

"No?"

"I'm done with dating."

I don't even deserve to think about it.

Not after everything.

"How 'bout a tryst then?"

I stop. *A tryst?* What are we? In the nineteenth century. "Would I summon the guy via carrier pigeon?"

"If you're into that." Venus smirks.

She doesn't give a damn about my sarcasm.

Sometimes, I hate her too.

"There's another bachelorette party tonight..." She wiggles perfectly groomed eyebrows.

Around here we have enough bachelorette party and wedding invites to fill the building.

"I'm not going."

"I knew you'd say that."

"Then why bother asking?"

"Because," she slides in front of me, barring me from getting into my office, "you need to loosen up."

"And letting a strange man of questionable sexual health screw me will help?"

"Exactly." She winks.

"I'll pass." I try to move past her.

Venus slaps her palm on the door. "I'll pick you up at eight. Wear something tight and slutty."

"Sure I will." I gesture to the office. *Out of the way.*

Her playful expression sobers. "I'm worried about you, K."

The words are sincere.

And she has a reason to be.

A reason I haven't admitted to anyone.

Not even my close friends.

A reason that's taken over my life.

When did I become so unrecognizable?

I pause in the doorway.

Another wave of hopelessness attacks me.

I didn't start out being this much of a downer.

I was always on the quiet side but this...

It feels like I'm living life in a cage. A prison with no escape.

Work became my sunshine.

And sleep became my only way to cope.

I don't even count the days anymore. They all kind of blur together in one big mush.

I'm not really living.

Maybe something *does* need to change.

Venus is already turning away when I push out a sigh. "I'll meet you there."

She whirls around, big smile on her pretty face and hope in her eyes. "In something slutty?"

"Goodbye, Venus." I grab my door. Push it forward.

"Keep it low-cut," she presses her face into the sliver of space left and gestures to her chest. "You've got a nice—"

I slam the door.
My headache worsens.
I'm already starting to regret this.

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