

Book I Sample

The Great Balance

Beyond the Balance Saga

An Original Series

by Terrene A. Davenport

This book is an original publication of T. A. Davenport.

This book is recommended for mature audiences. It contains violence, language, and mild sexual situations.

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Purchase only authorized editions.

To my first,

Gabriel

Here's looking at you kid.

We love you so much

TO MY READERS

*Live righteously and love everyone; you will build up around
you an aura of light and love.*

*Thank you for being the light around me that encourages me
to strive forward, it truly is my stress relief. You mean the
world to me!*

*Only you can make the journey that will determine your fate.
So, thanks for joining me on mine while I figure it all out!*

In every moment of life, you should be who you ought to be.

Creatively Forever Yours,

T.A. Davenport

The Write Provocateur

DEDICATION

To My Amazing Best Friend & Husband, Roger

Without you, none of this would be possible. Your encouragement and feedback have made me and this beautiful idea come alive to its full potential. You have shown me so much love, passion, and adventure, that I was able to transform those experiences into words that became part of the story. I'm so fortunate to have such an amazing individual to call my partner in life. You brighten my day when I'm saddened by darkness.

You make me laugh when I feel like I'm going to burst from anger, frustration, and tears. And you stick by me and give me room to breathe when I need it. You are my muse, bringing every creative bone I have in my body back to life. I'm so blessed to have you and thank God for it every morning and every night. Thank you for making me complete again. Cheers to us

—THE GREAT BALANCE—

Terrene A. Davenport

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TO MY READERS

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— ξ —

My Dearest Sister

Thank you for constantly hearing every thought and future detail. You kept me level-headed and calm. More importantly, thank you for taking on this enormous project. Nothing is more fun than working with someone amazing, and that amazing someone happens to be your baby sis.

My Amazing Proofreader, Edward

So very fortunate to have you on my side! I can't express just how invaluable your contribution was and will continue to be throughout this series. Having someone to depend on 100% is truly a wonderful feeling and I'm proud to now call you a friend. You helped me to polish this book and I couldn't have accomplished that without you!

My lovely twin, Ashley

You've supported everything I do from day one and with this book there were no exceptions. I can't describe how much love I truly have for you and what you do for me as a person. You are dear friend to me Ash, forever & always.

My dearest, Grandmother

Without you, none of this is even possible. It gives me great joy to have you in my life, always supporting every endeavor. And your feedback is the greatest I could ever have; now and forever. Love you so much!

PROLOGUE

Briellyn

Her face is barely recognizable. It's morphed into something much darker, more demonic. I don't know this face. The wind beneath her sweeps her long dark locks straight up into the air, yet I feel nothing. I pant, afraid of this *situation*. My heart beats so fast and hard that I can feel it in my ears. I don't know what to make of it. Two men kneel before her. They mean something to me, yet I can't see their faces. Her long, dark claws dig into their shoulders on either side of her, keeping them subdued.

"Leave them alone," I cry out to her, staring into the eyes of this creature that strikes a sense of fear and loss within me. The darkness inside her has consumed her entirely and there's no humanity left.

"You get to choose who lives. *Or* they both die. You can only choose *one*, if you see it fit." Her voice is serpent-like, with a faint echo. The room around is so dark that it's difficult to see much of anything.

"Why should I have to choose? Please just let them go." I plead, fear and worry dripping from each difficult word.

"One may live *if* we make a trade." Her tone delighted by her offer.

"Will you take me in their place?" I huff audibly, willing to make the sacrifice.

“*Only one!*” She hisses at me. “Would you give your second child in place of one of these men?” Her eyes grow darker, burning into me like a master branding his slave.

I nod yes.

“I need to *hear* it woman. *Speak up!*” Her words cause me to tremble, I can’t keep the hands at my sides still.

“Yes.” Tears fall slowly down my cheeks, the words challenging to voice, “I would give my second child in one of their place.” It didn’t matter. *I have no children.*

“Well then, kill the one that you don’t want!” She screams out, pushing both men forward into the light.

“How can you make *me* choose? I love them both!” I cry out.

— ξ —

My eyes fly open as I stare into the dark abyss that is my bedroom. I lean up to glance at my phone. Three AM. My palm gently rubs my forehead. *Will these dreams ever stop?*

Admittedly, I haven’t had one in a while. Anxiety is through the roof because of business and when I’m stressed; my mind displays them in weird, violent vision. *Sigh.* Nothing I can’t handle. Nothing out of the norm.

I leave my bed and walk to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. After a few sips, I lie back down and attempt to fall asleep again. Sometimes I wish I could just get away from it all. If only just for a little while.

I

THE INVESTOR

Briellyn

“Brielle? Brielle? Anyone in there? Earth to Brielle?” the distant words break my train of thought. I’m staring into space, getting lost in my book, when a familiar voice intrudes. I quickly swerve my chair around and take my glasses off. My business partner is standing at the front of my cherry wood corner desk with her arms crossed, tapping her foot. Rubbing my eyes, I look up at her, baffled as to why she couldn’t read the sign on my door.

“What is wrong with you, the sign is on my door...” I point to the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign, merely twelve feet away. She stares at me, frustrated, not saying anything. “What?!” I raise my voice again.

She smirks then slams a magazine on my desk. *I’m on the cover.* “First off, you know that sign doesn’t apply to me. Secondly, you made the cover! I told you it was a good idea to do that interview,” she’s overjoyed.

I turn beet red and clear my throat, looking at her with doubt. *Admittedly I’m jumping for joy inside that they thought me glamorous enough to put on the cover, who would’ve thought?*

She picks up the magazine and opens it, covering her face and reading aloud. “After having the pleasure to sit down with this brilliant young woman, we have come to the conclusion that not only is Briellyn Donado the Donatella Versace of the business world, but she’s as gorgeous on the inside as she is on the outside. Her radiance and confidence

shines through her approachable exterior, but is displayed with incredible humility. Her fresh ideas and unique take on business attire is like a glass of cucumber water, chilled to perfection. This up and coming fashion genius is also extremely business savvy, having opened her line with only a few thousand and growing it to over a million in revenue yearly. She's currently in the market for an investor, and trust us, she's a pot of gold and platinum with only rainbows coming *and* going from her... Blah blah blah, so on and so forth. You get the gist; I know you won't read it because heaven knows you can't take a compliment. Wouldn't kill you to accept a little flattery Brie. Which leads me to my next point as to why I'm here..."

Twiddling my thumbs and trying not to smile, I wait for a moment before replying, "Which is?"

"You were supposed to sign those papers this morning with that guy," she whines as she sits down in the cushioned red chair in the front of my desk.

"Oh right, because you so desperately want to bring someone else into our fold who wants so much of the cut when we are about to strike it big... 'scuse me for not being overly anxious," I reply sarcastically, "Takes away from those that work for us. I don't even know this guy and I hate him already Ryn." I plop my face into my hands.

Eryn calmly grabs one of my hands from my face and I stare at her. "First off, it's *your* business that you've so graciously allowed me along for the ride and don't worry, everything is going to be perfect and this is going to put you and me both in a very generous position. *Maybe* if you would've done the interview sooner, like I'd asked, you would have more

options right now. We need to expand NOW and the buy in is more than we should spend. You gamble with other people's money, not your own, remember?" she smiles at me, tilting her head sideways. Her bright red hair catching the light coming through my office window behind me; it makes it appear as if it were on fire.

I hate to agree with her, but I know we need to do something soon to aid in the business's growth; otherwise we'll be capped. I reluctantly smile, "I will call right now and schedule the meeting to get it done..."

"Today," she adds, standing up and walking towards the door of my office.

"Of course..." I grit my teeth together and roll my eyes as she goes to close the door; she turns around and blows me a kiss. "Read the article... you might like it," she adds before shutting the door.

I turn my chair around to stare out the window, "God please, if this is meant to be, please give me a sign." I look upwards, pressing my hands together in prayer.

My cold office is being warmed by the sun coming through the beige window blinds. It is nice to have a floor to ceiling window in my office, the sunlight gives me that warm happiness I need right now. I get lost in thought while the leaves are blowing around outside, I think about how fortunate I've been thus far.

Focus. I swivel my chair forward once again. My corner desk acts like a barricade between me and whomever comes through my door; protecting me, shielding me. I glance at my peace lily in the opposite corner on my left; the red marbled

vase it's in just seems to burn into my soul. *I should get out of the office, I work too much.* Who would have thought being a clothing designer would be so demanding... *said no one ever.*

Suddenly my phone rings, I glance at it on my left from the corner of my eye; the black phone lighting up, beckoning me to answer it; the number unknown. I playfully swivel my chair left to right and stare at the phone. It continues to ring as I get lost in my thoughts again, "Why must EVERY thing be so extraordinarily difficult!?" I pick up the phone and press the button to answer the line, "Briellyn Donado." I was stern and unfriendly intentionally to get whoever was on the other line to go away.

"Good afternoon Ms. Donado, my name is Eric," the very inviting deep voice on the other end cordially states. *Maybe too inviting, probably a sales call.*

"Look Eric, I'm sorry but unfortunately we are not in the market for whatever it is you are selling," I reply, lightening my tone while remaining stern.

"I'm sorry Ms. Donado, I think you have me mistaken," he insists, "I'm calling in reference to the expansion of your business."

On one hand, I feel relieved; on the other, I am annoyed. "I'm sorry I haven't called you guys back, I've been deciding on whether or not to proceed with the merger," reluctantly, I continue speaking, "Can we meet this afternoon to discuss the paperwork and the final cut?"

Nothing but deep, dark, silence on the other end; broken by a slight, very manly chuckle. Eric continues, "I still think you have me mistaken Ms. Donado, we haven't spoke before but

from the sound of it, I would say that you aren't fond of whomever that you have me mistaken for."

I immediately blush, grabbing the nearest pen to fiddle with, "Oh my goodness, I am so sorry. Yes, I indeed had you confused with someone else... anyway, my business *is* primed for expansion. Um, what is it *exactly* that you are referencing?"

Eric clears his throat, "I have heard about you... and your business, and I want to help."

Baffled and confused, I reply, "Help? I'm sorry, from whom did you hear this?"

"Well besides the wonderful article in W magazine, a mutual friend of ours by the name of Justin Vandergrift. He says that you are one of the most brilliant women he knows and that your cup is currently full, you need to expand and grow. W magazine's description was more lighthearted of course. From either perspective, with a little help you'll be one of the most sought after designers in the world..."

"I'm so flattered..." I reply, elated with the thought that Justin would recommend me so highly. He is an old friend whom I care about very dearly. "Well... actually, I could use some external investments to grow, but I'm not interested in selling majority share and becoming an employee."

Eric laughs, "Well..." He chuckles again. "You're in luck because I wish to invest. Justin briefly went over your numbers from last year and I have to say, I'm quite impressed. I think you and I would work well together. Can you put together a small business plan discussing the expansion?"

A smile creeps upon my face, “Are you serious?” I sit here dumbfounded, I can’t believe it. This is exactly what I need to prevent having to essentially sell a huge chunk of my business with a merger to those criminals that Eryn deals with.

“Very, Ms. Donado, when do you think you might have it read—?”

“Today!” I excitedly cut him off, regaining my composure. I clear my throat, sit up straight, and calmly repeat, “Today... are you available for us... I mean me, to meet in person? I would really prefer to see exactly who you are and go over a few things with you.”

“Absolutely. Can we meet for dinner at say, 7pm? I know this great place on 5th that has amazing food. I think it would be appropriate given the fact that I believe we will be toasting to a new venture for us both by dinners end.”

“I sure am!” I blurt out. *God, don’t sound so desperate.* My thought is interrupted by Eric’s laugh. It sounds so wholesome. It’s the first refreshing thing I’ve heard all day.

“Great, here is my number. Please send me a text and I will send you the address. It is dinner dress though, just fyi.” He proceeds to give me the number.

I write the number down and imagine the way the night is going to go, “I will be sure to text you Mister...?”

“Windsor, it’s Eric Windsor. But please, just Eric.”

“Well, with that being said... please call me Brie,” I smile wide, holding my breath.

“I look forward to seeing you in a few hours then... Ms. Brie. Until then,” he says.

“Until then...” and I hang up the phone. *Could my luck really be this good?* Excitedly, I call Eryn’s desk phone to tell her the good news. I let it ring twice before quickly hang up. Wait, what if this *IS* too good to be true? I would feel incredibly stupid to tell Eryn I bailed on her guy and this Eric is full of it.

She’s calling me back. I pick it up immediately, “Hey Ryn, just wanted to let you know that I’m heading home for the day. I need to clear my head about this merger.”

“Okay Brie, just remember this is important to *us* and everyone involved, I will schedule a meeting for tomorrow morning...” she replies quickly.

“Sure, we’ll talk later,” I hang up, irritated by her persistence. What does this guy have... is she sleeping with him or something? *Okay Brie, don’t think like that... she’s just trying to help.* I grab my phone to text this wonderful stranger, Eric. “God, I hope you’re the real deal,” mumbling as I type away. I grab my purse and head out the door.

THE MEETING

Briellyn

I pull into my garage, the base floor of my cute little corner townhouse unit in this gorgeous Stamford community. It's unnecessarily three bedrooms but works for when my sister and her children come to visit even though one of the rooms is my home based office. The gorgeous dark cherrywood floors throughout the entire house was the first thing that drew me in, then the golden sponge painted walls, a two car garage, a cute little kitchen with white cabinets and granite countertops, and a tiny balcony, ideal for myself and a friend sets me at peace.

I walk up to the 3rd floor where my bedroom is and immediately start ransacking my closet. I need a dress that is powerful, sexy, and screams invest in me. *I'm worth it.* I have to land this deal. He seems pretty interested, but what if he is full of shit? *I've had my fair share of fast talkers this past year.*

What if it's some dirty old guy trying to get lucky? He didn't *sound* old though. I frown. I've been let down *so* many, *many* times. I've built what I have all on my own and unfortunately the path from good to *great* requires more capital and *significantly* more risk. *I can't afford to risk the futures of everyone counting on me.*

Think positive Brie, this could be huge. I stop for a moment. *Or it could be nothing.* I just don't want to get my hopes up! I can't emotionally afford to get my hopes up, *again.* I breathe in deep and close my eyes. "Let go, let flow." I stare at myself in the mirror with a black knee length Herve Leger bandage dress held up in front of me. It's a sweetheart neckline with thick straps. I put it aside and then hold up a red lace

Monique Lhuillier dress. It's a little shorter than the black one with no cleavage, still very sexy though.

Decisions, decisions. I decide to go with the black dress because it's a little more low key and subtly sexy. Even if he's old, some nice cleavage never hurt anyone.

Being a business owner isn't easy. All the glamour is enticing, but the stresses once your business reaches a certain size can be daunting. The best part is being your own boss and taking responsibility for what happens, which is a whole lot more satisfying than any nine to five I can think of.

Practicality is a necessity though. For example, I drive a 2017 metallic steel Dodge Durango to help me haul whatever supplies I need. *Not exactly glamorous.*

And I may own a three-bedroom place, but it's really just a condo with great square footage. I keep myself on salary and at the end of the year I award bonuses to everyone, including myself. But right now, there isn't enough surplus to support an expansion on my own. *And like Eryn said, you never risk your own money.*

— ξ —

I decide to drive into the city instead of requesting a driver, *this way I can high tail it out of there if Eric is a creep.* I grab two twenty-dollar bills from my cash stash for parking and hop into my truck. The drive into the city is always so pretty in the evening, and there's no traffic going in at this time either.

I arrive at my destination at 6:55 and decide to valet so that I don't walk in late. The valet approaches my door and opens it, helping me out. I reach over to grab my purse before

strutting to the door. My nerves overtake my senses. I start freaking out, rehearsing the pitch in my head. How will I even know who he is? Should I text him and let him know that I'm here? *Yes, I should text him.* I take my phone out of my purse and proceed to send him a text.

I type, 'I just arrived, should I ask for you or meet you in a particular spot?' then hit send. Keeping the phone in hand, I slowly start to pace.

I tilt my head back and glance at the sky, inhaling deeply then exhale, catching my reflection in the tall glass doors in front of me. I fix my hair as a gentleman proceeds towards me, "Ms. Donado?" I would know his voice anywhere, confident and calming. I coyly turn to say hello to the man who may very well be rescuing me from a bad merger, only to find an extremely handsome, tall, dark haired, blue eyed, muscular figure. *Wasn't expecting him to actually look like a superhero.*

"You must be..." I stand there in awe of him. "Um," I lost my train of thought. *Train of thought, completely gone.*

He finishes, "Eric."

"Right, I was just going to say that. *Sorry*, a lot on my mind," I hold my hand out to make his acquaintance, feeling sheepish that his appearance has turned me into a stuttering schoolgirl. *Get it together, woman.*

He smiles, "I'm sure you do," he proceeds to shake my hand and leans in to kiss my cheek. *Oh, my.* Inadvertently, my eyes brighten and eyebrows rise. The cologne he's wearing is absolutely divine. His suit is an extension of his statuesque physique, perfectly tailored to fit his muscular frame. He looks to be about my age. *Trust fund baby perhaps?*

“I hope you’re hungry, this place is really very good,” he holds the door open and guides me inside, gently placing his hand on my lower back as we near the hostess.

“Mr. Windsor, nice to see you again. Would you like to be seated in the usual area?” The hostess stares at him with a large smile. Eric acknowledges her with a simple nod.

The restaurant is very posh and like all big city hotels, there’s a bar-lounge too. The music is hip and the ambience is trendy and modern. The hostess leads us to our table. We walk past numerous cocktail tables to a narrow stairway, hidden behind a wall. As we walk up the stairs you can see everyone on the floor below; dimly lit tabletops, and some people dancing on the open floor. At the top of the stairs there is a wide hallway equipped with huge, abstract lounge chairs lining the walls and small coffee tables. Eric walks behind me as if to make sure I don’t lose my way. The waitress stops in front of a glass door and opens it. Once inside, the ambient sounds dull out completely and I could hear my thoughts again.

We finally arrive at our table, exclusive and intimate, with a gorgeous view of the garden that is centered in the middle of the building. The shrubbery is lit up like Christmas, white lighting and soft highlights on perfect landscaping. On the far side from where we’re sitting, the glass showcases the high ceilings of the public restaurant area, sofas and classy chairs lining our floor, the low lighting hiding the intimate kissing shared between a well-dressed man and much less dressed young woman.

Eric pulls out my chair, “Please, have a seat my lady.” I flirtatiously smile at him and sit down. He proceeds to sit

across from me. “So, where is the paperwork? Unless of course, there’s more to that dress than meets the eye,” his brief, but thorough, assessment indicative of something more, asking so nonchalantly as he places his napkin over his lap. I blush, unable to focus enough to flourish a witty response. *I’m in trouble*. He signals over to our own personal waiter. Before I can answer the first question, he asks me another. “Can I get you something to drink?”

I think to myself, no, but then I think again. It might take the edge off. *I need to take this edge off*. I smile at him, “Mai Tai, please.”

The waiter arrives to our table, “Double McClellan, neat, and a Mai Tai for the lady,” Eric hands the waiter something after he mentions the drink order. *McClellan? My drink seems childish in comparison. Maybe I should switch to a cran vodka?* The waiter promptly walks off. *Whelp, too late for that*. “So...” he turns his body to face me.

“The business plan is right here,” I point to my head, “If you would like a hard copy after we speak this evening, I have it synced in my phone. All I’ll need is your email and you can review it at your leisure.”

He raises his eyebrows in response, “I see. I love a woman who’s hands on about her business. I respect that.”

I clear my throat again while folding my hands into my lap so as not to fidget too much.

A few minutes pass when the waiter returns with our drinks. We’ve already discussed how much capital is necessary in order to accomplish this fiscal year’s goals and the expansion over the next three-year period. “I’m willing to allow a

twenty-five percent share in the company for the five hundred-thousand-dollar investment, payouts beginning in fifteen months,” I sip on my drink and confidently smile at him.

“You’re very persuasive.... I’ll tell you what, after hearing the details of your plan, I’m very intrigued. You know how to get right to the point, and quickly,” he raises his glass to me, “I’m excited to hear more, but first let us order.” He takes a sip of his drink as I stare at him blankly. *I haven’t even glanced at the menu.* I’ve been too busy running my mouth.

Hastily, I grab for the menu and proceed to glance through it when Eric gently grips my wrist, “May I?” He cordially smiles at me as if he knew this would happen the whole time.

I reflect the smile and nod, “Okay.” A lady could get used to this type of gentlemanly treatment, it’s so rare.

He turns to the waiter, “Will you please get my lovely dinner date the seafood delicatessen and for me, my usual,” he looks over at me, “What kind of salad would you like?”

Immediately I respond, “Caesar, extra parmesan with sliced tomatoes, please.”

“Thanks Jim,” Eric says as the waiter scurries off. He turns back to me and sips his drink, “As you were saying...”

“Well you see, our biggest sellers right now are...” I continue chatting about the business’s best sellers, sometimes I get too excited about jackets and dresses, but *it’s why we’re here.* “... And since the summer release is right around the corner...” I go on for what seems like an hour, it’s really only about twenty minutes. *Again, I’m excited!*

Eric seems to know a lot about the fashion business, his take on the industry is refreshing. He remains engaged in the conversation the entire time, genuinely interested in everything we're discussing. I confidently shrug, "So that's the main idea, nothing complex, just an increased marketing push to our newly targeted audience, the licensing, and a few new additions in production. Easier overseas distribution. And the biggest push is a fashion show that's really a *performance*, possibly overseas. But I'm curious, Mr. Windsor, you seem to know an awful lot about my area of expertise, what *exactly* do you do?"

He shuffles a little bit in his seat, "Well you see Ms. Donado, I haven't been *entirely* honest with you," he places his ankle on his knee, then his right forearm onto the table with his drink in his hand, and his left arm over the left back of the chair.

Oh no, here it comes. I knew it was too good to be true. I grab my drink and quickly suck the rest of it down.

He looks up and smiles at me, "I had no intentions of..." Just then the waiter, with help, returns with our meals. *Saved by the dinner bell.* Our meals are placed in front of us with beautiful silver warming covers. The servers remove the covers to reveal this gorgeous platter of shrimp and lobster tail mixed with vegetables and some kind of potato. It smells delightful. *But I think I am going to be sick.*

I'm sure this handsome gentleman, Eric, is about to tell me he doesn't really want to invest, *or* he wants different terms. The servers leave. Eric smells his food, as if taking in every distinct scent then looks over at me, "Please, try your food. I hope you like lobster."

A half-hearted grin graces my face as I take the fork and poke a piece of shrimp and the potatoes *dripping* in this sauce. I place it in my mouth as Eric watches me intently. Immediately, I'm in heaven, it is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted... *ever*. The shrimp is cooked perfectly, and the potato just melts in my mouth. Whatever the sauce on top is, it adds just the right amount of flavor to make it delightful. It sends a sensation through my entire body, it's so good.

Eric grins at the approval on my face, "That's what I thought," he points at me, "I figured you a seafood lover." He cuts into his steak and places a piece into his mouth. He then puts his fork and knife down and digs into the left pocket on the inside of his suit jacket. He pulls out a white envelope and places it onto the table, keeping his hand on it; he slowly slides it closer to me. "*This* is for you," he states confidently.

I take a deep breath and a long pull from the new Mai Tai that the waiter just brought me. What could be in the envelope? *Have a little faith Brie*. I take a deep breath as I slide the envelope to the end of my side of the table, then proceed to open it up.

Eric continues, "As I was saying, I had no intentions of leaving without giving you my investment *up front*. I knew I wanted to invest long before you and I had ever spoken. But *I am* changing the terms," he interjects just before I open the folded letter. A cashier's check falls out filled out to me in the amount of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The letter had all the terms outlined in it. *With a final payout totaling one and a half million dollars. Is he serious? Am I being Punk'd?*

I am taken back. Now this *is* too good to be true. I don't know what to say and keep stumbling over my words, "Well... this is... *um*... more than I need, but extremely generous of you."

Eric takes another bite then pats his face with his napkin, "Well the additional seven hundred and fifty thousand is for something I need you to do for me. And I only want a ten percent stake in the company; you do enough without someone wanting to dig into your profits."

Almost choking, I sip my beverage. "Okay..." I start, "What could I *possibly* do for you that's worth seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" I didn't mean to sound like a skeptic, *but for real right?*

"Well technically, you were only asking for five hundred thousand, right? So, your service to me would be valued at one million dollars, two hundred and fifty of which you already hold in your hand. You will receive the remainder upon completion of the task. Besides the fact that you can use the money to put your ideas into overdrive with no worry about funding, I'm in desperate need of your expertise and Justin told me that you would be exactly what I'm looking for." *Sounds like that's what this is really about.*

"Justin has apparently told you a lot about me," smiling forcibly, I quickly grab my drink again, polishing it off.

"He told me that you have a very natural analytic mindset and you're quick to solve puzzles and problems. Seeing things others can't, so to speak."

Funny he used those words. "So," the alcohol is setting in, "there are many people who can solve puzzles and problems, catch

things others may miss.” I tried not to sound sarcastic there, but my confidence is showing. *Maybe my cockiness too.*

“Yes, but you are *different*, from what I understand,” he reaches into his right pocket and places a small square picture onto the table, “tell me what you see in the photo.”

I glance down at the picture then again at Eric. He nods his head, encouraging me to proceed. I pull the picture closer, inhale deeply, and look at it. There are numbers that seem to pop up right off the table, like a 4D holographic. It’s unlike anything I had ever seen before.

As my face lights up in amusement, I glimpse at Eric in delight and exclaim, “Now wherever did you find this? Interesting trick. The way the letters appear to fly off it like that.” *I really am amused by this.* I just don’t understand his end game yet. He looks at me with intent and tilts his head. I carefully shake my head as my grin fades, “What?” Worried that I may be coming across *too* confident. *Or possibly drunk.*

He leans closer to me, “Tell me *exactly* what you see.”

Hesitantly I analyze the picture again, “Well, there’s letters. An ‘E’...looks like an ‘M’... and a ‘P’... I think, it’s a little difficult making out these letters, I know I see the word royalty. And there’s something about Canaries here...” Eric immediately takes the picture away from me and places it back into his right inside pocket. “I don’t understand, it was clear as day, anyone could have seen that Eric,” I stare at him, brow furrowed.

He smirks, “Please, let us finish eating. I do hope you will consider my offer... *the additional* offer that is.”

I grab my fork and poke another piece of shrimp, before I place it in my mouth I ask, “Are you going to tell me more about yourself and what’s going on with that photo in order for me to make an informed decision?” I resume eating after asking my question, staring at him with purpose and poise.

He gazes at me and smiles, “I will tell you, but we have a long time to get into those details, not tonight. Let us lighten the mood,” he waves over to the waiter for another round of drinks. *Not another round.* Anymore alcohol and I’ll be singing and dancing on the table for him.

I don’t usually drink; in fact, most occasions, I have no want or need to drink. Tonight is different, Eric has given me very mixed feelings and I’m not sure how I should proceed with this. *Hence, the nervous sipping.*

Do I say yes to his mysterious offer? I mean, what exactly is it? Am I helping to solve a crime? *That actually might be fun!* Or maybe a treasure hunt... although, I don’t think I would be good at that. Whatever it is, he is willing to pay me pretty damn good money to help. And ten percent! He seems pretty harmless... *Let’s not forget incredibly handsome.* “Brielle?” I hear a familiar voice break my concentration for the *second* time today. Could it be? *No...*

THE INTERRUPTION

Briellyn

My eyes follow the voice to the door and here comes Eryn with some guy waving at me. “Oh no,” I wipe my face and inhale deep. *Buzzkill*.

“What?” Eric asks as I stand up and proceed to stand in front of the table, *in front of him*, so that Eryn couldn’t get a clear view of him.

“Brie, I thought you told me you would be home this evening? I couldn’t help but notice you from downstairs...” Eryn accuses as she tries to look past me. Eric has his body turned towards me, trying to see around me at this other woman.

“Do you have a date, and you didn’t tell me?” She asks, finally moving me out of the way. “Hi, I’m Eryn. Brielle’s best friend and business partner, how do you do?” she holds her hand out to make Eric’s acquaintance, so he stands up to shake her hand.

“Eric Windsor,” he says as he grasps her hand into his. Just as they shake, I feel a little winded. As if something takes my breath away, I stumble back. Eric let go of Eryn’s hand so quickly that he is already standing beside me to prevent me from falling.

Eryn glances at the table to see the investment paper sitting there. “What is that?” she attempts to grab the papers, but Eric swiftly seizes them.

He sternly says to her, “It’s something private... between Briellyn and I, actually.” He forces a grin, her visual response uninviting.

“Well since you are here Brielle, I would like you to meet the new business partner... Fiórello,” she flashes a devious smirk Eric's direction as the gentleman she came in with comes to light.

He’s a very tall man with medium brown hair, slender build and stunning green eyes. I find it odd that him and Eryn actually look alike. *Maybe it’s the booze.* “Pleasure to finally meet the brains behind the business Ms. Donado, I’ve heard so much about you. Please, call me Fiore,” he holds his hand out to me. Eryn snorts and turns her nose up at his comment.

I take his hand, which he then kisses. “Pleasure’s mine,” I reply with a cordial smile graced upon my face.

He then proceeds to shake Eric’s hand, “Eric.” He gives a gentle nod with a firm handshake.

“Have we met? There’s something about you that is *familiar*,” Eric states, raising one brow and tilting his head while staring at Fiórello’s face.

“I don’t believe so,” is his polite reply. They simply nod at each other in acknowledgment of their meeting.

I cut the silence with my words, “I’m sorry I haven’t called you or your people, but I don’t believe the merger will be necessary after all,” breaking up the odd glare the two gentlemen had between each other.

Eryn cut her eyes over to me, “Excuse me?!”

Fiórello raises his hand ever so gently as if to silence her. “Any particular reason for that my dear?” he asks smoothly.

“I found an angel investor who is giving more capital for a smaller share,” I reply, graciously looking at Eric who happens to be staring my direction.

Fiórello smiles, “Well that *is* wonderful news,” he leads, he looks at me then glances at Eric, “But I do believe you’d be making a grave mistake by not partnering with me.”

Eric places his hands in his pockets, prominently adjusting his stance, “And why is that, *Fiore?*”

Fiore adjusts his posture in reaction, “Well you see, though you may be offering financial assistance Mr. Windsor, I have connections within the industry that can elevate her status in a much more significant way. You do have her best interest, don’t you? Which is...” He motions at Eric as he briefly pauses, “*priceless*, as you say it?”

“But Fiore—” I interrupt, batting my eyes and trying to seem polite.

Eric then interrupts me, “I’m sure you have plenty of connections, but she shouldn’t have to sell her soul and forget all of her sacrifices to get there.”

Fiore stares at Eric accusingly, “Sell her *soul?*” he chuckles as he steps a little closer to me, carefully staring into my eyes, “I’d be willing to *match* his offer Ms. Donado.” His eyes are very mesmerizing, yet genuine.

“I... I... *um*,” I stutter trying to think of a response; my eyes gazing back and forth between the two men inquisitively.

“Why change the offer now, why didn’t you offer that to begin with?” Eric fiercely asks Fiore, eyeing him keenly. I glance at Eric, intrigued by his natural urge to be protective. *Kinda hot, wait.* My focus returns to the conversation at hand.

I add to his statement, “Yeah, why *didn’t* you? Surely Eryn told you my numerous counteroffers, you wouldn’t come down on the shared stake. Not for anything.”

Fiórello takes my hand, “I’ll tell you what mademoiselle; I’m willing to not only match his offer but give you access to fifty percent of my existing clientele and hold off on all profit shares for the first three years. If I don’t make you money, I will gracefully sign back my share.” He continues staring deeply into my eyes, something about it beckoning me to say yes. *Just say yes.*

“Brielle, don’t let him trick you into a last minute deal,” Eric urges as it breaks my concentration on Fiórello.

“*ENOUGH*, both of you. At the end of the day, this is *my* company, and I will do with it as I see fit,” I raise my hands to both of them. Eric clenches his jaw and Fiórello places his hands together, intrigued by my response. I continue, “With that being said, I graciously accept BOTH offers.”

Eric and Fiórello both look towards the ceiling, assessing what I just said to them. Eric immediately states, “But you said it yourself, you only needed five hundred thousand, why—”

I motion to stop him, “Take it or leave it, we can all make money together. Eryn has put a lot of time and effort in with Fiore here and Eric your proposal is too good to say no. *So...*” I raise my eyebrows at the two of them and fold my arms together. Eryn stands there in utter shock waiting to hear the outcome.

Fiorello perks up, “You have a *sass* that I like, Ms. Donado.” He then turns to look at Eric, “Well, I look forward to seeing you at the quarterly investment meetings Mr. Windsor. After all, it’s just business.” He holds out his hand to shake Eric’s.

Eric glances at me out of the corner of his eye before proceeding to shake Fiorello’s hand. “Right, it’s *just* business,” Eric replies to him sternly.

“I look forward to meeting again. Ms. Donado... Mr. Windsor... I’ll have my attorney bring over the paperwork and the check,” he shakes hands with me, kisses it once more, then proceeds to walk away.

“Oh Fiore,” I call out, stopping him in his tracks.

“Yes?”

“Make sure that contract states that you must make *more than* your shared stake in order to keep your share,” I smile confidently at him.

He simply nods his head and smiles back, “Of course.” Then takes his leave.

“You and I have a *lot* to discuss Brie, I’ll see you in the morning,” Eryn mumbles my direction as she proceeds to follow Fiorello out.

I take a deep breath as Eric awkwardly twists his face, a smile somewhere in the mix, “Well, that was interesting.” He helps me to my seat, which was just a few steps, but I stumble. He asks, “One too many drinks?” *You have no idea, Mr. Windsor.*

I stare up at him and gingerly smile, somewhat embarrassed I reply, “I believe so, I’m not usually like this... *you...* this meeting... and now *that* meeting, it has all been incredibly stressful... and wonderful.” Starry eyed I stare at him, *you’re wonderful.* I shake my head. *Focus woman!*

He slightly angles his head and asks, “Why stressful Ms. Donado? Handling business and getting your way seems so... *natural* for you.” He chuckles.

I adjust in my seat and take another bite of my food; I have eaten over half of the entree and clean my mouth with my napkin. “Well... *since you’re asking,*” I make sure no food is left in my mouth before continuing, “You’re obviously this born to wealth, hot shot, who seems to be able to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants...” my tone is confident as I stare at him.

“I mean, I think any business owner with a good idea could only hope to have someone like you knocking at their door wanting to invest in their venture. Surely you know that though. You haven’t told me much about yourself but I can tell you that you’re probably third generation wealth, grew up in a great neighborhood, high-end education like *Oxford*, surely a master’s degree at the minimum, given your extensive knowledge. Even though I didn’t see you pull up in a vehicle, I’m sure you have a chauffeur at least some point in the day and at the very least three or four vehicles at your behest. I would say you are worth at least in the triple digit

millions and if not yet, you will be one day through an inheritance of some sort. I'm not sure what you do for a 'living' but I'm sure you could lounge all day and never do anything, which I doubt you do because you are in such great *shape...*" with a cocky sneer and a twist of my mouth, I take another sip from my beverage and look at him sweetly, "Did I miss anything?" I say sarcastically. "Not all of us have such a charmed life..."

Eric lets out a wholesome laugh as he wipes his face clean from finishing his food. He nods his head in agreement, "Yes, I definitely could use your expertise. You're *saucy*, I like that. You were spot on about almost everything."

I flirtatiously motion at him as I take another sip, "Which one was I off on?" I never break my gaze from his eyes.

"Well for one, I have my doctorate. *Yes, it's from Oxford.* And I'm worth billions Ms. Donado, that's billions with a 'B', thanks to family wealth. But I bet you didn't catch that I'm not American..." he points at me as if to say, ah-ha, and shifts in his seat.

"Well, excuse me... *Doctor Windsor,*" I reply sarcastically. Changing topics, I put my drink down, "I have to say, this was really delicious. Thank you for treating me to this delightful dinner and meeting."

"Treating *you*? I thought you were treating me?" He stares at me blankly but unable to keep a straight face, he chuckles. "I'm just kidding. The pleasure is all mine," he finishes his drink.

The waiter comes by and gives Eric the check. Without skipping a beat, he places something in the fold and returns

it. The waiter bows graciously and walks away. “Are you okay to drive?” he walks over to me, giving me his hand to help me up and out of my chair.

I smile at him while reaching for his hand and lie, “Of course I am.” I take two steps while holding his hand and almost fall sideways, “Okay, maybe not...” I add, trying to be more graceful and less like the terrible drunken date.

Eric is still holding my arm and laughing under his breath. “Okay. How about I drive your car home and I will have my driver follow us to take me home, would that be okay?” he asks as we board the elevator to get to the first floor.

I flash him a coy look out the corner of my eye, “I *knew* you had a chauffeur...”

He chuckles.

“That’s fine,” I smile like I’d just won a prize on Jeopardy for guessing the phrase. We get outside and approach the valet. Eric hands him my ticket and the young man dashes off to retrieve my vehicle.

Eric turns to look at me and cups my left hand into both of his hands, “Ms. Donado, I have had a fantastic time with you tonight and I truly hope that you give my proposal some serious thought after you get home. I...” he hesitates, “I need you on this. Your expertise would be graciously appreciated.” He gathers himself to quaintly smile; patting his left hand over top of mine and then releases me. He then waves over his chauffeur with his left hand as he places his right into his pocket, waiting.

His chauffeur pulls around the corner. As he drives up, Eric proceeds to the passenger side door. The man rolls down the window and the two of them exchange a few words. Eric finishes speaking to him as my ride pulls up in front of me, the valet quickly exiting the vehicle to open the passenger door. I dig into my purse to pay him, but he quickly shakes his head, “No ma’am, your valet was already taken care of by Mr. Windsor.”

He opens the door for me and holds out his hand to help me inside. “Of course he did...” I mumble sarcastically under my breath as I sit in my vehicle and the valet closes the door. *Kind of sweet too.* Eric walks up to the driver side as the valet opens his door. He waves at him in thanks and sinks into the seat. As he adjusts his position along with the mirrors, I tease, “Been awhile since you’ve done this huh?”

“I was out driving this morning, I’ll have you know,” he quickly replies, amused. He glances at the navigation system in the center console and hits the ‘home’ button. “Ah,” he states, “you’re not too far from my home.”

I laugh hysterically, “You mean you don’t live in some fancy penthouse here in the city?”

He chuckles in response and nods, muttering, “Mmmhmm,” under his breath. He drives off, making our way out of the city, his chauffeur close behind.

“So...” I begin boldly, “I’ve been thinking about your proposal and you never mentioned exactly what it is I’ll be doing.” *I know he said I’d find out, but curiosity is killing me.*

He glances over at me and cocks an awkward, blushing type grin, “I’d like to think of it as important research, but for

you, I think it will feel a lot like a vacation adventure. Lots of traveling... ya know, hotels and houses in private, remote locations. Kind of like a treasure hunt... but, *not really*.”

“Sounds fascinating,” I tease, “I could use a little bit of adventure in my life. I’m such a bore and a homebody, I’ve never even had a real vacation before,” I drift off into a brief thought while looking out the window.

“I’m also going to double the pay I offered you, are you *sure* you want to do this?” He keeps glancing at me then back at the road.

I quickly turn and look at him, “*Double* my pay? Why? A million is already more than generous. Perhaps too generous. You just said it’s only research...”

“I said you can *think* of it as research. But I believe that it’s going to be a little more... *dangerous* than I let off...” his tone hesitant.

“Dangerous?” I think quickly, and mockingly I reply, “I laugh in the face of danger, ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Ha ha, yeah okay Simba, I’m being serious. Are you *sure* that this is something you want to do?”

“First, I’m impressed you got the reference. Second, I’m young and invincible. I could use some adventure to spice it up. Let’s do this,” I smile at him, my words carrying excitement and certainty. *Please take me away from my normal life, you handsome stranger. If only for just awhile.*

He glances over at me with a very serious focus about him, “This isn’t a game Brie, I want you to be sure...”

I can't believe he *finally* called me Brie, I blush, "Let me show you just how sure I am." I unbuckle my seatbelt and reach over to him.

He nervously stares at me, "What are you doing?"

"Showing you," First I unbuckle his seat belt. I then pat his chest down as his breathing quickens. I open up the right side of his jacket, pulling out the contract, then settle back into my seat. "What were *you* thinking I was going to do?" I lend him a flirty smile as I pull out a pen. I sign the contract and the back of the check. "I will be cashing this tomorrow. When do I start?"

"As soon as you are ready..." he replies confidently. I fold up the papers and lean over to place it back into his jacket pocket. I then re-buckle his seatbelt. *I can't believe I am doing this.* Eryn is going to freak out at me. "Something about sexy strangers that makes you do things you wouldn't normally do," I cynically mumble to myself.

"What was that Brie?" Eric chimes into my thought.

"I didn't say anything," I smile back, glancing over at him as his features gleam in between the streetlights. Perfect nose, chiseled cheeks, masculine chin, rich dark hair, and eyes so deep blue you could drown in them. I snort to myself, 'there's not a chance he's interested in *you*,' but a girl can dream right? I lose myself in the possibility.

— ξ —

"And it looks like we are here," his voice booms in my head. The ride, *and the delightful thoughts*, are over. He pulls into my neighborhood and I guide him to the front of my house. I

open the garage and he pulls in. “May I walk you to your door, well to your first floor?” he shrugs, his sweet, handsome face just so inviting.

“I’d like that,” I reply.

I start to open my door, but he stops me “No, please, allow me.” Again, I am taken back by his chivalry. He hops out of the car and quickly comes to the passenger side, his chauffeur in the rearview mirror just as Eric opens my door and lends me his hand.

“Ya know,” I begin as I take his hand, “Your mannerisms aren’t like most men, a lady could get *very* used to this. I might mistake this for flirting.” I smile as he helps me out of the truck.

“As a lady should be treated,” he smiles back. *No hints about the flirting though.* I knew right then I wasn’t his type. He walks me to the door that leads to my first floor and I pull my house keys out of my purse. I stick the key in the lock and turn it to open the door. “Well, thank you for the wonderful evening. I look forward to working with you,” I hold my hand out to shake his.

He takes my hand instead and brings it to his lips, kissing it softly and prolonged, “Until tomorrow.” My heart instantly skips a beat. *Definitely can be mistaken for flirting,* I think again.

“I will call you and let you know an exact date tomorrow,” smiling as he lets my hand go. I turn around to walk through my doorway and as I close the door, I wait to see him get into his car. His chauffeur is standing with the door open and just as he is about to get into the vehicle, he pauses and looks straight at me, cracks a smile and waves. I politely wave

back and close the garage door, then shut the inside door leading upstairs, pressing my back against it trying to catch my breath. *What an exciting evening!*

T.A. Davenport

II

EXCITEMENT AWAITS

Briellyn

I start to undress while making my way to the bedroom, thinking to myself, traveling with a handsome billionaire, only God knows where; *how risqué of you*. Finally getting out my comfort zone though. This should be fun. *Eryn would be proud... or pissed*. I chuckle to myself.

What if he's some psychotic crazed killer? *Like American Psycho*. *Pfft, that'd be my luck*. This getaway... *this* is something women dream about, but it never *really* happens. A princely stranger whisking them away. I still have my doubts on its validity, but I'll let this play out. See if it's more than just a tall tale.

As I sip my nighttime tea, I cop a squat on my bed and pull out my laptop. I've never heard of the Windsor family and he claims to not be an American. Then what *is* he? He didn't have a defining accent. Perhaps I'll just Google him, there can't be that many people who are billionaires in the world.

I go straight to the Google search page. "Okay, let's see," I crack my knuckles and my neck and proceed to typing. E-R-I-C... space... W-I-N-D-S-O-R, enter. I scan the search page, but nothing stands out. I decide to try W-I-N-D-S-O-R... space... B-I-L-L-I-O-N-A-I-R-E, enter. First entry is from ancestry.com. I click on the link and up pops a gentleman who looks like Eric's twin and it states within the brief explanation, born in 1895, the Windsor family was already worth millions.

“Well,” I chuckle to myself, “at least he’s not full of it.” The butterflies in my stomach swarm as I get excited all over again. I’m going to start packing tonight and post a job replacement right *now*. I don’t even know how long I’ll be gone.

As I sip my tea further and lose myself in thoughts of exotic beaches, my phone beeps. I grab the small purse I had for the evening and see that I’d already missed three calls. *Eric perhaps?* I excitedly unlock the screen and press the phone button. Three missed calls from... Eryn. Wrong E-R name, *last name I wanted to see actually*. Why though, I’m not sure.

Here is this dashing, handsome stranger who more or less sweeps me off my feet and single handedly saved my business from a merger I didn’t want and I *don’t* want to talk to my best friend, this has never happened before. Maybe it’s the notion that I know she’ll be pissed that I’m leaving for a while. Just then, my phone rings again. It’s Eryn. Should I answer it? *Ugh*, I’m dreading talking to her. I don’t want to hear her lecture me, but I know I might as well get it over and done with.

“Hello Eryn,” my tone sarcastic as I roll my eyes and take another sip of tea.

“Um, why am I just now hearing from you?” she snaps.

“I just got home, calm down.” I pace the room, eventually eyeing an outfit for tomorrow.

“Who was that guy you were with this evening? You told me you were going to be home...”

“Well *mother*, you don’t have to worry. He’s just a shareholder now, but of course, you know that.”

She’s silent for a moment, “And when, pray tell, were you going to inform *me* about him?”

“Hmm, maybe this evening after dinner. Oh wait, you were at dinner so...” I’m sure she can hear both the sarcasm and smile in my voice.

“Excuse me Brie, but last I checked, we were partners.”

“Eryn, last *I* checked you were my VP and business confidant, partner is a term we use loosely as you so eloquently put it earlier. I still *own* the majority share along with my sister. You don’t *own* any part.”

“Oh, I see...” she sounds almost hurt.

“Don’t get all crazy, look, I will be doing interviews this week and I’ll be going out of town for a while...” I bite my lip, clenching my jaw.

“Seriously, Brie? What are you *talking* about? I’m coming over.”

“Um, no you’re not, we will talk more tomorrow.”

“Brie, you can’t do this to me. I worked on getting Fiórello for *months* and this is how you repay me? You go parading around with some gorgeous stranger and just forget about me?!”

“If I didn’t know any better, I would say that you were a little jealous. And it’s nothing personal, it’s just business. He took a significantly lesser share in the company than Fiórello was

offering and gave us more money. Effectively, he convinced Fiórello to take a lesser share as well and now we have double the capital to work with. I'm actually thinking very clearly." *No need to mention the extra money.*

"Okay, prove it. Fiórello knows this type of business inside and out, let him hire your replacement."

Why you little... "Whoa now," I sit down on my bed, "Considering how important this is, I can't just leave it to anyone."

"Why don't you allow me to run it then and I will hire someone to do *my* job for a while."

"I love you Eryn, but I'll be hiring someone else. It's nothing personal, it's just—"

"*Business.* Right. Whatever Brie, I guess I'll see you tomorrow," she angrily hangs up the phone.

I look down at the screen as it blinks indicating the call ended, "What a bitch!" I say loudly. *I'm not going to let her ruin my night*, no way. Just then I get a text message. I don't know if I should check it because it's probably just more of her negativity. I pull it up anyway. I have a soft spot for Eryn and even though she's a bit crazy right now, she's *my* crazy bitch.

'Love you, I'm sorry and I can't wait to hear more,' it states.

I'm beginning to think she's bipolar, but I guess my news wasn't exactly like Christmas morning.. We've both been super stressed about what direction the business was going to go. I smile at the phone and put it down. It rings again, so

I immediately pick it up. “Eryn, it’s totally fine, I forgive you just—” the heavy breathing over the phone distracts my thoughts. I pull the phone away from my ear to look at the number but it just says ‘unknown’. “Hello?” I ask. “Eryn if this is your kind of a joke, I’m not amused.”

A deep, husky, voice breaks the silence, “We are coming for you Aurecia.” Then they hang up. *What the hell?* Inside I’m freaking out a little, my heart starting to flutter. It’s that time of year though, October rolls around and the crazies flood in from the first to the thirty-first.

I turn my phone off. “Jokes on you, douchebag,” I mumble, tossing it aside. I clamber into bed and turn the bedside lamp off.

I lay in the dark for about thirty minutes and can’t fall asleep from all the excitement. Eric’s face is all I see. I turn the lamp back on and open the drawer of my end table. The cashier’s check sits there staring at me, a sight for sore eyes. I smirk and think to myself, I really hit the jackpot with this one... *lucky me*. So rarely can I make that statement.

I take the phone and turn it back on. As it loads, I stare off into space wondering what clothes I should bring on this ‘expedition’. When my phone finishes loading, it gently vibrates to let me know that I have another text message. I open it up to see that Eric sent me something... apparently shortly after I turned my phone off. *Of course*.

‘I’m excited to be working with you Brie, please let me know if you need any help for this transition.’

-Eric W.

Even his text messages sound so prim and proper, I wonder if he has someone in mind to replace me. Gasp. I mean, he *did* already have the check ready and he knew he was going to ask me to leave. *Now I feel like a hypocrite after just telling Eryn I didn't want a stranger choosing someone for me.* She won't know the difference, I feel like Eric just *gets* me. I open the keyboard on my touch screen and swipe away.

'I know you won't see this until morning, but before I decide to post on the job board, do you happen to know someone who may be able to fill my spot while I'm gone?'

-Brie

It's worth a shot if it saves me from weeks' worth of interviews. He seems anxious to leave right away. *Shoot, I didn't even ask how long we'd be gone. That persuasive glare he had could erase my memory anytime.* I wonder if we will be back for the holidays. My mind is off pondering again as I reach to turn my light out. I place my phone on the end table and plug it up to charge, then drift off into the most wonderful dream.

— ξ —

Birds chirping in the distance, the sound of the wind gently swaying the trees. Everything appears hazy because the sun is so bright. I'm in a gorgeous field filled with long ivory tulips. The smell is crisp and fresh with a hint of sweet. The flowers amongst my fingertips, like the finest woven silk, serenade my sense of touch as I walk in the direction of the sun. As I get closer to the trees, there is a small stream. The trees shielding my eyes from the dazzling sun, I sit down next to the water. I run my fingers in this crystal-clear stream, feeling the coolness it provides from the short walk. All different

kinds of animals are sip from the refreshing creek; two fawns and their mother, a couple of bunnies, as different types of birds grow alarmingly nosy. I smile at the one fawn eyeing me from the distance.

Suddenly the fawn falls over and the field dims. The other animals, except for the fallen fawn, quickly scurry away. I look around frantically, trying to figure out what just happened. I stand up and attempt to make my way over to the fawn. As I step into the stream it seems as if the distance between me and the fawn gets wider. The closer I step, the further I seem to be. Once the water reaches my hips, it turns crimson red. The ivory draped dress I'm wearing is now blood stained. I look up to see the fawn is bleeding out into the water. I continue to walk towards it, but with the next step the ground disappears beneath me. I sink infinitely into the water, the surrounding ground no longer there, drowning within its icy grip. I look up towards the surface to see a large dark figure hovering above the water as I draw my last breath.

III

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Briellyn

Tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. My sleep is interrupted by the sound of something hitting my window, gasping for air while gripping my blouse, trying to wake up, “Rrrgh, shut it woodpecker!” I glance at the time on my phone to see it’s 8:30am. “Jeeze,” I roll over to stare at the ceiling, phone in my right hand and rubbing my eyes with the left, still trying to wake up while sifting through notifications one at a time. Email after email, I mark it as either important or delete it before reaching a text message response from Eric. My heart briefly stops.

‘Actually, I have two people in mind. Care to do an interview or two at 9a? I’ll bring coffee and breakfast.’

-Eric W.

Wait. Like nine, like thirty minutes from now, nine? I don’t think I’ve ever gotten out of bed so quickly. I run into my bathroom and turn on the shower. While it warms up, I brush my teeth and use the toilet, checking the time every ninety seconds because I’m not sure if he meant at my house or the office.

As I continue to brush, I walk into my closet to find something fashionable and powerful to wear. I mean after all; my signature suit collection is what got me linked into the fashion world. I find it to be extra powerful and sexy when a woman wears a three-piece suit that fits like a glove. I choose a wine-colored pant suit with a pale blue satin blouse and

hang it on the door. I spit the remaining toothpaste out and quickly shower up.

Once out the shower and drying off, I glance at the phone again. 8:50. *This will be the fastest makeup session I have ever done.* I dab a little foundation all around to cover up any imperfections, blend it, dab some bronzer on my cheeks and atop my eyelids, then throw on some mascara. I top off my look with a pale pink lip gloss and a deep rose color on my cheeks. I unpin my hair; that I'm grateful I wrapped last night. Just as I put on my heels, there's a knock at the door. I grab my phone and glance at the time again. 8:57. "A little early," I mumble as I walk down the stairs to the door with my suit jacket over my left forearm, "But I'm not surprised by that."

I open the front door and Eric is standing there in this spectacular pinstriped navy suit with a steel grey shirt and fantastic deep grey tie. He's holding two coffees from Dunkin' and a small bag. "Well good morning sunshine," he leans in to kiss me on the cheek.

"Come on in," I reply, kissing his cheek simultaneously in return, "the kitchen is to the left."

He steps into my home and looks around, "So this is what a clothing designer's home looks like. I guess it's true what they say..."

He glances back at me, I smile. "Or I could just know a *really* awesome decorator," my response teasingly swift.

He hands me an iced coffee, "Touché."

“Well what *do* they say? Now I’m curious,” when I glance at the side of the cup, it says my usual ‘double extra cream, extra sugar, caramel swirl’.

“Um, scratch that question,” I furrow my brow inquisitively, “how did you know what I like?” I snark, “*With precision.*” I squint my eyes at him in shock, forgetting completely about the previous conversation and hoping to God that he isn’t *really* a crazy stalker.

“Oh,” he grins as he places the small bag on the counter, “I called your assistant. She told me what you drink since you never texted back this morning.” *Disaster averted.* Clever man. Maybe *too* clever.

“I was hoping to catch you in your bed dress...” he chuckles. *Bed dress?* Really?

“Seriously?” I reply teasingly, “who *are* you? Were you born in the 1800’s.” Laughing while repeating the word to myself, I notice Eric fixated on me. “What?” I ask.

He tilts his head a little, “You have an absolutely radiant complexion. I couldn’t quite tell yesterday evening, but here in the sunlight, you just have this... rich beautiful bronze glow.” He smiles at me again.

I blush as I pull my hair back behind my right ear. *Bronzer does wonders my handsome friend.* Shyly I reply, “Why, thank you Eric.” I grab some plates and open the small bag, quickly changing the subject, “So where am I doing these interviews?”

“Ah,” he taps my hands away from the bag and proceeds to open it himself, “Well for one, I told the first person 9:30

because I hadn't heard from you. Two..." he glances at me with a devious smile, "I thought it more professional to interview at your office." He pulls two small containers out of the bag. The first one he opens, to my delight, is a mini ham, tomato, spinach, onion, and cheddar omelet while the second is a fresh fruit mixture of sliced grapes, strawberries, kiwis, and bananas. He puts the omelet on the plate then garnishes it with the fruit around it, before placing the plate in front of me. "Bon appetit," he says cheerfully.

I work up a quirky smile and ask, "You're not eating?"

He sits down next to me, "I already ate, I had my chef whip this up for me to go... *for you.*" I let out a chuckle on the inside. A chef? *Spoiled brat.* "I hope you like it," he pulls his chair forward and adjusts.

Of course, the omelet is delicious and made oh-so-perfectly. The fruit is so fresh you can taste the farm it came from. Is this what it will be like traveling with him on this extravaganza? *The ultimate vacation.* I get to see how the other side lives for a change.

Thankfully, the omelet is small, I'm able to eat quickly while maintaining lady-like bites. I don't want to come across mannerless in front of a man who would put a nun to shame. *But I hate being late.* I finish and wipe my mouth, "I don't know what it is about you Eric, for some reason I trust you on a whole other level than most." I quickly walk into the living room to grab my purse then meet him at the front door, he holds it open for me. "You're too good to be true," my eyes flutter at him and a subtle laugh escapes, "I'm still wondering why me though?" We both step out of the house and he stands there to watch my six as I lock the door. *Don't*

judge me on the lingo, I'm going on an adventure, gotta get into character.

He gently touches my back and points to his car below. *A two-door, dark blue Bentley continental*, “Might I see you into work today?”

I smile coyly at him. “No chauffeur today?” I tease. I shake my head and lightheartedly reply to his initial question, “Yes, of course.” He walks me to the passenger side door and opens it for me, lending me a hand as I sit inside. He walks around the front of the car, *and time momentarily slows down*. He puts on these sunglasses that framed his face just right, the edge of them catching the sunlight. He’s like a Hugo Boss supermodel. “It’s just not fair,” I mumble. He slips into the driver’s seat and unbuttons his jacket, then buckles himself in. As do I the same, he presses the ignition. The car rumbles with a low, sexy murmur.

“One day, I will tell you why I chose you. Until then, just enjoy the ride,” he peels off. *Phrasing!* I’m not sure whether he meant it literally, metaphorically, or both but I was certainly going to sit back and do exactly that.

‘Looking back over the past year, there’s been another decline in births on a worldwide scale. The number has been declining rapidly every year for the last...’ Eric turns the radio down as we pull up to my building.

“I’ll wait outside, I’m confident you will hire at least one of them today,” he smiles. I nod at him gratefully, opening the car door and stepping out. As I approach the door, I see Eryn staring at me from her office. I smile and wave at her, and though it was delayed, she waves back. I open the front

door and make my way to my sanctuary, saying good morning to everyone while walking by.

My assistant isn't at her desk, so I just leave her a note stating to call when the first interviewee arrives.

I enter my dimly lit office and immediately put my stuff down so I can open the blinds. The sun's warm embrace feels like the world's telling me everything is *finally* going my way. I don't remember a time when I've ever felt so good, and genuinely happy. I turn around and am immediately startled.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you," a sharply dressed man says as he hops out of the guest chair in reaction to my scream, my heart beating out of my chest.

"Oooo weee," I exhale loudly, "it's... *okay*..." I raise my hand as if to stabilize myself. *It's really not okay though.*

He proceeds toward me, taking my outstretched hand and chuckles, "I really am sorry."

"And who, *exactly*, let you into my office Mister...?" I lean toward him waiting for a name.

"Fiorello sent me," he states, "I'm his attorney, Laurence Steele, just dropping off the paperwork. As requested, ma'am." He holds his hand out to officially greet me. He continues, "And no one was at the desk, so Eryn said it was okay for me to wait in here."

"Oh, did she? Well alright," I place my hands on my hips and glance down at my desk, "I have a few interviews coming in and only a few minutes, so let's get this done quickly, shall we. Where do I sign?"

He pulls out the necessary papers and I quickly glance through them, double checking on the share percentage and the success clause. I know Eryn has been rehashing this contract for a while, so my skimming it isn't as bad as you may think. I initial where necessary and sign the bottom.

I stand up straight and look at him, "Is that all?"

He files the few papers away, "Why yes ma'am, and this..." he pulls out a white envelope. I open it and glance inside. It's a cashier's check in the amount of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. *Sucker.* The attorney asks, "Is everything to your liking Ms. Donado?"

"Um, indeed, yes. Just one question, how does Fiore have such a prestigious lawyer to make house calls? You are *the* Laurence Steele from the firm Steele, Cyrus, & Rinke, are you not?" I reply to him, taking notice to exactly who he is. The name didn't ring a bell at first, but it suddenly dawned on me when I noticed the logo on his briefcase.

He smirks then chuckles at me, "Indeed, one and the same. And Mr. Baron owns a rather large stake in the firm. If there won't be anything else, I'll be going now Ms. Donado." He waves at me as he exits my office.

I shake my head in disbelief that I just signed a deal with a man who tried to take *forty percent* of my company from me. Maybe this is what we need though. My phone rings, I quickly answer it, "Good morning Stacey," I say matter-of-factly.

My assistant, Stacey, lets me know that the first interviewee has arrived.

“Go ahead and send her in,” I finish as I hang up the phone and sit down at my desk. Pulling up closer, I turn on my computer and grab a notepad and a pen from my left drawer. Not a moment too soon, this gorgeous woman walks in, brown skin, long dark curly hair, eyelashes for days, and a Hollywood smile. I stand up to greet her. “Hi, I’m Julia,” she holds out her hand in front of me so I welcome her.

“Please, have a seat,” I point at the chair setting across from me as I proceed to sit down in my own chair. “Thank you for coming in for this interview on such short notice Julia,” I pull out her resume from my folder that I had set on the desk.

“It’s no problem at all Ms. Donado. I heard about this opportunity and knew it would be worth my time.”

I glance up and smile at her before looking back down at her resume, “I see here that you have four years’ worth of general manager experience, a Masters in organizational leadership, and several excellent recommendations including one from Mr. Windsor.”

She nods her head in agreement, “Yes ma’am.”

“So, tell me, what brings you in for this opportunity? Filling in for the CEO of a small business is a big jump from a GM,” I warmly smile at her.

“Honestly, I’ve heard so much about this business and your success in the tabloids. The way you are so real, how you help people to become better, it’s such an inspiration. Even though I’m a little older than you and our paths have been different, I want to walk in your shoes. Be more like you. Most of the things you do, I have had training. Though I

may need training in certain areas, I learn fast and I'm used to fast paced environments," she states confidently. *I like her already.* She crosses her hands and fingers into each other as she sits a little straighter.

"Fabulous, I love the vibe that I'm getting from you. I'm also flattered you think of me so highly," I smile at her, "are you familiar with shopping cart platforms such as like BigCommerce or Shopify? Adding products, setting up photoshoots to display the products, et cetera? As a small business CEO you will be required to have your hands in many other positions, not micromanaging; but a sense of awareness of what goes on in other departments."

"After being a general manager, I realized how important it was to know everyone from the lowest paid to the highest paid, taking special care to show genuine interest and concern for those at the lowest. And in that position, I believe it to be quite similar to what you are talking about when you mention wearing many hats."

I beam at her as we continue to breeze through the interview for another ten minutes.

"I will follow up with you within the week to let you know the outcome. Personally, I think you nailed it Julia, you were refreshing to be around. In order to expedite the process, please leave your email with my assistant on the way out so that we have a second point of contact for you," I stand up to shake her hand and show her out the door, "Stacey, please retrieve Julia's additional details so that we may contact her with our decision."

“Will do, and your next interview is here Ms. Donado,” she points to a gentleman who immediately stands up upon hearing my name. I peek over at him, encouraging him to approach. He’s tall, slim, tan, and a total pretty boy.

As we enter my office, I glance at the other resume on my desk to see his name, “Nice to meet you Javier.” I hold my hand out to make his acquaintance. “Please have a seat,” I motion at the chair and we both sit down.

“So, tell me, what brings you in for this opportunity, filling in for the CEO of a small business is a big jump from a fashion director,” I warmly smile at him.

“Well, I’ve been working my way up the corporate ladder and it’s no longer fun for me. I met Eric awhile back and he told me about the numerous opportunities that he comes across, I asked him to keep me in mind if anything were to come available. When he called me this morning, it was out of luck that I had requested the week off. I’ve never worked for a small business before, but I hear it’s a humbling yet more rewarding experience.”

“Indeed, it is,” I reply as I look at his resume, “Are you familiar with what we design here?”

“Yes ma’am I am, and I think I could be an asset because...”

He continues talking. But I can’t help but notice how he seems to be more focused on the working for someone else concept as opposed to actually *being* the boss. We finish up the interview about fifteen minutes later. “Alright, well that about sums it up. I’m going to be honest Javier, I think you would make a great addition to my team but not necessarily for this position. *You’re in luck*, I have wanted to create a new

position for a while for a merchandising director and I think that you would be an *excellent* fit... if you're interested," I eye him curiously, hoping he will accept the offer.

"Perfect," I shake his hand before walking over to my printer to hand him a description of the position as well as the salary. "Everyone who comes in has to pay their dues the first six months and prove that they are worthy, become a part of the family. Afterwards, there is room for growth and very nice yearly bonuses."

He glances through the paperwork, "What *is* the starting salary, if I may ask?"

"With your experience and such I will happily start you at \$74,000 a year. I know that may not seem like much, but depending on the yearly end results, I offer everyone a generous bonus based off a percentage that is calculated based on contribution, years worked, position, and of course final product. Everyone is eligible for it the moment they are hired. Many members of our little family earn an extra amount equal to their yearly salary, so their pay pretty much doubles. And to help with taxes, it's distributed into their check throughout the following year. So, you could very well end up making over \$100k if you play your cards right," I confidently hand him the background and reference paperwork then wink at him, "Get this back to us whenever you are ready."

"Could I borrow a pen please?" he asks as a huge grin graces his face. We walk out my office and over to Stacey's desk to grab a pen. He immediately sits down and fills out the paperwork.

I whisper to Stephanie as Javier fills out the forms, “I liked them both. Follow up on Julia’s references and background check, don’t send the official offer until those items come back clean. Same for Javier. Positions will be COO and merchandising director respectively. In the meantime, Eryn will be in charge. I don’t need any animosity while I’m gone and this is a win in every way.”

Stephanie nods, excitement building in her eyes, “I hope you have fun boss lady. You deserve it! It’s about time you got out of here for a bit.” I smile in thanks as she walks around the desk, running up to give me a hug, “Be safe.”

I lovingly hug her back, “You be good while I’m gone and be sure to report to me *anything* that seems off.”

She is the first person I hired when I started *Chic Boss*. Her future means something to me so her college tuition is part of her compensation package. She’s only 21 years old and has been here since I began my small expansion three years ago. Before that, it was just Eryn and I, putting as much capital away as possible. That was when it was easy to handle everything ourselves.

I glance at my watch and remember that Eric is outside waiting for me. I can’t wait to tell him the good news and how much I adore Julia. When I make my way outside, I loudly exclaim to him, “How did you know?”

“Know what?” he queries, his expression reeking of confidence from already knowing the answer.

“Know that those two would fit in so well,” I finish, approaching him quickly.

“Oh, it’s what I do for a living. I see people who have potential, and place or recommend them where they can do the most good,” he genially beams, “and what do you mean *two*? You only had one position to fill.”

“Julia is perfect to fill my position as an interim, I’m going to give her the COO position. But Javier had such a quality about him. I knew I’d be hiring a merchandising director in the near future as part of the expansion, so I’m going to give that to him, pending background and reference checks for them both of course. So yeah, I hired them both,” I start laughing as I cross my arms and lean my hips against his car.

He chuckles back, “Of course, well I guess that means—” He’s interrupted by Eryn strolling out the front door, heading our direction, her expression conflicted. She approaches us and quaintly smiles at Eric before looking my direction, “You weren’t leaving without talking to me were you?” She looks sad, my heart immediately drops,

“Of course *not*,” I wrap my arms around her and rub her back.

She places her chin on my shoulder and glances up and over at Eric, “Please keep her safe, you have no idea how important she is to us. She’s irreplaceable.”

He nods at her in agreement as we release from our hug. “I hired a wonderful young woman in there that I know you will love. Now she doesn’t *know* she has the job yet, as you will be the one to make the final offer call and fill in for me until she does. Please make sure—”

She places her finger on my lips, grinning, “Don’t you dare finish. You know I will make sure the business is great and

teach her *everything*... and everything will be good for your return.” She smiles at me and hugs me again, “Thank you for having faith in me. Don’t forget to have fun. You should go ahead and go; I’ve got everything under control here.”

I pull back and stare, “Go ahead and go? Trying to get rid of me so soon? Plan on throwing a party right after I leave?”

“No, I’m not trying to get rid of you. *You* are the party. I just know that if you think about something too long, you’ll back out so yes, I’m sure, you deserve this! You’re the hardest working person I know and all that money you’ve stashed in your house or whatever, you *never* spend. *Go... live* a little,” she smirks. I gaze at her lovingly and jokingly pout.

I then look over at Eric, who puts his hands up, “Hey, I’m ready when you are.”

This. I needed this. Everything is going so smoothly. It almost worries me. *Nothing could be this perfect.* I walk to the passenger side of the vehicle where Eric is holding the door open for me while Eryn walks back inside. As I sit in the car, Eric exclaims, “Well, let’s go get you packed!” He shuts my door then walks to the driver side when I see Eryn return with a small light blue box with a silver bow in her hand.

I roll my window down and she hands me the gift. She lovingly smiles, “So you don’t forget about us here. It has two separate time settings on it so you will always know what time it is here.” I knew immediately it had to be a watch.

When I open it up, it’s one of the most unique trinkets I have ever seen; a double-sided watch bracelet locket. There’s a heart with an oval inside of it on the front, and when opened, there are two clocks, one on each side. Inscribed on

the back 'Not even time stands in my way'. I chuckle at the engraving. "Eryn, this is... *absolutely beautiful*," I immediately take it out of the box, and she clasps it on my left wrist.

"It's made of platinum," she states as she adjusts it, "So no allergic reactions. It's also waterproof." She briefly glances past me at Eric, "Just in case you get wet." *Way to be obvious Eryn!* My cheeks flush as I stare at her in dismay. *She really just freakin' said that.* I blow her a kiss and she blows one back after which she says goodbye to me one more time and walks away. I didn't know what to think of her walking away so suddenly like that, but we've never had to say 'goodbye' before.

Just before we leave the parking lot, I ask Eric to wait, "Before we go." I glance around taking it all in, unsure when I'll be back. I want to remember everything in this moment. The smell, where the sun is in the sky, how many clouds there are, the laughter of the kids playing nearby. I've worked so hard for this and now I'm *breaking* from it. *Feels like I'm cheating.* But at the same time, I'm happier than I've ever been. While closing my eyes, I whisper a quick prayer "I know God will keep it safe for me. Okay, we can go." I beam at Eric, wondering where my life quest is going to take me next.

IV

WHAT NOW?

Briellyn

We are five minutes from my house when my cell phone rings, “Short cake! I was just about to call you, I have—” the voice on the other side stops me mid-sentence. “What?” I reply solemnly. The feeling of dread, guilt, and negativity suddenly engulfs me like a catfish sucking in its meal.

The voice repeats, “Dad died.”

I try my best to keep my composure, taking a deep breath before swallowing the lump in my throat, “When, Skyla?” I listen intently as she details the bit of information she knows. Eric glances over at me as we pull into my neighborhood. He makes his way to the front of my house as I open the garage for him to pull his car into the empty space.

“Let me... ca-ca-call you back,” I end the call, lowering my phone to my lap, staring at the wall in my garage, silent and still.

Eric reaches over, touching my left arm, “Brie?” The touch sends a startling shiver down my spine as I recall a vivid memory of my father.

— ξ —

“Briellyn! Get your ass down here!” my father yells out from the bottom of the stairs. A ten-year-old me walks down the narrow hallway of our home and stares at him from the top of the wooden steps, his eyes piercing like daggers as my eyes cross their path. He gestures for me to come to him using his

right forefinger. A terrified child walked down those stairs. As I came closer to the bottom, I could see the bottle of vodka in his left hand.

“Yes father?” I approach the third to the last step. He quickly grabs my left arm and pulls me down the remaining stairs, lightly hitting my heels as he lifts me from my stance.

My eyes tear up, his violence has no boundaries when he’s drunk, and I’m horrified as to what he’s going to do to me *this time*. I have no clue why he is upset. He brings me to the kitchen and viciously throws me to the ground, “Why the fuck are there dishes in this sink? And why are the clothes not done?”

I try to get up from the floor, my shaking arms pushing up from the cold tile, “I’m sorry father, when I got home I helped Sky with her homework and—” before I could finish, he slapped me across the face with the back of his hand, sending me back to the ground. I cry out, holding my face with one hand and extending the other in front of me to prevent another hard blow. “Please, father! I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry! I’ll do them right now.”

He grabs my arm again to bring me closer to his face. Short, quick, audible breaths escape between my pleas. “Do you want something to cry about? Huh?!” he punches me in the chest. I could barely breath, tears streaming down my little face; all I heard was Sky come running down the stairs screaming, “Daddy no!” I remember reaching for her.

“Brie?” Eric asks again carefully taking my left hand into his. I glance at him, eyes filled with tears. He looks at me with remorse, “What happened?”

Expressionless and slow, I reply, “He’s dead. My father’s dead.”

“Oh my, Brie... hold on,” Eric opens his door and runs to the other side of the car to comfort me, quickly kneeling down to embrace me. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers. His words fade as I lose myself in another memory.

— ξ —

At twelve, I remember standing under the overhead of the private school I attended. I’d gotten a full scholarship to attend while my sister was in public school. It was warm but raining heavily that day. I had been waiting *two* hours for my father to pick me up. Seeing car after car pick up my peers *but no one for me*. The sun would be going down soon. The thunder was loud, bold lightning strikes in the distance. Another day disappointed, *rejected*... he forgot about me, *again*.

I start the walk home, my five-mile journey, hoping the rain would wash away the tears and the pain. “When I grow up, I will never do this to my kids...” I mumbled to myself. Several cars drove past, then one seemed to slow as I see out the corner of my eye before it honks the horn. I look up and manage to crack a smile, running over to it and opening the front passenger door to hop inside, soaked to the bone. “I’m so sorry,” my father rubbed the rain from my cheek and kissed my forehead. I smiled at him gratefully.

— ξ —

“I can’t go right now Eric,” I speak softly. The words were difficult to voice, each one choking me harder than the last, “I have to go bury my Dad.”

I stare off in the distance as Eric nods in agreement, “Well of course Briellyn. I’m here for you if you need to talk, or if you need help making arrangements, or just a shoulder to cry on. I know this is difficult for you.” He helps me out the passenger seat to my garage door that leads upstairs. He closes the garage for me. A notification chimes as I climb the stairs. I glance down at it to see a text message from my sister,

I’m already at his home, but if you could get here ASAP, I think it’d be best. XO’

I reach the third floor, Eric following close behind. Walking straight to my bedroom, I put my purse down and slowly sit down at the edge of my bed, staring at a picture that sits on my bureau. I was eighteen and Skyla, my sister, was sixteen when the picture was taken. The three of us stand together, dressed nicely, in our front yard. I had just received an award of appreciation from my school for the charitable work I did as a student council member. The school threw a formal dinner in honor of all students who received an award that evening. It was the only night that I remember that didn’t end poorly. My father had been sober for several months and his health was getting better. The last good evening we had before he spiraled out of control and became eternally angry.

A gentle knock at the doorway is just in time to prevent me from soaring into another flawed memory. I subtly shake my head and fake a smile at Eric standing there. He leans on the

left of the door frame with his hands in his pockets, “Are you okay? May I come in?” I nod as he strolls over to the bed. He kneels directly in front of me, and stares me in the eyes. “Do you need me to fly you somewhere?”

I don't need you to do anything for me. I don't want to feel like a charity case. Not now, not at *this* very moment. I shake my head no and softly reply, “No, I'll take care of it.” I look down at the ground, past his face. The death of my father was like an odd wake up call to remind me never to trust anyone. Maybe this trip *wasn't* a good idea. Maybe I should try to get to know Eric first, figure out what this so-called expedition is about.

Eric can see in my eyes that my mind is wondering. “Briellyn, I have a plane that can take you *anywhere* you want, *whenever* you're ready.” His words are like a fresh towel pulled out the dryer, wrapping that positivity around my looming thoughts, even though I didn't want them to be. My father would bring so much negativity into my life, which is why I had to distance myself from him. *Eric is nothing like your father Brie.* The way he stares at me from below with those bright blue eyes is both aggravating and soothing at the same time. He seems like he means well. *Genuinely*, means well.

Do I *really* want him around during such a sensitive time? Do I want my perfect image to unravel in front of him? Vulnerability is *absolutely* my worst nightmare. I don't even want to call Eryn and here I am with a virtual stranger. Maybe that'd be best; *a stranger won't pry too much.* He won't ask questions or bring up painful memories. Part of me wants to call Justin; he would know exactly what to say right now. *But Eric is right here.* Maybe keeping him around will make him more likely to tell me about the job he needs me

for and *that* will keep my mind off all the bad. *And that's a good thing.*

“Okay,” I mumble, “I will pack a bag and we can go. I would greatly appreciate the ride...” I lean onto my knees with my hands, rubbing the left. “And um-uh,” I stutter, staring past him, “I w-w-would appreciate the company.” I twist my mouth nervously, hoping he’s okay with that.

He smiles at me as he stands, placing his hand on my shoulder and the other in his pocket, “Whatever you need. I will call my pilot right now.” He leans in a little bit, “You are strong, you *will* get through this.” He flashes a concerned smile, kisses my cheek, then walks out of the room.

A half-grin tries to creep onto my face as I raise my fingers to touch the cheek he kissed. *He's so dreamy.*

Focus Brie. I think my sister is withholding details. My father was only sixty-five after all. I was waiting for her to say, ‘Oh, he drunk himself into a stupor and never woke up,’ or something to that effect. I stand up and stroll into my closet, first grabbing a black scoop neck maxi dress, then a black sheer blouse, another black dress with lace, and lastly, a pair of black dress pants. I throw my black ballet flats and a pair of heels into my travel bag. I fold the clothes and gently place them into the bag along with underwear, toiletries, and my favorite fragrances.

I then pick out a travel outfit, black lounge pants with the matching jacket and a pink tank top. I shut the closet door and proceed to changing into the loungewear. After I’m done, I grab my black sneakers and two pairs of jeans, two other tops and a sweater. I throw the sneakers onto the floor

and slip them on, then fold the other items and place them into my travel bag too.

Just as I open the closet door, I'm startled to see Eric standing there about to knock. I jump backwards, grasping my chest after a scream manages to creep past my lips. "*Holy moly*," I wheeze, trying to catch my breath and recapture any dignity I still have.

Eric reaches out, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to." He grabs my hand as I hold it out to maintain my balance. *Second time today*. I chuckle and Eric cracks a smile in relief. "I just wanted to let you know that the pilot says everything is set and we'll be okay to take off whenever we arrive at the airport."

I smile and softly reply, "Okay." I pick up my bag and exit the closet.

"I'll just be on your balcony, handling a few phone calls okay?" he gestures for the stairs. I nod in acknowledgement and glance in the mirror. My makeup had run just enough to blacken underneath my eye. I decide to just wash my face. Wash away all the misery that comes permanently hitched whenever my father enters my mind, in hopes that it makes me feel just a little bit better. After I finish washing, I glance at myself in the mirror again. I already feel better and ready to tackle this... temporary *complication*.

I walk downstairs with my bags and wave at Eric on the balcony. He signals to me, walks in and takes the bigger bag from me, then heads straight down the stairs to the garage. He's still on the phone. I will admit, it's nice knowing that I don't have to wait inside the airport to board a plane, or have

to sit next to some stranger who wants to know where I'm going and what I do.

I lock up the house and open the garage. Eric finishes his conversation as he places my bag in the trunk, then opens the passenger side door. "Yes, but that shouldn't be a problem. Keep me posted, something doesn't sound right. Okay, bye," Eric ends the call as he grabs the other bag from me and places it in the trunk. I walk to the passenger side and sit down into the vehicle. Eric closes the door behind me and runs over to the driver side, settling in his seat with a deep breath before starting the car. I buckle up and look over at him; his expression occupied with concern and worry. *All too familiar with that look.* He backs out of my garage, carefully looking behind him; hand on my seat to support his turned body. Each movement with such precision as he clenches his jaw. *He's aggravated.* I didn't dare ask him what's wrong; I just assume that something isn't going right concerning his business. Part of the trade is dealing with the bullshit, and if it were me, I wouldn't want someone asking me a bunch of questions.

I close the garage with the button on my key chain and just sit in silence, trying to brace myself for anything and everything that is going to come my direction within the next eight hours. If there is one thing I know for certain, I need to be strong for my sister Skylá. I was always the one she looked up to, so I need to be ready to set a good example for her and a shoulder for *her* to cry on when I get there. I don't even know who to call right now or if I should bother calling anyone.

We pull up to a private airport, the remainder of the ride in silence. The plane is waiting for us, in all its glory. I'd never

seen a private jet up close in person, but I've definitely never seen a plane this *color*. The entire under belly of the plane is a sky blue while the top half is a rich midnight blue. The windows are all tinted the same color and the interior, which is noticeable from the car, boasts a rich golden tan hue. The stairs look like they're some type of golden maple wood and everything is trimmed in tan leather or suede.

The co-pilot stands at the base of the steps waiting for us to stop. He's a rather tall gentleman, light caramel complexion, goatee, and rich dark hair. He looks to be Hispanic, maybe Puerto Rican, dressed in nice navy slacks and a navy jacket with two gold stripes upon his cuffs. He approaches my side of the vehicle as we come to a halt.

He opens my door to assist me out. "Welcome to WindsorAire at Stamford," he gently takes my hand and helps me stand, "I will grab your bags ma'am." He swiftly maneuvers to the trunk to grab my bags. Eric steps out of the vehicle as the man greets him, "Good day Mr. Windsor, the cabin is ready for you. No cabin help, *as requested*." Eric simply nods as he makes his way over to me.

He places his hand on the small of my back as he guides me to the stairs. "I didn't request any additional crew; I hope that's okay. I figured you'd just want to relax. Anything you might need, I can simply get for you myself," Eric manages to crack a short-lived smile.

I smirk, grateful for the forethought, "Thank you."

I turn toward the stairs, making my way up and notice the pilot waiting for us. To my surprise, she was a cute, chocolate skinned woman, with long black hair formed in

this elaborate bun, a little shorter than me, dressed in a nice navy pant suit with the matching jacket. Not the typical pilot's jacket either, the neckline was uniquely tailored to look like a cowl neck but it was a button up. She had four stripes on her jacket. "Hello there Ms. Donado, my name is Sheila Johnson and I will be your pilot this evening along with my co-pilot," she holds her hand out to motion to the man who greeted me, "Joseph Mendez."

"So wonderful to meet you Sheila," I beam at her.

"I need to ask; where is the final destination so that I can land at the nearest private air strip?" She inquires, remaining as reserved as possible. Female pilots are extremely rare and here is one, employed by a billionaire.

I reply to her, "Perkins Florida is where we are going, I believe the airport in Tallahassee will be easiest." She nods in agreement. Eric guides me along into the cabin. *The cabin is absolutely gorgeous.* Each circular tinted window has mini navy curtains. The entire cabin ceiling had lighting that curved to look like a snake of lights in a posh lounge. There was a bar immediately to the left with a black granite countertop and several liquors secured by metal bars. Several wine and whiskey glasses are secured within cushioned barriers. The bar doesn't take up too much space, maybe wide enough to seat two guests comfortably.

A rounded leather couch that could easily seat five or six people is next to it, part of which the back side of it is molded into two high seats for the bar. It has a small flat surface that could be used behind it, lit up with pretty, blue lights. To the right of the cabin are two huge reclining chairs that swivel around completely with the click of a button. A

mounted round table with a granite top sits between the two chairs. Past that section are two rows of four wide first-class looking seats, and on the other side of it a booth that would seat four to six people. Behind that is a wall, assumedly the bathroom. The whole ambience of the plane is like a five-star hotel with wings. It's beautiful.

"Can I make you something to drink, it might help take the edge off..." Eric immediately walks behind the bar and starts whipping something up.

I nod, "That sounds great." I continue admiring everything, taking it all in and decide to have a seat at the bar. Joseph places our luggage into the front closet behind the bar. "We'll be doing our pre-flight check and leaving in ten minutes sir," Joseph states as he closes the plane door and retreats to the cock pit. Eric finishes mixing my drink and glances at me from the corner of his eye, "Would you believe their married?"

"Who?" I whip my head around, acknowledging his question.

"The pilots," he hands me the drink. *Am.* "To your father," he raises his glass up to toast me. I clink my glass with his and force a smile. *I don't know if my father deserves a toast, let alone me flying there.* Eric consumes his drink in one gulp and pours himself one more.

Concerned, I ask, "Eric, are you okay?"

He glances at me from the bottoms up glass. He finishes the drink, his lip curling from the afterbite. "Yes, don't worry about me Brie. I'm here for you," he smiles, quickly cleaning the glass before returning it to its secured resting place. "Just

a little bad business is all, no big deal.” Just as I finish my drink, he takes my glass too.

“If you want to get some sleep, there is a king size bed beyond the bathroom that is quite comfortable,” he strolls over to one of the huge recliners, gracefully flopping down into the seat then reclines it. Seemingly now more relaxed, “These are pretty comfy too, actually.” It’s obvious he’d prefer not to discuss what’s bothering him, ever since that phone call he’s definitely been off.

I walk over to the other chair and sit. “Wow,” I lean back, “This is impressively comfy!” I beam at him. *I’d prefer making others feel better*, it’s so rare that I need cheering up. It would make me happy to make someone else happy.

“So, Eric, would you mind telling me a little bit more about this assignment you’ve hired me for?” I lean on my fist as its propped up on the arm rest of the chair. I grin at him like a high school girl excited to talk to her crush. He looks at me from the corner of his eye as his lips part, his chair still facing the bar.

He clenches his jaw before pressing the button to swivel my direction. “Are you sure you still want to do it?” He leans toward me, his elbows on his knees and his fingers laced together. I throw my right leg over the right arm rest and the left leg over my right leg, leaning over the left arm rest. “I understand if you don’t want to proceed now. You know, given the circumstances,” he continues, maintaining a solemn look as if awaiting my decline.

I flutter my eyes, “No.” The defeated expression almost pains me as my eyes drift to the floor. “I think I need this

now more than ever, actually,” I pause, sad but determined, *not to mention the money and company is too good to decline.*

His eyes return to mine, “Well.” A smirk plays at his lips. “If that’s true, I’ll admit I admire your perseverance. *And it may have been doomed without you.*” The revelation is obviously difficult for Eric to vocalize, the words seemed forced. “If it puts your mind at ease, you will first receive self-defense training with a close friend, because as I said before, it could be dangerous. We will then fly off to a place near Quebec City and after that the islands, then to London.”

I pull my legs off the arm rest and sit up straight, somewhat leaning in towards Eric, “So it is a treasure hunt?! But *why* would I need to learn self-defense?”

Eric glances around the cabin, “I mean, I guess, if you wish to call it that. We are actually trying to decipher coded messages to find a few things needed for something bigger.”

“Bigger... *like?*” I curiously egg him on for more details.

“A project that I’ve been working on for a very, *very* long time. I can’t tell you everything just yet. First, I must see how everything goes and... see if I can *trust* you completely,” Eric’s serious stare almost melts me. He finger combs his hair back with his right hand. *Trust me? Imagine that.* I’m still trying to trust *him*. I laugh to myself at the thought.

The pilot announces the pre-flight check has been completed and that we are preparing for takeoff over the cabin intercom.

The engines rev up and the forward jolt of the plane moving forces me to the back of my seat, the sudden look of fear

and disgust on full display. *I hate flying.* Eric furrows his brow, concerned, “Are... you okay?”

My eyes find his once more before I stand. “I get motion sickness, I think I’ll take up your offer on the bed in the back,” I start towards the rear of the plane. He stands up to join me. As we pass the wall, the bathroom is indeed to the left and to the right is a refrigerator and a microwave. Past that it opens into a gorgeous small room accompanied with a king size bed, amber colored lights, no windows, a small space for changing clothes and closet, and a beautiful navy and gold color bed set paired with the decorative pillows and all. The wall surrounding the bed is cushioned, so it’s like a giant sofa. “Oh wow,” I raise my eyebrows and stumble onto the bed, a hint of mockery in my tone.

“It’s really something, right?” Eric smiles assuredly, “there’s a switch on the wall there for the lights. It’s about a four-hour flight. I won’t wake you until we make our descent.”

I couldn’t help but blurt out my first thought, “So how many women have you brought back here? This is too nice for a man to want it just for himself.” I joke, immediately regretting it as the last word left my lips.

Eric looks at me confused, then smiles, “I *still* think you have me all wrong, Ms. Donado.” He puts his hand to his face and gently pinches his bottom lip with his forefinger and thumb, “Let me know if you need anything.” I coyly smile back at him as he exits, closing the door behind him. *Insert foot here,* I motion to my mouth before taking my shoes off.

Eric seems more and more mysterious. Oh my goodness, what if he’s gay?! *What a huge gut punch for the female population*

that would be. Well, if there's one thing for certain, he got my mind off everything and that drink gave me just the hint of relaxation I needed. Just as I find a comfortable position, the plane hits the runway and the sound of the engines rev in full force. I turn the light out and feel us ascend into the sky. I only have four hours to clear my head, and I am going to take advantage of every minute.

T.A. Davenport

V

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL

Eric

I leave Brielle to sleep as I find my way back to my previous chair, pulling my cell phone out to call a friend. I impatiently wait for him to answer.

Confidence and anger in my tone, “Hey Kalil, I know she was previously ruled out, but I’m convinced otherwise. Funny how someone can seem right, and then you think you’re wrong, only to come back to the same one. I’m going to bring her to you for some training,” *It shouldn’t have taken so long, I hate doubting myself.* The thought of her last question echoes my mind again and makes me laugh.

Kalil replies, “Are you sure? I felt pretty confident about my decision back then, still do. Why does she need training, has something changed? Why can’t you do it?”

“Questions, questions... how long have we been at this, Kal? I’m 90% positive she’s the one. She can read the glyphs, and there’s a certain *charm* she has. And I need you to train her... *because I need you to train her.* We’ve got to be close for these little ‘incidents’ to become so frequent, I need to try to make contact to figure out what’s going on. I can’t risk her life. She needs to be able to protect *herself*, more than just her thoughts; we’re running out of time,” I state assertively. *I hate it when he questions my authority.* We’ve been at this too long for him not to trust my judgement.

“Okay boss, whatever you need. You know I’m just giving you shit. When do you think you’ll arrive?”

Sometimes, I think he reads my thoughts. “I’m not sure, her father just died. We are heading to north Florida to handle that. You’re near the facility, right?”

“Yes, I’m in Arlington still following that other lead.”

“You can forget her, I’m telling you... *I feel it*, she’s the one. Much different than the others. I will give you a call twenty-four hours before we get there. Just be ready, I need her to learn hand to hand combat and how to handle a weapon. Ya know, the works.”

“Danny and Nick will glad to assist. Do you think *he* is onto us?”

“I’m not sure, it could just be rogue treasure hunters. I know something is *off*. I know if we don’t accomplish this task soon, someone else will. We just need to proceed with extreme caution, no more delays.”

“How much have you told her?”

“Nothing really, she knows where we have to go and why I need her, *in a general sense*. She knows about self-defense training, but that’s really it. *Hopefully the money will be enough to satisfy her curiosity*. I need to be sure I can trust her. Besides, I don’t wanna scare her off.”

“But if she’s the one, then trust really isn’t a factor right? The prophecy says...”

“I know what the prophecy says,” I interrupt. My tone softens, “I just... imagined her different I guess.” I picture her face from dinner last night. *Something about it, something about her.*

“Okay Eric, do you want to tell me what’s on your mind? I get that you’re stuck here, and we’ve been playing the shadow game for however long, and you’ve been trying to make contact *forever*, but you sound...”

“No Kal, I’m fine. Can you get this done for me or what?”

“*Fine*, consider it done. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

I end the call and ponder her presence again. *What is it about her?* She really does have me all wrong. I need to figure out who this person is who has suddenly taken an interest in my affairs. I can’t put anyone in danger, I just can’t. *Not after what’s happened to the others.* My thoughts are interrupted by Joseph entering the cabin.

“Smooth flying here sir, mind if I sit?” I shake my head and gesture to the other chair. “Sir, if I may, you seem edgy; much more edgy than I’ve ever seen you before. Is everything alright?”

I glare at him. His genuine concern for my well-being is... *heartwarming*, but why does everyone keep asking me that? I give him a reassuring smile, “Yes Joe, I’m good. And knock it off with the sir stuff. You’ve been with me ten years and you know how casual I prefer you to be.”

“I know... Eric,” Joseph sighs, “And in that ten years we’ve never seen this look about you or feel the tension you’re giving off.”

“I thank you for your concern Joe, but I’m fine. I just hope that you and your wife are prepared to be away for awhile,” I point to the cockpit, rather annoyed by all the recent prying. *Tension, pfft.*

“We knew this has been coming, long time now. We’re ready.”

“Great,” I halfway smile and lean back in the chair to convey my disinterest in further conversation, “Will that be all Joe?”

“Well,” Joseph begins, halfheartedly grinning. *Here it comes.* “In all of our years of working for you Eric, we’ve never seen you fly with anyone else besides Kalil and Danny.”

I perk my head up a little bit, swallowing hard, “What’s your point, Joe?”

“Well, she’s very attractive, successful, sweet... I mean, could this be? *If I may be so bold...*”

I raise my hand and point to Joe with my forefinger, “That *is* too bold.” I lower my hand, softening my tones, “Besides, it’s not like that. I’m not attracted to her in that way.” I recline once more and stare out the window; the only time I feel at ease is when I’m forty thousand feet in the air. *Close to my family.*

“I’m just making an observation Eric; you must be very lonely. You’re never with anyone at the holiday parties you throw. You are always working. And here comes someone who is like-minded, and you won’t even consider her? Life is too short...”

“Please Joe,” I interrupt, rolling my eyes, each word dripping with disdain, “It’s so important that you not finish that sentence. I know how happy you and Sheila are, trust me, I can see it. But I don’t expect you to understand. I just wish to sit in peace right now and get my thoughts together. We’ll talk later.”

Joseph stands, buttons his jacket then approaches me to place his hand on my shoulder, “Do it for you, Boss. You need to relax.” He turns around and walks back to the cockpit.

I continue to gaze out the window. Why was it me to get stuck here? I just want to go home. I drift off into sleep as I feel comforted by the thought that I am one step closer to getting there.

— § —

Brielllyn

3 hours and 45 minutes later

I wake up in the dark room at the rear of the plane, unable to distinguish other noise with the exception of the ambient noise of us still in the air. I turn on the light. A dark cloaked figure stands at the doorway. As my eyes attempt to adjust, I mumble, “Eric?” After gently rubbing my eyes, the figure is gone. I shimmy my way to side of the bed and bend over to grab my sneakers. I slip them on and stand up then, *BOOM*, the figure is standing directly in front of me. The shrillest scream escapes me before I fall backwards onto the bed.

“Briellyn, Brie,” Eric shakes me to wake me up. I open my eyes to see him standing over me, hands around my wrists. “You’re okay, look at me... *you’re okay*,” he sits down and holds me. My heart pounds so hard I think it’s going to explode through my chest, like some gory scene in *Alien*. I pant, gripping his arm that is wrapped around me. “You were just having a nightmare,” he quietly comforts me. “Shhh, I’m here.” A tear escapes my right eye.

Again, with the dreams. Like the universe is trying to tell me something. I can deal with vivid night terrors, but *this* dark figure's appearance is different than the one that's haunted me, not before I met Eric. *It's freaking me out.* What if I can't trust him? *What if there's something sinister he has in store for me?* But *oh*, the warmth of his body against me is soothing, calming. I instantly feel better with his arms wrapped around me; the negativity from the night terror just fades away into my distant memory. Something about it just feels familiar. Something this good can't possibly be bad, right? Maybe I should tell him about it.

"You woke up just in time, we've already started our descent and we are fifteen minutes out," he releases his grip a little bit as I sit up.

"Eric," I begin, scooching away from him a little to make my way to the edge of the bed to put on my shoes. I take a deep breath. "I have," I hesitate, "a *confession* to make." I tug my hair back behind my right ear as I slip on the other shoe. "I know this may sound crazy, but I've always felt like I have a special connection with God and the universe, and I think, for whatever reason, it's telling me to stay away from you." I finish quickly, staring downward then glancing up at him, bracing myself for either a spurt of laughter and him calling me crazy or just a foolish stare.

To my surprise, a soft chuckle breaks the awkward silence. He looks down and shakes his head, "And why, dear Brie would you think that?" I stare at him, instantly feeling better. He's taking my accusation rather well.

"Well," I begin, I scooch a little closer and encase his hand between both of mine, "Lately, I've been having these

dreams...” Eric’s cheeks flush a little red and an awkward smile surfaces. I correct myself, “Not *those* kind of dreams.” Remembering what I said earlier, I blush, “I know what I said earlier was rather inappropriate.” I glance away around the room, anything but at him.

He softly chuckles again, placing his other hand over mine, “You can tell me. And I’m not worried about what you said earlier.” I stare into his eyes, his face calming. Feels like I could tell him anything without feeling judged. “Last night, I had a dream I was drowning while trying to save a fawn. This dark figure appeared at the surface, but the water made it too blurry for me to see it. And just now,” my eyes got wider as they tear up, “The same figure was standing where you were when you woke me.” I regain my composure.

He rubs my hands, his palms and fingertips rugged yet soft, like a man who works with his hands but still takes care of them, “What did the figure look like?” Eric’s concern is sweet.

I swallow hard, “It was dark, I couldn’t see the face. The clothing was draped, black and oddly flowing, like someone under water. It made it appear very wide and intimidating. I think it had some type of hood, which is why I couldn’t see the face,” I gesture with my hands, “And I got a weird call last night and just, ugh,” I brush it off and put a palm to my forehead, “I think it may be anxiety.” I bring my hands together.

Eric perks up, “What call?”

“Probably just some jokesters, they said they were coming for someone named Aurecia... I don’t know anyone by that

name, so I'm sure it was a wrong number," I sniffle and smile at him.

His concerned stare is comforting as he continues rubbing my hands, "I'm sure it just anxiety." He fakes a half smile.

I lean in and hug him, "Thank you." He is taken back at first but proceeds to embrace me in return. Being within his grasp makes me feel safe. *And he smells so good.* I hate that I have such an attraction to him. I know he's handsome but damn, usually I get a grip by now.

He mumbles to me, "You're welcome." He leans further into me, settling into a genuine hug. I think he needed one too. We release our embrace, and he mentions joining him in the main cabin.

"Sure," I respond. Just then I could smell my breath. *Have I seriously been breathing my bad breath in his face the whole time?* "I'll be there in just a moment," I come to my feet, "Just gotta use the ladies' room." I smile and walk into the bathroom as he walks into the cabin.

"Okay," he cordially responds as he walks by. I shut the door quickly.

Even the bathroom is nice, and surprisingly spacious. I immediately look in the first drawer under the sink. "Ah," I exclaim as the drawer full of one-use toothpaste and on-the-go toothbrushes. Just as I thought, *perfect.* I thoroughly brush my teeth and tongue. *If he gets that close again,* at least I won't have to worry about my breath scaring him off.

I finish up, washing my hands and using a paper towel to dry my hands and face. A glimpse in the mirror makes me wish I

had my makeup on hand, patting my cheeks to make them appear a little flushed. If Sandra can do it in ‘The Proposal’, maybe I can too. *I think that only works for more fair-skinned people, Brie.* I laugh at the thought. I open the bathroom door and make my way to the chair opposite Eric, fighting the gravity as the plane’s downward position pulls me forward.

“Brace for landing,” Sheila states over the intercom.

Eric smirks at me, “Just in time, Brie.” I flop down into the chair and sit myself back completely, grasping the arm rests hard with my eyes closed. Eric analyzes me, “What are you doing?” He places his hand over his mouth as if to stop from laughing. I open one eye to witness his glee.

“Landings make me uneasy,” I inhale deep through my nose then exhale through my mouth, clearly overcompensating for the landing because it’s one of the smoothest landings I’ve ever experienced. They eased right into it, no crazy braking or terrible bumpiness, just a gentle tug. Eric looks out the window with a smile on his face. I glance out of the window nearest me, taking note of the private airstrip. I certainly don’t mind the exclusivity.

“I have a surprise for you,” Eric stands. *Oh, you come gift wrapped?* The plane comes to a stop and Joseph exits the cockpit to open the doors.

Admiring Eric as I prepare to stand, “A surprise... *for me?* What could you possibly surprise me with? You haven’t had any time to plan anything.” Eric reaches for my hand to help me up. I take his hand and stand. He holds my hand and guides me to the front, leading the way. He approaches the exit, his muscular physique seems like it fills the entire frame

of the entryway, blocking me from being able to see anything past him. As he begins down the stairs and everything comes to light, a man is standing in the distance. As my eyes finish adjusting, I realize I'd recognize that face anywhere. Grinning ear to ear, "Justin!" I quickly walk down the rest of the stairs as he runs over to me. I jump on him as he swings me around in his embrace.

"Brie," he holds me tight, "I've *missed* you woman!" He chuckles as he kisses my cheek numerous times.

He puts me down as I exclaim, "What are you doing here? I thought you were traveling or something." I pull the hair from my face and put it behind my ears. "Last we spoke you mentioned you were in California... *Mr. Big Shot,*" I continue as I playfully hit his arm with my right hand.

He grabs me again and hugs me tighter, "I heard about your father. I know how you are Brie, stop holding it all in. You don't have to keep it together one hundred percent, one hundred percent of the time."

Justin is my other best friend, the same one that told Eric about me. He, Eryn, and I have all known each other for over twenty years. I met Justin when I was four, and Eryn came into the picture two years later. Justin is, to this day, one of the best people I know, he keeps me humble. We talk three times a week and have never gone longer than four days without speaking to each other.

In college, he and Eryn dated briefly and had a fall out. Justin decided to go off and pursue his dreams and is now one of the most sought-after sports rehabilitation therapists. He's become quite popular among big athletes and very wealthy

individuals. He's about an inch taller than Eric, with a very muscular stature, thick, light brown hair, well-trimmed facial hair, and great cheekbones. He is one of the sweetest men I have ever known. *Well to me anyway.*

"I'm not ready yet," I wrap my arms around him in return, grateful for his words, "I'm not ready."

"Well, I've got all the time in the world for you. Why didn't you call me?" He releases me again, pulling away to stare down at me. It appears he's a little hurt that I didn't call.

"I couldn't. I didn't want this news to affect anyone else I guess," I sourly look away.

He grips my chin and gently pulls it up to look back at him. "I'm *always* here for you, whether it good or bad. But *especially* with the bad," he smiles at me, "Now that bitch Eryn, not so much."

I laugh aloud, wiping away a single tear, "Oh stop, you're not over that *yet?*!"

He puts his right arm around my shoulders as he walks me to the truck. I reach up to hold his hand draped over my shoulder. He then opens the door and insists I climb in. I hop into the seat and he glares at me, "No, *I'm not*. I didn't even love her but what she did was just wrong."

I chuckle as he shuts the door. Eric kept his distance but Justin finally greets him with a handshake and hug. They exchange a few words before joining me in the truck.

Eric sits in the front seat and Justin sits in the back with me. The black Cadillac Escalade, with full black leather interior

and impressively tinted windows feels official. The driver waits for us as we settle in. “So,” Eric says as he turns around to us. Justin’s arm is around my shoulders again as I lean on his chest. “I knew you two were friends, but I wasn’t expecting that, *are you two...*?” Eric’s implication obvious enough.

Justin and I exchange glances and laugh, replying, “No,” at the same time.

Eric raises one brow, “Have you two ever...?”

Justin glances down at me before returning his gaze to Eric, “Really Eric? Are you eyeing my girl?” he chuckles, asking rhetorically, “Nah man, we are just really great friends. I can understand your confusion though.”

I peek up at Justin and playfully hit him, “What did you tell him?”

“Well ya see, when Eric and I met, I was rehabbing a friend of his. I overheard their conversation about investment deals and such. Then they mentioned their search to find someone who has a penchant solving puzzles and incredible memory stuff. Of course, you came to mind,” he looks down at me, “seeing as our last conversation was about you expanding the business.”

Eric quaintly smiles, “Yes, Justin here spoke of you quite casually, making no real mention of just how close you two were. When he said your name, I remembered it from that magazine spread you did with Forbes early last year. And of course, the delightful article from this year.”

“Yup. This one...” he shakes me a little, prizing me up for Eric, “is as *single* as they come.”

My cheeks immediately flush from the embarrassment. I playfully elbow Justin in the ribs, “Shut up!” I whisper aggressively, mortified but still smiling. I glance at Eric just in time to see his smile slowly disappear. He then faces forward and his attention diverts to his phone. *Definitely not interested in me.* That’s okay; a girl can dream, I guess. I clear my throat to ease the burn then ask Justin, “Have you spoke to Skyla yet?”

“I called her, let her know I’d be picking you up from the airport. She’s concerned about you.”

“So, you came down because she called you.”

“No silly,” he points to Eric, “*He* called me. *It* should’ve been you though. You need to stop that macho shit. You can be such a mule sometimes.” He rubs my shoulder with the hand that’s wrapped around me as he stares out the window.

“Yeah, yeah. And you’re kind of a nag,” I mutter as I pat his stomach, “have you been working out? You’re um, a little more buff than I remember.”

“I *guess* I’ll take that as a compliment,” he adjusts in his seat, “I have actually.”

I roll my eyes, “You look good Justin,” I reply forcefully, “Where are you staying while here?”

“I’m over at this place called Duval, really nice. Not far from here actually,” he continues to rub my shoulder.

“I think I want to stay with you,” I say softly to him.

“I’ve got a big ol’ king size bed that I’m willing to share,” he smiles down at me.

I gently tap him on the chest, “Not in your room silly, I meant I’ll book a room there too.”

Eric erupts in laughter out of the blue. “I guess we will all be staying there then.”

Justin shakes his head, “I don’t know how the three of us will fit; besides, no offense Eric, you’re a good looking guy and all, but threesomes are only appealing if I’m the only guy.”

My face turns beat red as I sit up and glower at Justin, “Would you stop?” I playfully hit him several times gritting my teeth, “You’re embarrassing me.”

Eric is up front, chuckling away, “I find you equally attractive Justin, but that’s one thing we can agree on.”

His comment makes me smile and stop thinking for a fleeting moment. It’s the first time he’s made a joke in front of me. It makes me think back to the bed on the plane. If there’s one thing that very statement made clear; *he’s certainly not gay*. The thought makes me laugh. I thought about it a little longer though and hope he’s not a boy toy like my buddy Justin here. Ever since he and Eryn slept together, he hasn’t had a steady girlfriend. I’m sure being a rehab therapist has its perks, but he goes through women like underwear, and I know it. *And he knows I know it.*

“Where are we heading gorgeous, Sky’s first right?” Justin asks, smiling at me.

I grin at him lovingly, “Actually could we check in first? I’d like to freshen up and change.” I relax back into the seat and fiddle with my nails.

Justin shuffles closer to me and leans in, “You know, I know you and your dad weren’t close in the end, but you can forgive yourself for that. He never made it easy for you.”

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. He always knew what I was thinking, and it irritated the mess out of me; in a good way. Immediately the tears blur my vision and I attempt to cover it up with my hands to my face. Justin wraps his arms around me to soothe me with a light shushing, holding me tighter. “I... just,” I snuffle between breaths, “don’t know why... he... *hated... me.*”

“Come on Brie, don’t be so hard on yourself,” Justin assures me, “He never *hated* you, he was simply... confused. It was the alcohol. *Not* him.”

I’m bawling my eyes out at this point, trying to tell myself to get it together but I can’t. It was as if those few words just unraveled this little neatly knit barricade, built to protect myself and it couldn’t hold anymore. Justin kisses my forehead and rubs my back. Anything he could to soothe me. I calm down a few minutes later, my face pressed against his chest and my arms loosely wrapped around his waist. Just then, we pull up to the hotel. *That was fast.* I sit up and try to wipe my face clear of the tears. *I can’t let anyone see me like this.* I pull out a mirror and see the horror that is my ruined mascara. *Eric can not see me like this.* I’m a complete and total mess. “Give me just a second,” I note to the driver as he pulls up under the overhang and waits for us to depart the vehicle to check in.

“I got it,” Eric states as he opens the car door and enters the hotel lobby. I let out a sigh of relief.

“You *like* him,” Justin exclaims as I feebly attempt to fix my face. He sounds so sure of himself.

“No,” I sniffle, “it’s just business.”

“You... *liar*,” he smirks, “Girl, if you weren’t milk chocolate you would’ve been a strawberry when I mentioned that threesome.”

I pause and shake my head in disbelief, “He’s handsome and like-able but I don’t *like* him like that... he’s nice to look at though. You said it yourself he’s attractive,” I deflect, wiping away the makeup debris.

“You accepted the money already, didn’t you?” he takes my hand and pulls it towards him.

I immediately put the mirror down and glare at him, “Yes, why wouldn’t I?”

“You accepted the terms of the entire contract then too?” His stare turns serious.

“How do you know about that?” I snap.

He grabs both of my hands and gazes into my eyes, “Please be *very* careful and you call me if you need help or something seems off, you hear me?”

“If you were so worried, why tell him about me?”

“I’m not worried... necessarily. I just don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you because of me,” his serious

demeanor forces me to focus on the words entirely, it's a rarity for Justin.

Eric returns from the lobby with a bellhop who opens the trunk. Eric opens my door and helps me out of the vehicle. He hands me a keycard and states, "You're in the room right across from Justin, room six-zero-three."

I carefully take the card from his grip, "Thank you Eric, but I *will* be paying for this myself. I just want you to know."

He chuckles as I walk away. "It's really not a big deal, Brie," he yells out. Justin walks from around the other side and they both remain by the truck as I wheel my suitcase in, taking note before I enter the lobby. Justin's hands on his hips, lifting his jacket up a little while Eric has one hand in his suit pants pocket and the other has his hotel key.

Knowing what I know about Justin, I imagine their next few moments are like this...

Justin looks at Eric and gently slaps him on the top of his back, grasping his shoulder, "Please take care of her, that woman means a lot to me. And if one hair on her head is harmed, I will hold you personally responsible."

Eric glances at Justin from the corner of his eye after I disappear from their view, "Justin, you have nothing to worry about my friend. I would never willingly put her in harm's way. I just need her help and I will return her home, safe and sound."

Justin pats Eric on the back in agreement. "Thank you," he replies humbly.

“But...” Eric turns to him, “If for any reason we need help, can I trust to call you?”

“Are you kidding me man?” Justin holds out his hand to show Eric respect, “Consider it done, just say the word.”

Eric smiles back at him and shakes his hand, “Thanks man.” Eric grabs his bag from the bell hop and tips him. He looks at Justin and states, “I’m going to go get settled, just knock on my door when Brie is ready to go. I’m sure she’ll come to you first. I’ll be in room seven-ten.” He enters the lobby and up the elevator. Justin walks in with him and stops to get a coffee at the snack stand near the front desk. He finishes making his coffee, adding a couple creams and sugars. He takes a sip and mumbles to himself, “It’s going to be a long night.”

VI

WHAT IF?

Briellyn

I make my way into the elevator while Eric and Justin remained outside. With a need to shower and clear my head, I say a silent prayer before this day goes any further. I glance at the watch that Eryn gave me and open the locket. *Not even time stands in my way.* The elevator door glides open. I step inside and press the button for the sixth floor, waiting patiently as a few other people join me.

I can't help but notice the interracial couple amongst the small crowd of us. The woman is a beautiful rich shade of brownish red, with gorgeous jet-black hair, and had the most striking green eyes I have ever seen; I'm almost positive she was of Indian descent. She, *all five foot nothing of her*, is snuggled up to this tall, slender, fair skinned Hispanic fellow with rich, semi-long, dark brown hair. They remind me of Sheila and Joseph the moment I lay eyes on them. They're cuddled up together, his hand wrapped around her and his chin touching her head. It's as if he's just standing there taking all of her in, her scent, her touch, her beauty. It's just beautiful. *Wish I had that.*

The elevator reaches level three and the loving couple, as well as two others, depart. All that's left is me and a handsome, sharply dressed, dark chocolate skinned gentleman and one of the hotel workers. I glance up and our eyes meet briefly, long enough for us to exchange cordial smiles before the elevator reaches the sixth floor and the doors slide open. *Is it just me or do those moments always feel*

awkward when you don't really want to strike up a conversation? As I walk out of the elevator I say to the gentleman, "Have a nice evening."

He politely replies, "You too," and bows his head.

I finally reach the front door to my room and swipe the key, opening the door to a gorgeous room. I hadn't taken the time to notice, but it suddenly hit me just how classy and modern this hotel is. The room is painted red with cherry wood accents, two cherry wood nightstands on either side of the bed, cherry wood bed platform base, and even a cherry wood headboard with black leather in the middle that engulfed the entire height of the wall and width of the bed.

Two ceiling lights hung low just above the end tables, giving off soft amber light. The bathroom, which is immediately to my right just as I enter through the door, has walls made of frosted glass with a sliding frosted glass door. The floors and inside walls are made of large, tan, square marble tiles. The sink has a clear glass top and open bottom, with a small shelf just under the piping to hold a tissue box and complimentary toiletries. The toilet is a typical run-of-the-mill, but the shower is glorious! It's a spa type with glass walls and a raindrop shower head. Everything in the room is put together well.

This glorious shower and I are about to have a hot, steamy date. I place my bags down onto the bed and dig my phone out of my purse. I unlock it and find my sisters' name:

'I just landed about 20 minutes ago, just hitting the showers and changing. Meet at the house in about an hour or so. Text ya when I leave. XOXO'

I enter the bathroom and turn the shower on, the droplets cascading from the ceiling spout like raindrops from a full gray cloud on a perfect spring day. I align all my toiletries onto the shelf noted below the sink and stick my body wash, loofah, and face wash into the shower. I peel off my clothes and throw on a shower cap, tucking in my strands to keep them from getting wet.

When I open the shower door again, a gentle cloud of warm steam comes creeping out. I step inside, quickly closing the door behind me. *Abbbbbb*. I coo as the mild hot water cascades down my delicate skin. *This is exactly what I needed.* The large water droplets bead across my shoulders, falling further down with each additional drop. I lean on the side of the shower, facing the wall, allowing the water to massage the back of my neck. I stand, unmoved, for about two minutes, letting the water put in the work. *The most action I've had in a very long time.*

This shower is getting to me. In the safety of the droplets, I allow the tears to fall, thinking of my mother and how happy my father was when she was alive. *It's all my fault, they're both dead cause of me.* At least that's what I've come to believe, my best was never good enough for my father. *And now he's dead.* Maybe I'll finally be free of the pain he caused, be done with all of his antics. *Or just feel guilty that I didn't do more.*

My phone buzzes, noticeable past the sound of the water. It must be Skyla. Every part of me wants to just stay here and hide away in the shower; maybe, doze off. Obviously there are more important matters at hand, the phone buzzing is my irritating reminder. *Reality calls.* I grab my loofah and lather it up with my body wash, the coconut aroma engulfing the

steamy air. I quickly wash up and rinse, then turn the shower off.

I reach for my towel and dab the excess water off. The towel is fluffy and plush, not hardened like most hotel towels. *Justin sure knows how to pick'em.* After wrapping the towel around me and taking a couple steps over to the sink, I pour my oil into my hand and gently massage it into my skin. I actually feel better, almost normal. I glance at the time to take note it's almost three o'clock. It feels later. The jet lag and sleeping in the middle of the day always drains me. I approach the bed where I've laid out my clothes. I decide on the black maxi dress with the black and white poncho sweater. With the chill outside, this will be the perfect balance of lightweight and warm. Once dressed, I return to the bathroom and rid myself of the shower cap, fluffing my thankfully still straight blow out and carefully lathering a toner then lotion on my face. My phone buzzes again, beckoning me to throw it in my purse to leave the room.

Quietly closing the door behind me, I walk diagonal across the hall to Justin's room. *Knock, knock.* I patiently wait, but hear nothing. I knock again. Still nothing. No ruffling behind the door, no shower running, just silence. *Shit, no clue what Eric's room number is.* I make my way down the elevator to the main floor, sending them both a text. The elevator opens on the main level and to my surprise, Justin is standing in front of me waiting to go up.

"There you are, I was just going to knock on your door," he states cheerfully, a playful grin plastered on his face. I exit the elevator, placing my phone back into my purse, discarding the text to him.

"Well *I* was just knocking at yours," I reply with a smile. I hook my left arm into his right and accompany him to the closest unoccupied coffee table. As we sit down, I ask where Eric is.

Justin leans back and puts his left arm over the back of the chair, crossing his right ankle over his left knee, "He told me to go get him when you were ready. He knew you'd look for me first." *If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was a little jealous.*

I lean back in my chair and pull out my phone again, "I'll just text him and let him know we're ready."

I send out the text informing him we are downstairs in the lobby and resume talking to Justin, "So... how many appointments did you have to cancel to be here?"

Justin rolls his eyes, shaking his suspended foot around. "Doesn't matter," he throws a small piece of debris my direction, "Nothing is more important than being here, you know that."

I shake my head, grinning, "You're a good friend Jus."

He smiles as he glances down at his phone, "Yeah, well."

I lean forward and place my hand on his right knee, "So are you going to finally let me in on what happened the last time I saw you?"

He glares at me, eyes squinted, "What? Ya mean the situation with Eryn?" His smile shifts to a frown. He uncrosses his legs and leans in closer to me, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you everything, Brie." He sounds so sure of it. *Which almost hurts my feelings.*

I lean a little closer to him, our faces just a few inches apart, and quietly challenge him, "With all that you know about me? *Try me.*" He doesn't break his stare, glancing from my lips to my eyes, back to my lips.

"Am I interrupting something?" Eric approaches us, breaking the stare down between Justin and me. We both immediately back away from each other, our attention diverted to Eric, who is now dressed in straight leg dark denim jeans and a red cowl neck sweater. His hair looks a little wet, so he must have showered too.

I stand up and reply to Eric, "No, nothing at all." I then glance over and say to Justin, "I'll be waiting to hear more later. *You're not off the hook yet.*"

Justin rolls his eyes as he stands, changing the subject, "The driver was just for the airport, I have the rental parked out back." He motions for us to follow as he starts in that general direction. Eric and I follow behind him.

On the way, Eric leans closer to me, "Are you *sure* I didn't interrupt anything?"

I glance over at him and smile as we continue walking next to each other, "Justin owes me an explanation about something that happened some time back, but I think he's afraid. You weren't interrupting anything. If *anything*, you bailed him out." Eric just nods his head in agreement. Out the back doors and a few cars later, we arrive at a black Chevy Equinox. He unlocks the vehicle and climbs into the front seat. Eric opens the front passenger side door and allows me to clamber inside, then sits behind me. Justin starts the car after we both buckle up and pulls off without

saying a word. He must be genuinely upset I brought up Eryn again.

"I'm sorry Justin," I mumble to him, "I honestly just want you to know that you can talk to me about it when you're ready, I know you'd expect the same from me." I find comfort in the scenery out the passenger side window, waiting for him to acknowledge my plea.

He glances over at me from the corner of his eye, "You mean that?"

I immediately snap my head back around to see his expression, "*Of course.*" I smile at him, grateful to have him as a friend and in my life. Justin and his brother are the only real family that Skyla and I have at this point.

"Okay," he smirks. I text Skyla that we are on our way. After I'm done, the roads start to jog my memory of my last visit here five years ago.

ROUGH MEMORIES

Briellyn

Five years before...

I flew in to visit my father, having recently graduated with my MBA. I decided not to walk the stage because I knew none of my family could make it. Besides, doing it once was more than enough. My business was just upgraded to an LLC and I was excited to share the news with my father.

I showed up that clammy summer evening, knocking on the door. I didn't get an answer, but the front door was open. I helped myself, "Hello?" I called out. A slight ruffling noise in the living room to my left diverts my attention. Upon entering the room, my father was laid out on the couch, *drunk*.

He had had his moments of sobriety throughout the years, but this was his worse relapse that I'd seen firsthand. Skylar had just gotten married about six months prior and I knew he had a hard time with that. I twisted my mouth up at the sight of him, "Father..." I said quietly, creeping closer.

He turn his head to look at me, "Aubrey?" he drunkenly asked.

"No dad, it's Briellyn. Mom's not here," I replied, kneeling next to the couch to take the bottle from him.

"You look so much like your mother," he stated coldly as he snatched the bottle from me to take another swig.

"Anyway, I came with some good news," I began to get excited, but gulp after gulp, I knew he didn't care what I had

to say. Concerned, I tried to take the bottle from him again. *Only for the drunk fool to swing at me.*

Shocked, I sat back and stood up. "Enough of this dad! Mom is gone and drinking will *never* bring her back. All you have is me and Sky now. Please don't keep doing this to yourself. You need help. Let us help you!" He glowered at me, feebly attempting to sit up. Clumsily he managed to do exactly that, never breaking his stare from me. He had this look on his face, that '*how dare you*' look. I remember it so many times as a girl.

He came to his feet as I backed up a little bit more. "HELP?!" he shouted at me, "I've never *needed* you. It's *your* fault your mother isn't here with me. I hate *you*!"

Shocked at his words, I took another step back and shook my head. "You've always blamed *me*. But we both know that she wouldn't have been driving back with me so late had you not been too intoxicated to come get me like you were supposed to!" I had to defend myself, felt like I had to do it every time we saw each other.

"How dare you! After *everything* I've done for you. Get out!" He took a few steps towards me, pointing to the door.

"Father," I pleaded, "You need help, *please...*" He threw the bottle at me, barely missing me.

He yelled again, "I fuckin' hate you, I've *always* hated you. It should've been you, not your mom. I disown you, leave and never come back!" Tears filled my eyes and my heart broke into a million pieces, never to be mended again. I left that night. Never coming back. *Until now.*

I wipe the tears from my face as the memory comes to an end as we arrive to my father's house. Justin parks right behind Skyla's truck. She exits the driver side and an officer from the passenger side, his police car in the driveway. Justin, Eric, and I all open our doors at the same time and exit the vehicle. Justin being closest to Skyla, hugs him first. Skyla then approaches me, I grab her and embrace her tight, never wanting to let her go. She hugs me the same way. It's this time of year we always spend together.

My sister is a little shorter than me, light skinned like our father's mother, long black hair, full cheeks, curvy, and soft spoken. She'd originally helped me with the first concepts of my business, rightfully claiming her small share of my company. She receives dividends every month, so on top of her husband's pay, she gets to be a stay at home mom and do what she loves; art.

Eric patiently stands to my right as Justin has made his way over to stand next to him. Skyla and I release our iron clad embrace as I glance over at the police officer. "Deputy Givens?" I ask, finally recognizing him. The uniforms are new and the hat shields his face. Givens is about six foot even, slender build, and dark brown hair. He is half Indian and half white, really tan skin but somewhat more European features. He has a rather unique look to him, so I am shocked that I didn't recognize him right away.

"Hey there Brie. It's Sheriff now," he tips his hat in my direction. I step closer to greet him; he's been a family friend since we had moved to Florida, my last semester of highschool.

"Congratulations," I exclaim as I release him, "well what are you doing over here? Don't you have more important stuff to do than offering condolences?" *Rude I know, defense mechanism.* He clears his throat, reminding me of my manners, "Oh, Skyla meet Eric. He's our new investor." Eric politely shakes Skyla's hand as they exchange greetings. "And *Sheriff* Givens, please meet Justin and Eric, both dear friends," I add. Sheriff Givens shakes hands with both men respectively. "Anything that needs to be said can be said in front of them," I finish, Skyla glancing over at me.

"Scuse me just a moment," Sheriff Givens retrieves a sealed brown envelope along with some papers, from his vehicle. The four of us silently wait. *What the hell's in the envelope?*

"There's a few things I need to go over here ladies, the first being that this envelope had explicit instructions to only be opened in the event of Mr. Donado's passing *and* with both of you present."

I fiddle with the collar of my sweater, nervous at the thought of what's in the envelope. He breaks the seal then pulls out the piece of paper to read it aloud,

"Dear Sunshine and Moonstone,

I'm so sorry for the way I have acted ever since your mother died. I'm especially sorry for my lack of effort towards trying to seek help and get better. Neither of you may understand now, and may never understand actually, but when we lost your mother, most of me went with her.

I never meant to hurt either of you and I can't ever take back the cruelty or grief I've caused. I especially need to apologize to you Sunshine, my dear Briellyn. Did you know that you were named after your great great grandmother? She was strong and independent, even in the days where

women weren't seen as much. You have always had her fighting will and spirit to one day help and change the world. Please don't ever change honey. I didn't mean it when I told you I hated you. I barely remember that night we last spoke all those years ago, but that word stuck out to me. Countless times I tried to call and say I was sorry, but I would only dial your number to hang up because I was too afraid you would reject me. I was afraid that I would let you down again.

I hid this letter from myself, because when I drink I feel like a different person, sometimes in a better way, but in most times not so much. I'm passing this letter to the Sheriff so that it may get to the two of you in the event I never find the courage to do it myself. I love you both so much and you two have made me a very proud father. I'm undeserving of such wonderful daughters. You are so special, you have no idea. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me. Knowing that if this is being read to you, and not by me, brings me comfort in knowing that I can never do either of you anymore harm. I'm in a better place now, looking down over you both. Moonstone, kiss those beautiful babies for me. I'm sorry I didn't come to see them more. Please remember me for the good moments, though I know there are few. Feel free to talk to me when you're ready. I'm finally prepared to listen.

Love,

Your undeserving father

P.S. I don't have much to give either of you, but I have left a few things that were specifically boxed up in the attic.

I try my best to keep my composure, but the tears escape me. I hold my sister as she holds me. The words affected her more than me, her cry preventing me from holding my emotions back further. Why couldn't he have told me this

before? Why didn't I just call him? "I take it all back," I weep softly to Skyla, "Every mean thing, *I take it back.*"

She replies between tears and sniffles, "It's not your fault, neither of us could have known." Justin wraps his arms around us, kissing our foreheads and rubbing our backs. We both shift to allow him into our crying circle. Eric stands there awkwardly, but decides to join us, unsure of what to do. I release Justin and Skyla, facing Eric. Between huffs and tears, I manage a thank you. He immediately steps towards me, embracing me tight. His hug feels so sincere and wholesome, again like he needed one too. I lay my head on his shoulder as he rubs my back; it's soothing and calming. I immediately relax.

"I'm so sorry for you both," Sheriff chimes in, "But there's more." Eric releases me to acknowledge the Sheriff. Skyla glances at me.

I notice Skyla glance at me before focusing on the Sheriff, "What do you mean?"

Skyla softly adds, "They found his body. He'd fallen down the stairs." She starts crying again as Justin consoles her.

"Sheriff?" I ask, staring at him blankly.

He starts towards the door, every so often glancing back at me, "Well Brie, when I received this police report on my desk yesterday in the wee hours of the morning, I had to go and inspect everything myself. Neighbors called in and stated they heard a screaming and then sounds of glass breaking here at the house... watch your step there," he steps over some glass as he makes his way to the porch. I creep behind

him, observing and listening intently. Eric follows behind me, as does Skyla and Justin.

He continues, "He was found here at the base of the steps, cause of death is believed to be severe trauma to the head and neck from the fall, but you will have to give the coroner's office permission to have him autopsied to be sure. Nothing appears to be broken into, i.e. we don't believe there were any intruders or anything," he states, climbing the stairs to the second floor, all of us still following closely. "But when I came back to do a thorough sweep, I'd noticed that the bat was taken out of his room. It was out of place from the last time I had been here. I know he normally keeps it downstairs, but it was in his bedroom. All the windows and locks had been checked to be sure that it wasn't a break in and everything came back clean. No fingerprints of anyone else besides the old man."

We reach the top of the steps and he points out to the window at the end of the hall towards the front of the house, we all look over. "That's where the window was broken; he threw a bottle of Cuervo through it. That's why you saw all the glass just in front of the porch. The bottle landed in the middle of the grass," he glances at me, "*but* the bottle was unopened." My stare shifts from him to the window.

"May I?" I ask, pointing towards the end of the hall.

I walk over as he continues talking, "All anyone is willing to bet is that he may have been drinking then simply slipped and fell down the stairs. And perhaps, in an angry fit he threw the bottle. The neighbors said they heard him screaming first before throwing the bottle. Time of death is

believed to have been within a half hour of the time the call came in."

I glance out the window down below, seeing the broken bottle in the grass below, "Well what do you believe, Givens? How do you know the bottle was unopened if it shattered?"

He comes towards me, staring into my eyes, "The seal of the bottle wasn't broken. And regardless of your fathers *many* relapses, he'd done quite well the past couple of weeks."

Eric approaches us both, "Are you *certain* no one else was here with him?"

"It's as I stated before sir, our sweep of the house yielded no fingerprints, no tampering with the locks or doors and the house was locked up when we arrived. Neighbors hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary either, only heard the screams," the Sheriff replies as he makes his way back to the stairs, "The other thing is, I know I mentioned it before, but I need one of you to come down to the coroners and identify the body and give permission, if you choose, to do the autopsy. I will leave you all to your thoughts." He ventures downstairs to his vehicle.

"Mind if I look around?" Eric asks, holding my hand.

I shake my head no, "By all means." He sneaks off into my father's room as Skyla and Justin move toward me.

"Who's going to identify the body?" Skyla snuffles, asking reluctantly.

"I can go for you, if you need me to," Justin insists, placing his hands in his pockets while staring at me.

Skyla quickly responds, "I don't mind."

I continue to gaze outside and reply hesitantly, "I'll go with you."

He places his hand on my lower back and asks, "Are you sure? I can do this alone. It's really not a big deal."

I turn around and place my hand on Justin's chest, smiling at him, "I know, but this is something I need to do for him." I take his hand and retreat down the hall towards the stairs, "We're going to take care of this right now," I say, rather matter of fact. "Sky, want to check out that box in the attic while we take care of this?" I yell out as we reach the bottom of the stairs.

"Already on it," she replies as she pulls down the attic door.

— ξ —

Eric

I overhear Briellyn and Justin walk downstairs but continue my inspection. Trying not to touch anything while in the process, I carefully open one of the doors and catch a glimpse of the window. *Nothing*. I proceed to exit the room but notice something behind the door. Upon closing the door from inside the room, I kneel down to get a closer look, "Hmmm." I open the door and call out to Skyla, who's now in the attic, "Excuse me, Sky?"

She shuffles over to the attic entrance and peeks her head down the ladder, "Yes, Eric."

"Did you and Brie live here with your dad at one point?"

"Yes, Brie lived here for less than a year after high school before going off to college. I stuck around for maybe three more years after that. Why?"

I smirk, "Oh okay, no, I was just curious." I creep off into one of the other rooms while Skyla continues her search for the box her dad mentioned in the letter. *There must be a lot of boxes up there.*

I find myself in Skyla's old room, a twin size bed, small desk in the corner, but not much else. Continuing into the bathroom, I take notice that it's connected to another room; a room filled with photos, quaint bed setting, a desk, even some clothes and shoes. Briellyn clearly left everything behind. *Feels like she left in a hurry.*

There was also a small chest on the floor that appears to be ransacked. *Oh, my, God.* Alarmed, I rush downstairs and outside to call Kalil. I'm sure Skyla heard me, hopefully I didn't alarm her.

"Kal, it was here..." both excitement and worry laced in my tone.

"What was?" Kalil replies.

"The termagant! In its raw form. It was here, at Brielle's father's house," I gesture trying to explain.

"I thought that was just empyrean folklore?"

"I thought so too. My father used to tell me about them, but I always thought he was trying to scare me. But I can see it's residue for myself right here in what I believe to be Briellyn's old room."

Skyla reaches the bottom of the stairs, quietly standing at the front door as she overhears my conversation with Kalil.

"But why would a termagant be in Brielle's father's house, I mean, what would it accomplish?" Kalil pleads.

"It convinces *me* that Briellyn is indeed the woman we've been waiting for," I pace, Skyla then hides behind the wall so that I can't see her, but I can feel her presence. "I have to call you back," I immediately end the call, proceeding back to the front door. Skyla panics, trying to seem as if she wasn't eavesdropping, but her heart is racing. *I can hear it.* As I walk through the door, she freezes; staring at me like a deer in headlights.

"*Hey Sky,*" I cautiously smile, "How long have you been standing there?" Skyla continues to stare at me, panicking further; her first instinct to run. But I chase after her, catching up to her quickly. She almost screams, but I cover her mouth. "Shhh, shh, shhh," I plead, "I'm not here to hurt you, *or your sister.* Now, I'm going to explain myself, but I need you to be *very* open minded." I nod my head to motion her to do the same. She nods as I stare at her nervously, "I'm going to uncover your mouth and let you go now, if you promise not to run or scream again." She quickly nods again as my grip loosens.

SHE'S THE ONE

Briellyn

Meanwhile, on the way to the coroner's office, Justin and I follow Sheriff Givens. I stare out the window, nibbling at my fingernails. "Hey," he glances over at me indulging my nervous habit, "are you going to be okay? That letter was pretty powerful stuff."

I focus on him, taking his right hand to kiss it, and softly reply, "Thank you. Thank you for the countless nights of my incessant bitching. Thank you for dealing with my hardened personality. I can't begin to describe to you how much you being here is so necessary for me *and* Sky."

He smiles, quickly glancing back and forth from me to the road, "I think it's a good time discuss Eryn."

I squint in curiosity, "Why now?"

Justin swallows hard as the words develop slowly, "Because I realize now that the year I left Connecticut, was the same year you and your dad had your fallout. It clearly still haunts you and I left *knowing* that you were hurting. And in my selfish rut I left when you needed me most. So, I think it's time you know why."

I'm torn between wanting to know and not ever wanting to know. Here I am, hurting because the entire time I *thought* my dad hated me; when he was really trying to figure out how to make it right. *A real life Dr. Jekyll dealing with his alcoholic split personality, Mr. Hyde.* And now my best friend wants to confess the one secret he's always been mysterious about. We still spoke on the phone and all, but for the first since I

could remember, he wasn't around. And worse, he never wanted to talk about it. *Remember, I deal with my own issues by helping others through theirs.* Eryn, to this day, still will not speak Justin's name. She acts like he never existed. In fact, when I mention his name unintentionally, she will ignore me as if I didn't say anything at all.

My dear Justin clearly had a good reason for wanting to tell me this right now. He would never want to tell me something like this, if he didn't find it either relevant or important. I grin, "Go on, I'm ready when you are."

He reaches for my hand and I give it, putting it in his lap as my arm is snuggled under his. "I've gone over and over in my head how to tell you this, but I think I realize now that I should just say it before I lose my chance," he continues to mind the road, only briefly glancing my direction. "I want you to keep a very open mind when I tell you this." I nod my head in agreement, but he stares at me and insists, "No, I mean it Briellyn. Promise me you'll be open minded on this one."

I lift my right arm, two fingers up, and persistently reply, "Scout's honor that I will be open minded. Do continue my love." I have only heard Justin call me by my full first name twice in the past, once when we met and once at his college graduation dinner. He stuck around for several years after that.

He continues, "Do you remember that night when the Huskies won the National Championship?"

I smile, "I mean, it was an amazing game that's hard to forget. But I'll admit, I was pretty drunk. Rare I know, but I think so."

"You and I were having drinks at that bar, right around the corner from our apartment building. The whole state seemed to be celebrating the win. You and I had been drinking and one thing led to another and we shared that kiss..."

I shuffle in my seat and swallow hard, "Yes." I pause very briefly then sourly reply, "You started seeing Eryn two weeks after—"

"Anyway," he interrupts, "you may not have noticed Brie, but I stopped drinking after that. *The kiss that is.* I wanted to be sure that if anything else happened that night, I could not only enjoy it... but remember it for the rest of my life. And to this day, *I will never forget it.*"

I start getting nervous. *Did we sleep together and I black out?*

He continues, not once looking at me, "Before the kiss, maybe about eight months leading up to that, I had grown rather fond of you. We would go running together or hit the gym. You would tell me about all your crazy, off the wall dreams. You were the only person I knew that had it all planned out and knew exactly what you wanted to do in life, how you were going to pursue it, and you were doing that... start up in your senior year." He bites his bottom lip, "You made a lot of college kids, including myself, some good money. And then you had briefly dated that quarterback..."

I sarcastically laugh, "Yeah, I remember." Not my best moment. *If only you knew, babe.*

"You were so heartbroken about finding out about that cheerleader that you told me you were no longer going to date, you were just going to let the right one come to you. After seeing your heart broken, yet again, something in me changed about you. I mean, I knew I had loved you. You've been my best friend since I was six. And right after your mom died, you just grew up. It was like you and I were the same age for the longest time, hell maybe you were older... but you were one of the guys. And then you just blossomed. Anyway, I was very fond of you and before I knew it, I had the biggest crush on you. That's why I started asking you to go out with me *all* the time. I didn't want it to be weird. That night we shared that kiss, I thought to myself, she finally chose *me*. The look you had on your face was so sure too. You didn't look drunk, you looked at me like you *wanted* me."

I blush, avoiding eye contact.

He carries on, "I knew right then, I needed to stop drinking because this could be the first night of the rest of my life."

I whip my head around to analyze him, astounded by his words.

"I hoped it was real, and I knew it was when you leaned in and kissed me again. There was so much passion there, anticipation. I knew I had wanted that to happen for those last eight months and finally it did. And when I took you back to your apartment, two floors down from mine, I thought I should maybe ask to stay, but I didn't. You were still a little drunk and I wanted our moment to be perfect, ya know? So, I walked upstairs to my place and sat down on my couch and just thought about you, over and over again, there in the dark. And then I heard a knock at my door."

This is all news to me; he'd never spoken to me about that night.

"I open the door," he pauses and swallows hard, "and it was you. You walked in and kissed me so deep and so passionately, I... I just... went with it, letting you take the lead."

I slip my hand away gesturing him to stop and shaking my head, "Hold on, I don't recall ever going up to your place. *I don't remember that at all.*"

"Open minded," he reminds me. I settle back down. He takes my left hand again, this time leaving it in my lap. He inhales deeply, "That night I made love to a woman who I just knew was going to be my wife. But I woke the following morning to find Eryn lying next to me. I couldn't figure out what the hell happened. Was I imagining things? Was I drunk and didn't realize it? *Did someone slip me something?* Two weeks later, she told me she was pregnant. My future with you completely crumbled into dust."

"Oh, I remember the pregnancy thing alright. But she didn't tell me until about a month after you two began dating. I'm still on the part about you mistaking her for me though. I'm not sure how you expect me to believe that Justin." *I'm not sure how I'm supposed to believe any of this, actually.*

"Honestly Brie, *I'm* not sure how I expect you to believe it either, but it's true."

"I mean, even in complete darkness I would think the complexion thing would be obvious," I stare at him, waiting for him to smile or say that he's joking, but he doesn't. It's obvious he genuinely believed it was me. "Then why did you

leave a couple months after that? Never to be seen again, until... well until a few hours ago. You never even would come down for the holidays when your brother would," I ask.

"When she lost the baby, she blamed me for it. The entire time we dated, I just felt drained by her. I hated every waking moment. The entire time, from the moment I woke up next to her, I thought to myself how much I fucked up. How maybe, had I just been honest with you to begin with, maybe it could've been you with my child. Not her."

I glance down, touched by his words. *The feeling was mutual.* I smile at the thought yet confused about the situation. How could I have not noticed? I had the *biggest* crush on Justin before, but knew, *or thought*, he didn't view me that way. Could the man I'd been waiting for be the man I knew my entire life? I haven't truly dated anyone since the quarterback incident. I mean, I'd been on dates, but no one who I ever wanted to stay with. *And admittedly, the crush on Justin faded after hearing about Eryn.*

He continues, "To add insult to injury, the day I found out she wasn't pregnant anymore, I caught her banging some other guy. That just broke me. I went to stay with Marcus in Georgia and picked up in sports medicine, which happened to work out with my degree, and I've been killing it ever since."

"She did *what*? She never told me about that... she told me that she was just so hurt about the baby she couldn't stand the thought of you," I sit back, trying to digest this fairy tale gone awry. We pull up to the coroners' office. I unbuckle my seat belt, staring directly into Justin's eyes, "So why tell me

now? Are you saying..." I glance from one eye to the other and swallow hard, "that you still have feelings for me?"

He holds his head down, "I thought the feelings were gone, but they are all still here, even after five years. I know you frown on me about my sexual exploits and I have *no* excuses for that other than I was trying to fill a void. Which *isn't* a good excuse, but I would change my ways, in a heartbeat, if you'd be willing to still at least consider me..."

My eyes fall to the floor as I think for a moment. I know I love Justin, he's my best friend and it's not that he's unattractive. But *in love*? Hell, I don't even know what love is. I've never said that word to any man but him, just never in *that* capacity. But after everything that has happened. I felt rejected when he and Eryn started dating after the kiss. *Our kiss*. But now I get it... *if what he says is true*. I still don't know how to explain the mistaken identity except that he was still drunk, which *I guess* is possible. Now he wants me to consider him and I don't know what to say. Hesitantly I reply, "Just give me some time, Justin," I caress his face, "you are the *only* man that has stuck by me through my emotional ups and downs. But this is a *lot* to digest. Will you just let me think everything you just told me through?"

"Of course," he joyfully replies as he opens his car door, "Just don't act all weird and shit now that I've said it out loud. I only told you I love you, which we say to each other anyway." *Good ol' Justin, always ruining a moment*. He exits the car and closes the door. I watch him as he walks around the front of the car to my side and opens my door.

Could I have just missed it all those years? I remember us joking back in high school before we moved here how if we

both didn't find anyone by the time I was thirty, that we should just marry each other. *Is he feeling anxious?* I didn't get that vibe. *Not by that story.* He opens the door and holds out his hand and for a moment, just an evanescent moment; I imagine him in a tux and myself in a white gown, him holding his hand out for me as we arrive at the airport to board a flight to leave for our honeymoon.

T.A. Davenport

VII

SHOULD'VE BEEN THERE

Briellyn

Sheriff Givens shows us to my father's body. The coroner is waiting for us when we enter. Justin and I stand off to the side as the coroner slides the body out of the cold, steel box. As he unzips the black body bag my father is encased in, I find myself unintentionally holding my breath. *Was his face going to be the one I remember from the day I walked out of the house five years ago or just a shadow of his former self?* The coroner asks us to step closer, so we did. I gasp at the sight of him. He's oddly thin, his mouth slightly open, eyes staring at the ceiling. I immediately turn around and plant my face into Justin's chest. He wraps his arms around me, holding me tight, leaning his head atop mine. I whimper, "How could I have left him? I should have come back. I should have kept trying."

Justin comforts me, "It's not your fault, even your father knew that." Tears stream down my face again, the salty water burning my eyes. First the letter and now his horrified face. He looks like he died painfully, unwillingly. I wanted to believe my sister and I knew deep down he wanted to be better for us. I let him fight this alone. It wasn't fair.

"Should I go ahead and close it up?" the coroner asks.

Justin nods his head yes, but I interrupt, "No, wait." *Suck it up buttercup.* I wipe my tears away. *I owed him this much.* I turn around and stare at him, "I've read that when a person dies with their eyes wide open, they've never found closure. I

need to give him closure.” I step closer to the table and gaze down upon him. His face is forever frozen in time like this, the time of his last breath. His expression gravely bothers me; but then I notice a mark that I’d never seen before, towards the top of his chest. “May I?” I gesture to the coroner about pulling the zipper down a little more.

“Allow me,” he replies nicely, zipping the bag down more until I tell him to stop.

“What is that?” I stare at my father’s chest, the rather alarming dark mark where his skin is raised like it was cut into the flesh, got infected, and scarred badly.

The coroner looks down, “What is it ma’am?” He stares closer.

I point to the symbol on his chest, “*That?* I don’t remember him ever having that.” I’m disgusted by it. Justin steps closer to see for himself.

The coroner stares at me, “Looks like a small mole or beauty mark, to me. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

I stare at the coroner, dumbfounded, “You’re kidding me right? That is *not* a beauty mark nor is it small *whatsoever*. This right here...” I point it out. “You’re trying to tell me you don’t see this very obvious marking that looks like an *intentional* scar?” I protest. He shakes his head no and stares at me like I’m crazy. Justin glances at me curiously, recalling my secret ability to see things others can’t.

The coroner begins to explain, “Sometimes loved ones see things when they are grieving—”

Justin holds his hand up to stop the coroner, “Excuse us for a second, would you?” Justin takes my arm and gently pulls me to the side.

Confused, I glare at him, “Please tell me you see the scar Justin, tell me I’m not losing it...”

He shakes his head and replies quietly, “I know you can, but I assure you that no one else can see it. You remember when we were kids and you would tell me how you could see things, but I never saw them? I always believed you, didn’t I?” I smile at him gratefully and shake my head yes. “I believe you see something, but I think maybe... *and I can’t believe I’m saying this out loud...* Eric may be the one to talk to about it. Just note it in your mind and whisper it to me and I will tell you if I can see it. I will touch your hand if I can’t, or nod my head in agreement if I can,” he smirks, kissing my forehead.

The two of us reapproach, the coroner seemingly uninterested in pursuing this further. I thoroughly look over the body. I don’t point at anything or make it obvious what I see. I simply lean over to Justin and put my hand up to whisper in his ear, “Do you see the purple mark in the middle of his bottom lip?” Justin softly touches my hand. I glance over again to see if there is anything else. I ask him again about the small purple mark on the side of his face and again he touches my hand. *Why does no one see this but me? Would Eric know about the things I see? Would he believe me like Justin does or just think I’m bat shit crazy? I guess it’d be worth a try. I’ve got nothing to lose, hell he’s already signed the contract.*

“That’ll be all sir,” I express to the coroner, yielding a forced, yet cordial, smile. He glances at me strangely before zipping up the bag.

Sheriff enters the room. After he does, the coroner mentions to me, “I have some paperwork for you to sign, to perform the autopsy. Sheriff if you wouldn’t mind getting her to fill out the necessary paperwork, that’d be great.”

Sheriff Givens escorts us into the next room and has me sign a few forms. “So uh, what *did* you see in there Donado?” Sheriff’s eyebrows raise in curiosity. Justin stands at the door, out of the sheriff’s view, shaking his head. I smile at Sheriff Givens, “Nothing, I think I’ve just had a long day Givens.” I sign the last form electing to have him cremated. “Anything else you need from me, Sheriff?” I pause before leaving.

“No, but if you need to let off some steam, the paths around Piney Lake are great this time of year,” the Sheriff states. I smile at him in thanks as Justin helps me out to the car.

Justin and I make our way back to the house. “I’m glad I got that over with,” I exhale aloud to Justin, shifting in my seat again, “I got to see him one last time.” *Even though it gives me more questions than answers.*

Justin reaches over and holds my hand, “So you’re going to talk to Eric about what you saw, right?”

Rethinking my decision earlier, I frown and reply, “What if he thinks I’m nuts?”

“It’s what he recruited you for though, right? I think he’ll be able to at least point you in the right direction Brie,” his reassuring smile makes me beam back before gazing out the

window. Why *do* I see these *things*? I've seen them since I was little, as far back as I can remember, but got worse when I hit puberty. *Sigh*. I am just ready to get back to the house to my sister, maybe go for a run to clear my head later. I turn the radio on with my free hand and just get lost in the music playing. *They play the best music during rush hour*. I know my brain will be entertained by it for the next twenty minutes until we get home, instead of pondering this issue. I sink further into my seat and just listen, holding Justin's hand in between mine and soaking it all in.

— ξ —

YOU SEE IT TOO

Briellyn

Twenty minutes later...

We pull up to my father's house to see Skyla and Eric sitting on the porch. Skyla's propping her face up by her crossed hands, steadied by her knees and elbows. As Justin cuts off the ignition, Skyla glances Eric's direction to which he shakes his head. She stands up, closes her sweater and crosses her arms as she shuffles over to me and Justin. "I opted to have him cremated," I blurt out. It was the first thing to come to mind for some reason.

"I couldn't find that box Brie, maybe you can help?" her gaze drops to the ground, virtually ignoring my comment, and shifts her right foot back and forth.

"What's the matter?" I ask her, worried that she didn't agree with my decision on our father's remains.

"Nothing," she glances up and scrunches her face, "I just..." She sighs audibly. "I just love you so much, that's all."

I immediately put my arms around her. "I'll always be here for you. Always have and always will," I kiss her forehead, "Let's get our minds off this and go find the box, yeah?" She smiles at me and nods her head yes. She turns around back towards the house as I wrap my right arm around her shoulders. She grabs my right hand with hers and wraps her left arm around my lower back.

"Reilly is on his way over by the way, he should be here in about ten minutes," she says matter of fact. I smile at Eric as

we approach the stairs to the porch, then walk inside the house. He smiles back and stands up.

“So, how’d it go?” Eric asks Justin.

“As good as it’ll go, I guess,” Justin nervously claps his hands together.

“Great,” Eric states, about to turn around to follow us inside when Justin stops him.

“Hey man, Brie saw something there. I don’t know if she is going to tell you or not, but I know she sees things that others, including myself, aren’t privy to; which *you* kind of know from our previous conversation. It seemed to freak her out a bit and I told her she should talk to you,” Justin slips his hands into his pockets, and yields Eric a serious stare.

Eric steps a little closer to Justin, curiously, “Well what did she see, Justin?”

“She had a hard time explaining to me the mark on her father’s chest, but she mentioned like a... purple mark on his lips and a small one on the side of his face. She said the mark on the chest looked like raised, infected scar tissue in this symbol...” Justin pulls out his phone and begins to doodle.

Before Justin finishes his sketch, Eric finishes Justin’s sentence, “Kind of like horns coming out of a circle?”

“Yeah, something like that, what do you know about it?” Justin inquires.

“Not much really,” Eric places his hand on Justin’s shoulder, “Look, Justin, I know I haven’t told you much about the mission or much about myself for that matter. But please

trust me when I tell you, I think Brie may be a target because of me. I promise this was never my intent. But *I'm begging* you, don't let her out of your sight while we are here."

He steps back away from Eric, demanding answers, "Please tell me you have more to say than that? Dude, if she's in harm's way I *need* to know how to protect her. And *why* she's in trouble. Who would be after you? *Are you into something that you haven't told me about?*"

Eric glances down, shuffling his stance, "I will tell you Justin, because I trust that your love for her is genuine. I will tell you on the way back to the hotel to be sure there are no prying eyes or threatening ears though. Fair enough?"

Justin nods his head still scowling, "Let's go check on them then." He strides onto the porch and walks up the stairs with Eric close behind.

— ξ —

Back in the house...

When I approach the attic at the top of the ladder, I hear a very high pitch noise; completely monotone, it never changes pitch. As I take my last step to completely stand in the attic and help my sister up, the noise gets louder. "What the *hell* is that noise?" I say aloud to Skylá, the sound somewhat deafening.

"I don't hear anything, what's it sound like?" she replies. I immediately roll my eyes and shake my head. *Here we go again.* I love being the weird one in the room. *Not.* I genuinely *feel* crazy. Lucky for me though, both my sister and Justin love

me and believe me when I say I hear or see something. We've affectionately named it my *x-factor*.

As I step closer to one corner of the attic, the noise softens. So, I turn back the other direction, towards the noise. In the opposite corner there are a stack of three boxes, none of them apparently labeled. As I stand directly in front of these boxes, the noise seems to turn into a beep. I move the box that's on top to the floor as the beeps grow closer together. Then I move the second box, the beeps growing even closer together. The top of the box had a shimmery blue glow. I turn the box around to see the year 1987 written on it in mom's handwriting.

"Well, I think this is the box..." I mumble to Skylar.

"Well open it up," she whispers impatiently. I open the box to see what's inside. The first thing I notice is the stuffed unicorn that my mother gave me on my third birthday. I remember mom telling me, "This may be an animal of imagination, but it's unique, just like you." It used to be a lilac purple, but for whatever reason it appears to be a shimmery shade of blue. I pull it out the box.

"What is going on with this thing? It's glowing blue." My sister shrugs her shoulders and just stares at the toy. I analyze it then put it down next to the box as I continue sifting through the items. There isn't much in the box though; some newspaper clippings, my first baby shoes, maybe a few other things. As I continue sifting through the box, Justin has made his way into the attic with Eric right behind him.

As Eric reaches the top of the ladder, he looks my direction and his eyes widen, "Brie?"

“Yeah?” I reply still sifting, not paying him any mind.

“What is that?” he continues as he enters the attic.

I whip my head around quickly thinking he saw some type of bug, “What?” I reply panicked.

He quickly walks over as he points to the unicorn next to the box, “*That...?*”

I glance down at the stuffed animal and pick it up, “It’s just a—”

“Unicorn,” he interrupts, “But it’s—”

“*You can see it too?!*” excitedly, I stand up and hand him the toy, smiling.

Justin stands next to Skyla, staring at the toy that is now in Eric’s grasp. He mumbles to Skyla, “It’s just a stuffed toy.”

“It’s glowing blue,” Skyla whispers back.

Justin whips his head around to look at her, “You can see it too?!” He stares back at the toy then at all three of us, confused. “Well, what the hell is wrong *with me?*” he mumbles to himself.

Skyla bursts out laughing. We all turn to look at her, inquisitively.

Between chuckles she blurts out, “Justin thinks I can see the glow,” she catches her breath, “But I never said I could,” she puts her hand to her chest from laughing so hard. She looks at Justin and gently grips his arm, trying to control her laughter, “Brie told me what she saw before you walked up

here, silly.” She continues laughing, I find myself laughing too. Even Eric chuckles a little bit. After a moment, Justin’s laughing as well.

Eric analyzes the unicorn, carefully evaluating every stitch. When I finally catch myself, finishing my last laugh, I watch Eric closely. I prop my hands up onto my hips and ask, “Well, what does this glow mean?” Before he could answer, a car door slams in the distance. That must be Reilly, Skyla’s husband. She excuses herself to head downstairs. Justin starts after her to greet his old friend, we all were in college at the same time. Skyla met Reilly through Justin.

Just before Justin walks down the ladder he jokes, “I don’t want to be the only one up here who can’t see the damn glow. I’ll be downstairs with the normal folks.” He almost seems hurt that he couldn’t see what both Eric and I could. I know he and Skyla are firm believers, but I never knew that there was anyone like me. *Until now. It’s quite exciting!*

Eric points to the bottom of the unicorn and says, “With your thumb and pointer, reach right in here.” His curious smirk and those pearly whites, his eyes dancing with excitement while staring into mine.

“Why?” I ask, clearly there is nothing but stitching.

“Just trust me,” he quietly replies. I blush as he motions for me to try. I take my right thumb and pointer and place it in the area he told me to. My thumb and forefinger bypass the stitching to reach inside the little unicorn’s belly. My eyes light up in awe, staring at Eric in delight. He continues to smile, subtly shaking his head. “Well how ‘bout that,” he mumbles.

“I feel something in there,” my brow lowers as I focus on reaching a little further in, “It feels... *hard*.”

Eric chuckles, “Well...” he rolls his eyes, “pull it out.”
Phrasing. I laugh aloud, doing as he says, securing the item between my fingers and gently pull it out of the unicorn. As I do, the unicorn dulls back to its original shade of lilac purple and the item appears to glow uncontrollably bright.

“What *is it?*” I ask, staring at its beautiful rich blue color. It appears to have some cracks to add texture and between those cracks it’s like lightning. It’s about the length of a credit card and shaped like a pentagonal rod.

Eric takes it from my palm, the brightness dulling down, “It’s the Aquari.” His smile is intriguing, the genuine splendor further adding to my own excitement.

“The *what?*” I ask again.

Delightfully he repeats, “The Aquari, a seraphic gem.” The grin is almost angelic, like this is best thing he’s ever seen.

“*Okay,*” I begin, looking off to the side, “Care to elaborate for me?” Eric continues to gaze at the stone before grabbing a handkerchief from his pocket. He gently wraps the stone into the fabric and places it back into his pocket.

He then takes my hands, “Brie,” he begins, inhaling deeply, “A seraphic gem is an ancient stone. The story behind it is something we will discuss this evening, but to sum it up, it’s one of four stones that when combined is the most powerful form of energy in the world. Some even, have thought to use it as a weapon.”

I blankly smile at him, bewildered and unconvinced, but intrigued by his description, “These vague details are killing me Eric, are you going to explain to me why that *gem* is glowing *now* when I’ve had that unicorn since I was three?” I release his hand and pace, feeling a little frustrated, “Or maybe tell me why I can see these things that I thought no one else could, *until you came along?*”

Eric glances away from me and places his hands in his pockets. He makes his way over to me, “I know I owe you some answers at this point. Some I will answer now and others in due time. You are a very, *very* special woman. Apparently, a genetic anomaly that even I didn’t know existed. *But one that I hoped existed.* I don’t think you are ready for the whole story, it’s a lot to take in. I promise you this; I will explain it to you when I know you can handle it.”

Phrasing again. I snicker.

He places his hand on my face, cradling it with his palm. The smell of his cologne entrances me, embracing his touch and scent. *What is it about this man?* My best friend pours his heart out to me earlier, the only man who I’ve ever had strong feelings for. I’m truly considering his offer. *But then there’s Eric.* I barely know him, but he gives me this feeling of comfort that I just can’t seem to shake. I manage to snap myself out of the minor trance, remembering that Eric has shown little to no interest in me *like that.*

I take his hand, pulling it from my face, but keeping it in my grasp, “I trust you... *I think.* But it doesn’t mean I don’t still feel left in the dark. Can you at least tell me a little bit more about these gems? I know I already signed that contract...”
Probably wouldn’t have hurt to have given it a thorough read through at

this point, shame on me. “But it would make me feel more comfortable proceeding.”

Eric smiles then closes the space between us, it makes me a little nervous. His face comes down to meet mine and my first reaction is to close my eyes and await a kiss. My breathing shortens and I swallow hard, leaving my lips parted. He kisses me softly; the texture of his lips just as supple as they appear to be. *My cheek is so grateful.*

He then whispers affectionately in my left ear, as I open my eyes, “The gems are what we are looking for. Will you join me this evening for dinner again, so that I may tell you the rest?” He takes a step back, awaiting my response.

Hypnotized, I nod yes, trying to maintain my cool. *Friend zone. I repeat, friend zone.* He reaches his hand out to me and gestures for me to come with him, “Let’s go rejoin the party.” I grab his hand and walk towards the ladder. He descends first and I follow, closing the attic and saving my thoughts, and numerous questions, for later this evening.

Justin and Reilly converse back and forth as Skylia just stands there. As Eric and I exit the house, I hold my arms out wide to Reilly, “Reilly, so good to see you!” He meets me halfway, hugging me tight.

Reilly is a tall man with a lean muscular build, deep tan, light brown skin, perfect waves in his dark hair, and a smile that would make any man jealous. I place my hand on his face, “Thank you for taking such great care of my dear sweet Sky during this tough time. It’s amazing of you to come all the way down from Moultrie to be with us today *after* your shift.” Reilly is an anesthesiologist.

“Of course,” he smiles then glances over at Eric. “And who might this be?” he asks suspiciously. Ever since that idiot quarterback in college, he’s been more protective of me. Even more so after Justin left Connecticut.

I take note of Eric to my left and reply, “This is Eric Windsor, an esteemed colleague of mine.”

Reilly chuckles, “Oh, you are the one Justin was telling me about. Nice to meet you Eric.” *Justin told him about Eric? Odd.* They make each other’s acquaintance.

I yawn, “It’s been a very long and exhausting day for me,” I extend my arms out, stretching my back. That urge to run it off calls to me; between anger and frustration I need some type of release. Everyone seems so oddly cheery and I just need to be alone for a while. *Just me and rock hard... pavement.*

“Sky, would you mind if I took your truck back to the hotel? I’m just going to rest a bit,” I motion over to her truck. She quickly tosses me the keys and winks. I kiss Reilly on the cheek, “It was good seeing you love, we’ll be doing a remembrance in the morning and I’ll bring the ashes with me.”

Justin approaches me, “Do you want me to go with you?” He asks.

I shake my head no, “I just need to be alone for a little while babe.” I walk to the driver side as he follows. He opens the door for me to get in.

“But I don’t think you should be alone. Rrr mmm. You know, for numerous reasons,” his expression speaks another agenda.

“I’m a big girl Justin, I can handle myself.” I reply sarcastically, raising one brow as I step in the vehicle, wondering why he’s being eerily clingy.

“Well *then*... while you’re in your room, I’ll go to mine. I think I want to shower anyway and relax.” This persistence is unlike him, he shuts my door. *I don’t want to hurt his feelings, but I don’t want to be bothered at all by anyone, including him.*

“You can drive back with Eric after catching up with Reilly. Seriously, *I’ll be fine!*” I try my best to be polite, but I know my body language is screaming no.

He cordially nods, “Alright then Brie. No problem. Just call me if you need anything. I’m here for you.” Smiling, I blow him a kiss and drive off into the sunset.

— ξ —

THE ABDUCTION

Briellyn

On the way back to the hotel I make a quick stop to purchase some workout apparel. I didn't think to pack any this morning being in such a rush. I buy three different outfits (leggings in different styles, a workout hoodie, two half zip jackets and three tees), three sports bras, and one pair of running shoes; everything laced with a little bit of red.

I reach the hotel room and strap up quickly. I do a light warm up and stretch before making my way back down to the lobby, taking off out the hotel back door; phone strapped to my arm and plugged in to my music.

As my feet hit the pavement, heel to toe, left then right, I suddenly feel the weight of the world lift from my aching shoulders. Running is the only time I able to completely clear my thoughts. My mind gets very cluttered, and running, or kickboxing, are the only times I get release from everything that's bogging me down. I knew the trail that Sheriff Givens referenced earlier; there's a small park before it, so I head in that direction.

With each step, I my body gets more in sync. This is exactly what I needed. *And then another date with that steamy, hot shower when I get back.* As I run through the neighborhood, I wave at the people sitting outside on their porches getting fresh air. It's nice seeing all the old stomping grounds. I get lost in my thoughts and memories with each mile I pass.

— ξ —

Forty-five minutes later...

I glance at my watch. *Already 6:30.* I should probably head back. It's still pretty well-lit outside, but the sun is going to set quickly; I head back through the park knowing it would be fastest. Just after I run past the ballpark and make the turn towards the hotel, the hairs on the back of my neck straighten as my eyes focus on a dark figure in the distance, right in my running path. I stop cold in my tracks. Goosebumps creep up every inch of my skin. The dark figure in the distance looks like the figure I've been seeing in my dreams the past two times I've slept. *But I'm not dreaming.* I blink my eyes several times just to be sure.

I turn around, glancing behind me, to then turn back and the figure is gone. *Okay, maybe I'm daydreaming.* The hairs on my neck prickle again, beckoning me to look behind me again. The figure stands there, not three feet from me. Startled, I fall forward away from it, screaming for help; the scream much less audible than I wanted. Quickly I shuffle, trying to get my feet underneath me as I crawl away panicked. "What do you want from me?" I yell out. The dark figure hovers closer until it's above me, grabbing my arm as I try to shield my face. I close my eyes, praying it would all be over, the wind gusting around us before the light suddenly disappears.

I open my eyes to a darkened room, deep hues of gray all over the walls and cold, hard black marble lay beneath me. *This is no walk in the park.* Maybe the basement of someone's estate. The room seems large and empty, no windows or noticeable escape routes. "Hello?" I whisper, the words manage to escape my trembling lips. I stand and gather myself.

Stay alive. I quietly repeat to myself. *What is this place? Am I dreaming?* The questions surround my thoughts. "Yes, this is

very real,” a deep voice breaks the silence. Startled again, I stumble backwards, maintaining my balance. I try to see through the darkness, the cold room yielding no signs of the intruder. That prickly feeling is back, the same one that they talk about in movies. My adrenaline to kicks in.

“You are too far away for anyone relevant to hear you, and you’re here because I brought you here,” he finishes. My heart beats faster than a jack rabbit on speed, my palms are uncomfortably sweaty, and I keep whipping my head around to try and see something, *anything*.

“Who are you?” I reply hesitantly, not caring to engage with whatever, *or whoever*, is talking to me. But I can’t help it. The room feels icy cold. Tears flee my eyes out of fear, even anger, because what I *can’t* see in this room leaves my imagination to run.

The room suddenly lights up around me, ever so subtle, about three feet wide. My hands are visible now at least. I dare glance up to see where the light shines from, but doesn’t appear to be any light I’ve ever seen. The wind gusts again right past my left shoulder.

“Who am I?” the voice replies, obviously coming from right in front of me, but I still unable to see *who* it’s coming from. “I think the question is, who are *you*?” his icy breath finding its way into the light.

This is in my head; I can close my eyes and tell myself to wake up right now and this will all go away. I close my eyes tightly. Tear after tear falls across my cheeks, freezing as they drop from my face. “You’re dreaming,” I say aloud, “Wake up!” I scream louder. A cold hand rubs my right shoulder. *I don’t want to*

open my eyes; I don't want to see, it isn't real. The man snaps and suddenly I'm floating, just suspended above the ground only by a few inches. I soar towards the back of the room, leaving the light into total darkness.

I am pressed against something much softer now, but I can't move my arms or my legs. I continue trying to assess my location by looking around, but it's still too dark in the room. "Help," the soft word escapes my lips. I tremble as the audible footsteps come nearer, like Prada shoes in an empty building lobby.

I didn't know which way to look or what to expect. I close my eyes again, hoping to wake up and realize this was indeed all a dream. My hands clinch up into fists and my feet are so cold, I can't feel them anymore. To my right, a curtain is opens, shedding light directly on me. I squint, attempting to adjust to the sudden burst of sunlight. Unfortunately, the light doesn't make me feel any better.

"Briellyn, this would be much easier if you relax," the voice booms in my head, carrying an accent I'm unfamiliar with.

Somehow, I find the courage to reply, "*What* would be easier?" Honestly, I didn't want to know. *I'm not even sure why I asked.*

The figure steps into the light, "I, am Barbanon." I'd described him as a very tall, very large figure. I can't tell if he appears so large because of physique or the layered clothing that he's wearing. His skin is a deep shade of green and his rich black hair is slicked back. He reaches for me, his long fingers and black pointy nails grasping my left arm. It's only now that the softness is that of red chair that I'm reclined on.

Barbanon stands above me to my left, moving his hand from my arm to my head. He uses his other hand to gently caress my cheek with his fingernail. "I need to figure out if you are the one I've been looking for all these years," he caresses my head, like he was a petting a prized puppy. When he smiles at me, I notice the fangs.

"What if," I swallow hard, my voice trembling, "I'm *not* who you've been looking for?"

"Then you'll end up like them," he points to my right, I follow his finger as a fire conjures up, showcasing the bones of at least ten different individuals. I face forward and bawl, "Please," I plead, "I *don't know anything*." I think about my mother and how she died. Then the thought of my father's gruesome face. My memories switching from the nightmares to reality, unable to separate the two. *Was it a deer?* Still crying, I gather my courage, "It was you, right...? The one who killed my parents..."

He wipes the tears from my face, his gesture almost affectionate. "Oh, my dear," he smirks, "I guess in a way, you could say that I'm to blame for that." *I'm going to die*. I'm going to die the day after my father, and Skyla will be all alone. I grimace at the devastating thought.

Barbanon moves towards my feet as the chair lowers, still reclined, my feet are dangle, bent at the knees. The back of the chair comes forward, now facing him. I sniffle and find my courage again, I turn my lips up and manage a few trembling words, "Do whatever you have to do, I'm not afraid of you." *I'm fucking terrified*. At this point Sky is my only thought; I'll never see her again or my little niece and nephew. Justin. *Eric*.

Barbanon chuckles at my comment, “Well, to clarify, I didn’t exactly *kill* your mother, she was an accident. Technically, so was your father. The women in the corner there,” he turns my face, “*that* was completely me. You see, the woman I’m looking for is the *perfect* reincarnate of a former deity. You wouldn’t know anything about that would you?” his devilish smile gives me chills.

I have no idea what he’s talking about and I’m not going to entertain him; one thing is certain to me, I am going to end up in that pile of bones. He steps closer, placing his hands on my knees, forcing them apart. He runs his thumbs up the inner seam of my spandex pants until he reaches about three inches from my crotch. I still can’t move, every inch of me wanting to push him away. “This may hurt a little,” he smirks as he kneels toward my right inner thigh, the pressure then stinging forcing my eyes shut before fighting the fear to raise my head up as he sucks the blood from me. A scream escapes me as I close my eyes again.

I open my eyes, as my numbed limbs regain feeling. Hysterically, I jump up only to realize that I’m propped up in my own bed back at the hotel room. I touch myself everywhere and inspect my thighs, which appear untouched. Two little beauty marks were where ‘Barbanon bit me’. None of it was real. The dark voice echoes in my head, “Just in time.” I glance at the clock. 6:55. I don’t remember returning here, and I don’t remember showering. Did I shower then doze off briefly? I overhear a door open in the distance.

“Justin!” I clamber out the bed and rush to my door. As I open it, I exclaim, “Justin, I...” But it isn’t Justin standing outside of his door. It’s a tall woman, roughly my height, hair somewhat darker than mine, same caramel complexion, and

same curvy build wearing a very sexy, *very little*, dress. It feels like I'm staring in a mirror. "Sorry, thought you were someone else," I mumble as I close the door. The woman smiles and walks off. I press my back up against the wall and tear up. *That bastard can't let go of his playboy ways.* I can't believe after our conversation; he would bring someone back to his room. Could he just not wait for my answer?

T.A. Davenport

VIII

STAY AWAY

Justin

Fifty-five minutes earlier...

“How do you expect me to believe all that?” I wearily gawk at Eric after he explains to me Brie’s ‘purpose’ in his mission as we venture back to the hotel thirty minutes after she’d left us.

“Well, honestly, I don’t *expect* you to believe anything. I *do* expect you to have faith though,” Eric replies, disdain in his tone.

“Well given everything Brie has gone through, I guess it all makes a little more sense. Question is though, what makes you think someone is after you and not after *her*?” I like to think of myself as intelligent and quite analytical. *Damn good at it too.*

“What do you mean? She’s part of the equation, not the answer. These termagants couldn’t possibly be after her... the only reason they would be is to get to me.”

“Because of what you’re trying to do? Using those stones?”
Don’t play coy, pretty boy.

Eric retorts, “Well, *you* wanted to know everything.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly expecting a modern day version of Terminator 2; instead of machines, their demons!”

Eric snickers, “Well, I trusted you enough to tell you Justin. You can run with it, or be in denial, either way it doesn’t change anything.”

“I believe you.” *I think.* “It’s just a hard pill to swallow. I think I should accompany you both on this trip.”

“I told you, I would *call* if I needed your expertise. As of right now, I don’t need you.”

I sneer at him, sensing the anger brewing deep down from that reply. “What if Brie *wants* me to go?” *Can’t turn me away if she requests my presence.*

Eric shifts his head towards the window again, “Well... if it makes *her* feel better...” *Found your weak point.*

We pull into the hotel parking lot. *She’ll want me to go, you’ll see pretty boy.* We exit the car and head to our respective rooms, I depart the elevator and venture to my room. I stop in front of Brie’s door, wishing to knock and check on her. She may be resting, so I think better of it. I open my door and undress. *I think I’ll just order room service or something.* I sit down on the bed to take my shoes off, glancing over at the phone then the drawer underneath. Grabbing the menu from the drawer, I quickly glance over the options.

“I think I’ll order dinner for two, have some food waiting for her when she wakes up,” I find our favorites and proceed to pick up the phone. Just then, someone knocks on my door. *That’s odd.* I approach the door. Looking through the peep hole, a woman stands there, but when she turns around I realize it’s Brie. I swing open the door, shirtless, “Hey gorgeous, I was just about to order us some dinner. Want to come in?” She smiles at me, nervously entering the room. I

close the door behind her and place my hand on her back, “Are you okay? You seem a little shaken.”

She glances up at me and nods, “Yeah, I just needed to see you.” *Of course you did, I’m irresistible.* I gesture over for her to sit on my bed as I grab the chair at the desk and offer it to her. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said,” she begins, “And I’m ready.”

A chill runs up my spine from her words. “Are you serious?” I try not to sound too desperate or anxious, but it’s difficult holding back my excitement. She stands, walking towards me.

As she stands above me, she grabs my hands, “I think you and I deserve a chance.” She wraps my arms around her so that my hands are on her lower back. Leaning in, she kisses me deep, intimately. Her lips are soft and juicy, like a plush pillow pressed against mine. I’ve craved that since that hazy night so long ago.

“Justin,” her voice echoes in my head as she nibbles on my lower lip, “Take me.” I pull her on my lap so that she straddles me on the bed. My heart beats wildly, my temperature rising in anticipation. I lift her up and place her underneath me, continuously kissing her. Without hesitation, I unbutton her blouse, kissing her neck then between her breasts until I reach her stomach. I notice a small mark just above her belly button, similar to the symbol that Brie had described to me at the coroners, but *much* smaller.

I push the woman down on the bed, “You’re *not* Brie...” *Wicked bitch.* I wipe my face of the kisses this she-devil just stole from me. *Not again.* “Who the hell are you?” I step away

from her, ready to throw her out. *I can't believe this is happening again.*

The woman morphs into something else right before my very eyes, with a long winding tail covered in scales that look like gold armor, protruding fins about three to five inches long lining her spine, her skin a golden pale green, long flowing deep blue hair, and her breasts were covered by a single piece of cloth. The vilest laugh escapes from the she-demons lips, “Clever, clever. My aren’t we quick to catch on.” *Damn right I’m clever.* Her voice very high pitched and snake like, “I am what many have called a siren, but there are other less appealing names that I’m certain you’re now aware of.”

“Termagant,” I mumble, thinking about what Eric told me. *Get the fuck outta here.* I shake my head and stare in awe.

“Precisely lover boy,” the termagant wraps her tail completely around me, starting with the end of her tail at my neck, the way an anaconda coils around its prey, “*you could’ve just went with it.* It’s been such a long, *long* time since I’ve been with a human.” She smirks, bringing me close to her face to lick my cheek with her long, forked tongue. I struggle to break free of her snake like grip, but the more I do the firmer the grip.

“You don’t look like the termagant that Eric described to me,” I struggle.

“Well that’s because Eric has only heard *stories* of us, our true form is so rarely revealed.”

“And this? This is your true form,” it gets harder to breathe. I stop struggling, my resistance futile.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t want to scare you to death. Our true form is for when we come to collect a soul, but rarely has a mere mortal ever seen that. This is for show,” she caresses my face gently with her curled finger before cradling my face with her hand. “Unfortunately, my master says I can’t kill you and take your soul, but you will need to do something for me... stay away from Briellyn for a while.”

“If you hurt her, I’ll—” her grip tightens around my throat.

“As long as you stay away, your dearest sweetheart will be fine... *for now*.” She smiles then drops me to the floor before changing back into human female form. Similar to Brie, but not exactly as before, and into a much sluttier outfit. I gasp for air, trying to stand anyway. “Go to *sleep* lover boy,” she blows something from her palm into my face that knocks me out cold. “Someone will find you... *soon enough*,” she chuckles as she walks over my incapacitated body into my bathroom.

IT'S NOT A DATE

Briellyn

Ugh. Could Justin be any more disappointing right now!? First this horrifying, far-fetched nightmare, *or whatever that encounter was*, and now I run into a woman who looks just like *me* leaving his room. Not to mention, my father's ghastly corpse, the letter he left, and that weird stone that Eric and I found inside my childhood toy. *Eric* is who I really want to see right now, *I need answers*. I need to know if this *Barbanon* character that enjoys tormenting my dreams happens to be someone Eric is aware of.

I wipe the tears and stand. *Love, the four-letter word that may always elude me; which I've come to accept.* I force the unproductive thoughts from my mind while searching for my phone. To my relief, a text from Eric awaits.

'Dinner at 7:15? Meet in lobby, dress sent up. ~Eric'

Dress? *What dress?* I place my phone back onto the end table as a sudden knock at the door startles me. The timing couldn't have been better, *I'll give him that.* I approach the door, check the peephole, then open it to see room service with a black garment bag in her hand. "For you madame," the woman hands me the bag, "Have a good night." The shuts as I walk to the bed, placing the garment bag over it. When I zip it open, this gorgeous, burgundy, strapless long peplum dress awaits, with zipper details at the waist, and a V cut down the front. I check the size, a perfect six. *How could he possibly know my size?* A small white piece of paper sticks out from inside the dress; I pull it out and open it.

'I called your assistant to find out your size, hope you don't mind. Didn't think you brought anything formal with you, so I picked this up. Cheers, Eric'

Cheers. I snicker, raising the paper up. I glance at my watch to see its already 7:00. *This will be a makeup job like this morning.* Oh wait. Being fashionably late for a dinner date that isn't *all* business, *isn't a bad thing.* I know I could use an extra five minutes to make sure my look is pristine. I venture into the bathroom and pick out deeper shades for my eyes and a very nude, caramel shade of lipstick with a little liner. My hair was still in a ponytail, so I pull it down and grab my curling iron from my bag. I pin some of it back into an updo and I quickly add some bounce to the top, accentuating the layers, and pull some curls down each side.

I grab the dress out the bag and slip it on as the bag slides to the floor. I need to fake some happiness right now and nothing makes me feel better than getting dolled up and being taken to dinner. *Though it's been forever, not including the business dinner the other night.* I glance at myself in the full-size mirror that was adjacent to the bathroom. Sometimes I surprise myself, I grin. *I slay, I slay, I slay, all day.*

The dress fit my curves just right, my cleavage actually looks fantastic in this cut, the color makes my complexion pop, and the length was perfect, falling right at the knee to accent my hips nicely. The long peplum fabric is a nice touch. *Oh no.* I don't have any shoes. I glance at my watch to see it's already 7:16. I don't want to keep him waiting *too* long. *Shit, what do I do?* As I stroll over to pick up the bag from the floor, I realize that it still has a little weight to it. A quick glance at the bottom and something golden is still in it. I reach in to find caramel heels, gold on the stems, with the

signature red bottoms. *He bought me Louboutin's.* Now unable to contain my excitement, because heaven knows I'm too cheap to splurge on super expensive shoes for myself. *Never saw the point.* I sit on the edge of the bed and slip them on, perfect fit. I quickly grab my clutch and rush out the door, heading for the lobby.

As the elevator reaches level one and the doors open, I notice Eric standing in the middle of the lobby dressed in this three-piece tan suit; black shirt; a wide, patterned tie with hues of deep red, black, and speckles of gold pinned down by a diamond and gold pin. His hands are behind his back as he beams at me with his perfect, angelic smile. Be still, my beating heart; my palms sweaty from anxiety and I don't know why. *This isn't a date.*

As I proceed towards him, the entire lobby seems to slow with the exception of him. He takes a few steps towards me, finally meeting within a few inches apart. He glances at his watch and teases, "Ah, 7:20. I thought you'd keep me waiting all night." He brings my hand to his lips, leaning a little closer to me, "You look absolutely *delectable* in that dress by the way." He kisses my hand. *Oh dear, there's a word you don't hear every day.*

I smile at him gratefully, "Why thank you. The man who purchased it for me seems to have exquisite taste."

His eyebrows raise, "Indeed." He brings his other hand before me, holding a flat, wide, black box. He opens it to display a gorgeous gold necklace with an intricate knot in the middle and two dangling pieces, each bearing a rather large diamond and a pair of matching earrings. My eyes light up with excitement. "Now that is the second time today I've

seen that look; I'm growing quite fond of it, actually," he says as I reach for the necklace. *Is this flirting? Cause it feels like it.* My smile shifts into a smirk as I blush in reaction to his comment.

"May I?" He hands me the box, takes the necklace out and has me turn around. He lowers the necklace to my collar, releasing the clasp as he adjusts it accordingly. He spins me back around, "The perfect touch... to the seamless look... on a flawless woman."

My eyes brighten; his comment is unexpected, but *absolutely* welcomed. "What's the occasion for such kind words?" I grin, admiring his lips.

"You'll see," he responds. He reaches for my watch, the gift that Eryn gave me, "Let's take this off, just for a little bit. You don't need to know the time tonight." I almost protest, *but I know he's right.* He unclips the bracelet and places it in the box. I hand him back the box so that I can put the earrings on. Eric then hands it off to the front desk and shows me in the opposite direction guiding me with his hand on my lower back.

A gentleman waits for us outside the lobby, standing next to the door of an American Aston Martin. As we exit the lobby, the gentleman opens the passenger door for me. "You are spoiled," I announce, eyeing Eric from the corner of my eye as I take a seat while he makes his way to the driver side.

Admittedly I love reaping the benefits of it, for now.

He sits down then looks at me, "*I'm* spoiled?" He motions at all of me, "Yet *you're the one* being wined, dined, and gifted." He smirks, forgivingly. I can't help but laugh aloud.

“I never—” I start.

“But, dh, dh, dh,” he interrupts, “I *know* you’d never ask, and I *know* I don’t have to. But I enjoy doing this for you, trust me.” He smiles, my feeble attempt at hiding my blushing amuses him.

The car is sleek, but cozy. Once settled, Eric starts the engine with the push of a button. As the car purrs, my heart starts to race again. *Nothing like a handsome gentleman driving a sexy car.*

We leave the hotel parking lot and speed off into the night. “Do I even want to know how you acquired this in such short notice?” I question as he shifts gears.

He glances over at me with a devilish smirk, “We’ll be driving this to Texas when we leave here.”

“Why not fly?” I inquire. *Not that I’m complaining.*

“We’ll be doing a lot of flying here soon; I want to give my crew some time here,” he shifts again. Light after light we pass illuminates his face in soft amber colors, accentuating his dimples, “Besides, I wanna see how she rides.”

Wait what? Me or the car? Smooth yet ferocious... the car that is. I chortle at his comment.

He glances at me curiously, “What? Do you know how to drive a stick? I could teach you if you don’t.”

His question and comment couldn’t have been timed better. *Get your mind out the gutter, lady.* My heart flutters for a moment, forcing me to change the position of my legs to take the edge off. I respond with a sultry look, then a flirtatious smile, “Oh I can handle a stick, it’s been awhile

though. Big engines too.” *Flirting never hurt anyone* and I’ve had the worst luck with men, given the circumstances with Justin. *And I’m told I’m naturally flirtatious anyway*, so why the hell not just let it out? *Shit, I know I’m good looking*. But everyone has their own taste.

I lean over to him, my legs crossed in his direction, and place my chin upon my propped up left hand, “What do you say I take the wheel on the way back, and uh,” I shyly lick my lips and smile, “*You* can sit back and enjoy the ride.”

Eric eyes me and chuckles, “If you think you can handle it...” *This conversation is spiraling dangerously out of control*.

I quietly laugh at his remark. Every moment we spend together, he loosens up a little bit more. It’s nice to see him lighten up. He makes a right turn then quick left into a parking lot. A small restaurant hails before us as Eric turns off the engine. We both unbuckle our seatbelts and proceed to opening our car doors. Eric rushes over to my side to help me out of the seat. He places a pretty, golden knit shawl around my shoulders to keep me warm, “I wasn’t sure if it was going to be too warm for this, but I think it’s a little chilly.”

“*Thank you*,” I adjust the shawl, staring at him in disbelief. He is almost *too* put together at times, like he has an oracle on speed dial. I take his right arm with my left hand and he cradles it, gently holding my hand with his left as my arm sits snug under his. The front doors are held open by a very well-dressed man, “Welcome to La Provence, may I have your name for the reservation.” The man queries in a French accent.

“Windsor,” Eric responds, holding me closer. “Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Windsor, your table is ready, please follow me.” Eric glances at me from the corner of his eye after the gentleman referred to me as the Mrs. My eyes fall to the floor, a little embarrassed. He quietly snickers and it immediately puts me at ease. He didn’t correct the man. *I’ll take it.*

The waiter leads us to a nice quiet area, away from the crowd. There is a fireplace going and a decent size table for two draped in a white tablecloth with three candles lit, a small vase with a single rose, and two place settings.

Eric enters the room, holding my hand out as he guides me along. The waiter pulls out my chair and Eric helps me to my seat. He then walks to the opposite side of the table, unbuttons his jacket, slips it off with ease, folds it, and places it on the back of the chair. He finally sits down and rolls up his sleeves. There is something incredibly sexy about a man with rolled up sleeves. And then there is that vest. *I’m a sucker for a chiseled man in a vest.* My temperature rises again. *Easy girl.*

He’s moving his lips, those perfectly shaped lips that are just above a strong chin and even stronger jaw line. His dimples show briefly, with each pressing word. He’s fixing his napkin, airing it out and placing it on his lap. With each movement, his shoulders seem to flex under the shirt, leaving me wondering. “And that is why I brought you here,” I finally hear him say.

I gently shake my head and softly chuckle, “Come again?”
Damn it, phrasing.

He grins, “I wanted to get you out of your element for a while, I thought some food and conversation might help you

through this..." He gestures his hands, "*trying* day," he repeats. I nod my head in agreement. He points to the menu, "Let's go ahead and order first, then I will fill you in some more."

Okay this phrasing is getting out of control! "Fill me in?" I smile, picking up my menu to cover my face.

"About the gems and such, you know, what we'd discussed earlier," he concludes, rubbing his chin effortlessly. The ring on his pinky finger showcases a symbol eerily similar to one of the hieroglyphs from the paper he'd shown me the first night we'd met.

"Oh yes, perfect," I smile. Gazing through the menu, all the food sounds amazing. I'm having a hard time choosing. "Um, Eric?" I ask. He glances up over his menu, I continue, "Any suggestions? Everything sounds so tasty, but I've never had French fare before."

He responds with a sexy grin and puts his menu down, "Why Ms. Donado," he playfully shifts his legs from left to right, "if I didn't know any better, I would say you're asking me to order for you..." he crosses his ankle over his knee, "*again.*" He clenches his teeth, flexing his jaw line.

I couldn't help but nervously smile. I immediately look away for a moment, afraid I might get suckered into his gaze once more. "Well," I finally look up, "you do have a rather well-versed palette."

He picks his menu back up and looks just above it, over to me, "You have no idea." *Please give me one.* I raise my eyebrows in response. I continue browsing through the

menu anyway, just until the waiter arrives. A moment or so later, he comes in for our order.

Eric begins ordering for us both, *in French*. When I mentioned well-versed, I didn't think in different tongues. He speaks it like he's born to it. Maybe that's where he's from; he did mention he wasn't American. I take a sip of water as he finishes the order. "My goodness, did you order us a five-course feast?" I joke in a whisper after the waiter leaves. I gesture at him, "You said so much there. I love food and all, but I don't want you to think I'm one to eat my worries away." I take another sip of my water.

"Maybe," he replies simply, "So let's talk." He shrugs his shoulders, quietly clearing his throat. I halfheartedly grin and bow my head to urge him on. "Well as you recall from earlier, the gem that you found today, I mentioned is one of four. I had no idea where the fourth gem was until today. I've only narrowed down a general location for the other three."

He shifts in his seat, leaning forward to better engage me, "Each one represents something different. There is the Aquari, which is blue, used to shape every water source known to man. There is the Eaviri, which is a pearlescent white, used to shape the skies. The Emaldi, a shimmering green with exotic features, used to shape every land mass. And then there is the Fieri gem, it's a radiating red and the most powerful of all four stones, it shaped the planets core. Each of these gems were placed in different parts of the world after it was created."

"Oh, you don't believe in the *big bang* theory?" I ask jokingly. *Corny almost, I know.*

He chuckles at my comment and shakes his head. *Glad he caught on.* I'm rather enjoying this phrasing game that I'm playing in my own head. *Thanks Archer.*

He continues, "The story has it that God had created three angels in the beginning; each with their own unique abilities to aid him in structuring the world as we know it. Once the world was complete, he gave each of the angels a wife or two, to create mortal life. It is from two of them, and their wives, that all human life, different nationalities and all, came from."

"And the third angel?" I ask, setting my left elbow on the table, as my thumb and forefinger support my chin, listening closely.

"He carried a jealous trait that God didn't want to be present in man; he took away his ability to have children."

I frown, "That's horrible." I think for a moment, "But if that were true, how come envy is a sin? It's obviously a trait that man developed anyway." So many interpretations.

"Evolutionary characteristics. Supposedly, if the third angel were to have a child, the child would be..." Eric hesitates.

Would be... I stare at him curiously.

"Would be an outright demon. The antichrist." Eric stares at me, awaiting my response.

I think for a moment, trying to grasp this slight alternative concept. "So, what are you trying to tell me, that the Bible has it wrong?" I'm not one to judge what others believe, but I don't easily sway from my *own* beliefs.

“No, of course not, it’s simply a shortened version. There are always forces at work that we can’t always see, and they don’t want or need any credit.”

Okay, I’m intrigued. “Ah,” I grab my goblet and take another sip. After today’s encounter with Barbanon, I think I will further entertain this, although still uncertain if my encounter was real. Before I could think of another question, the waiter comes in with our first course. As we both try our food, I ask, “Well how do you know all of this if it remains unpublished and untold?”

“There were manuscripts that were found, long before the bible was written, that were locked away. I found them; *well my family found them*, and had them interpreted. Never to be shared with mankind. The information is too sensitive to become public.”

“Is that how you became so wealthy? Family of treasure hunters?”

He laughs, “No, my family is wealthy through other means.”

“Like?” I question him hesitantly, hoping it’s not something outrageous.

“My great-great grandfather was a supreme court judge, his son a lawyer and a farmer, *his* son an inventor and railroad investor, and my father an investor. Collectively they invested right.”

“That’s an awful long line of successful men.” Dare I say, “Any of them slave owners?” My eyebrows raise as I pucker my lips.

Eric almost chokes on his drink as I cover my glee with my napkin. He quickly grabs his napkin to cover his mouth as he coughs then gathers himself. I giggle. Between coughs he manages, “Why... *on earth*... would you ask something like that?”

I take another bite of food, shrug my shoulders and smile, “I just figure the time periods match up. They were wealthy... assumedly white. Honestly, *I’m just curious*. I would never hold it against you if they were. Not all slave owners felt their slaves were inferior. Hell, some of them were even given land and wealth after the owners passed. And, by all means, correct me if I’m wrong,” I smile at him teasingly. I love getting a rise out of him, it’s oddly entertaining.

Eric collects himself, “Actually no, each of them rightfully *employed* every man or woman who worked with them or for them, of their own free will and with higher than average wages. My great grandfather actually fancied an Ebony.”

“Oh really, his mistress perhaps?” I raise my eyebrows but lower my head and eat, snickering to myself. *I should stop teasing him, but he’s so cute riled up.*

“No, they were together for a while and she disappeared very young, unfortunately. What is with this questioning?” Eric demands, unbelieving of my words.

“I’m just messing with you Eric, honestly I am, I may have gone too far, I’m sorry,” I laugh aloud, reassuring him of my playfulness. I really didn’t care what his answers were. I just wanted to tease him for my own amusement. *Terrible I know*. He angrily sneers at me, loosening up after a moment. He takes a sip of his water. I adjust in my seat, “*So*... did these

angels have names? In the bible they speak of the other angels, like Gabriel or Michael. Hell, even the devil has a name.” I take another bite as Eric answers the question.

“The eldest angel is Senon. The next is Palidon, and then the last, *the exile*, his name was Barbanon.”

I stop chewing and stare at my plate. *There’s no way I could hear that name twice in one day.* What I experienced could not have been some type of dream, it would be too much of a coincidence. “So, the devil, *Lucifer*, where did he come from if this *Barbanon* came first?” I inquire, anxious for an answer.

— ξ —

THE FALLEN ANGEL

Briellyn

Eric shrugs his shoulders in a *well* kind of manner, “They are one and the same. He was banished from heaven and lost physical form. So, he’s like a lost spirit, at the most, convincing man to do his evil bidding. Just like in the stories, you never actually *see* him.”

No, that’s not right. The man, *or creature rather*, that I saw had a body, a *very* real touch. Maybe I was dreaming, and he simply hijacked it, which is why I awoke in my own bed. *Yeah, that would make sense.* Fright and contempt finds my face just as our main course arrives. The food looks amazing, but the smell makes me sick. Eric notices my demeanor change, waiting for the server to depart to inquire.

“What’s the matter?” he requests as he scoots closer to the table.

My eyes fall to my lap, embarrassed. “Can I be straight with you?” It feel like I’m gasping for air.

“Of course,” he gestures with his hand and sits back.

I take a deep breath. “I had another horrible dream,” I start, avoiding eye contact, “I’m a little embarrassed because I feel like it was more...” I bite my lip, “*intimate.*”

Eric swallows after the last word. “I’m not judging,” he replies kindly, clearly intrigued.

“Well, I went for a run earlier and I had been running for about forty-five minutes. I was on my way back to the hotel

when I saw this dark figure, like the one I had mentioned to you before that was in the previous two dreams. It approached me, then grabbed me, and then I was somewhere else *all of a sudden*. He called himself Barbanon,” I quickly notice Eric shift in his seat, adjusting his neck. His motions were concerning, but I continued, “And he had me pressed against this reclining chair thing, where I couldn’t move anything except my head. He told me that he needed to be sure I was who he’d been looking for all these years...” I stop, embarrassed about the bite on my thigh.

“What?” Eric asks. His tone changes, his expression now filled with worry.

“He, uh, claims to take credit for my parent’s deaths, well accidental and then he um,” I continue avoiding his gaze; “he pulls my legs apart and... *and bites me.*” My eyes flutter at the confession.

Eric looks uncomfortable, shifting in his seat again, “Where?”

“Very high up my inner thigh...” I clench my jaw, “But it was just a dream, I thought. I woke up in my room. I just didn’t understand because I didn’t *remember* getting back from my run *or showering*. I’ve never had lapse of memory like that before.”

Eric is in awe, thinking carefully. He then sits forward and demands in a whisper, “You have to show me the bite.”

“What?!” I exclaim, not expecting him to say that. “Don’t be ridiculous, *it was a dream.*”

“Brie, I know it’s embarrassing where he bit you, but you have to get over that. I need to make sure you’re okay. I need to know if this is a credible threat or not.”

Ha! He’s asking me to open my legs to him. Even though it’s not for a sexual reason, there’s no easy way to show him without me feeling vulnerable. Maybe it’s because I find him attractive. I do find it rather riveting that he is jumping to my rescue though.

“The reason it’s embarrassing is not what you think,” I lowly reply, shaking my head still avoiding his gaze. I hold onto the seat of the chair in a nervous fidget. My gaze finally finds his, his glare more serious than I’d seen of him previously. I glance towards the ceiling and close my eyes hard. I suck my teeth and finally confess, “I’m attracted to you Eric, that’s what makes it awkward.”

Eric stares at me, shocked. “Come on, surely you knew,” I egg him on, placing my face in my hand. *I thought my googly eyes were obvious.*

“I mean, I just thought you were naturally flirty. You have such a happy, upbeat, *confident* personality type, that may seem like flirting, but it isn’t *really*,” Eric retorts, still a little surprised.

“I mean there’s something about you, I thought maybe you were gay because I was showing some actual interest and you wouldn’t display it back, but then the few comments in the car from the airport and then here. I have such... *mixed* feelings about you. You give me this very strange, *comfortable*, safe feeling. Like, I’m at home in your arms. But in my *mind*, I’m uncomfortable with it. There’s no way I can show you

the bite without feeling vulnerable to you. And I'm a very confident woman, don't misunderstand me. I just—"

"No, I understand," Eric interrupts. He reaches for my hand, taking it into his own. "Brie, I would never ask you to do something you weren't comfortable with. But I *beg* you, for the sake of your safety; I do need to see the location where he bit you. I promise I will think of a way for it to be as comfortable and *non-evasive* as possible." He smiles. "Now eat," he commands.

How can I eat now? At some point tonight, I'll be showing this man something on my body that is in a location that is supposed to be discreet. But his touch made me feel safe again, comfortable. *This man is going to be the death of me.* My emotions can't keep up. My body tells me he's familiar, but my mind tells me take it easy, you don't know this guy. I'd throw my rule book out for him if he asked.

Eric takes a bite but is obviously distracted. I try to eat too, but with everything I've learned, *well you know*. "So, what are the gems for?" I blurt out the moment it comes to mind, trying not to think of my examination later.

Eric stares at me, pleased to have the silence broken and conversation resume, "They... are actually for this machine that is being built. They are the key to making it work. Before you ask what the machine is for, I'm not going to tell you just yet. There are eyes and ears everywhere. But you will get to meet the scientists behind it, Dr. Lannister, Dr. Teegrit, Dr. Strassmore, and Dr. Reese. All of them fantastically brilliant in their own ways. And you're the perfect addition."

I gaze at him curiously. Me? *Brilliant amongst a team of doctors and scientists?* There aren't many times where I feel like the least qualified in a room, but I get the feeling I will know what it's like very soon. I want to know more about the machine, but I know he won't budge on his decision, so I ask instead, "When will I get to meet them?"

"When we reach Quebec City. They'll be awaiting our arrival." He grins for only a moment before it morphs into a troubled stare.

"When will I see this machine then?" My eyes grow big with excitement, anything to get away from it all. It's something I need more than ever with all the weird shit going on. *I keep saying that don't I?*

"Not until London," he says promptly as he signals the waiter over. "Can we get our remaining entrees to go please? Something's come up and we have to leave as soon as possible." He wipes his mouth with his napkin then hands the waiter his card. I glance back and forth between him and the waiter, confused.

"Um, what's the rush? Where are we going?" I inquire, nervous I missed something.

"Back to the hotel, I need to look at that bite Brie. I honestly can't even focus right now unless I know."

"Know what, *exactly?* If I wasn't hallucinating, what does all this mean? Again, I'm *pretty* sure I was dreaming. No marks or anything..."

“Barbanon is known to play many tricks. He’s taught himself very intricate mind games over the centuries. Things that would be any man’s nightmare. If he’s bit you, I will tell you more about what’s on my mind, but for now, I needn’t worry you *if it was just a dream.*” He stands up and puts his jacket on, smoothing it out to ensure its crisp. The waiter returns with our wrapped entrees in a bag. Eric nods as the waiter returns his card.

“Merci, Monsieur Windsor. We hope you enjoy the rest of your meal,” the waiter replies. Eric walks over to help me along. I’m nervous and anxious all at the same time. What could Eric be so worried about? *Should I tell him about the bones in the corner where Barbanon had me?* He places my shawl around my shoulders and grabs the bag with the food.

We make our way outside to the car and he stops on the passenger side. “Still want to drive?” He inquires, grinning at me. Caught off guard because he insisted we leave in such a rush, I’d thought he’d forgotten. *Hell, I kind of did.*

“Hell yes,” I reply.

“I figured it might take the edge off me seeing you naked here in about twenty minutes,” he chuckles and sits into the car as I stop cold in my tracks. I blush uncontrollably yet feel oddly turned on by his bold statement. I finally continue to walk to the driver side and get in after he is already settled.

He shrugs his shoulders and glares at me devilishly, “Pay back for the slavery and mistress comments.”

I shake my head and laugh aloud. “If I didn’t know any better, I think you’re the one who needs to take the edge off.

Don't worry, you just relax over there," I tease. We both know he's not going to see me naked. That wouldn't be necessary. But I might as well be in my underwear given where he will have to look. The last time I was in something so publicly revealing was my senior year of college. Hell, the last time a man has seen me scantily clad was over three years ago... *and that was a drunken mistake that I didn't care to make twice.*

"Are you going to start the car?" he jokes back.

"Oh, right," I snap back into the moment, start the car and we pull off, "Like riding a bike," I murmur. Eric just chuckles as we speed off back to the hotel.

When we arrive, the doorman comes to open my door. He then grabs the bag of food from Eric. Eric request him to bring it up to his room, prepared on plates. Eric then takes my hand and says, "Let's get this over with so we can both stop being so awkward... *and worried.*" *Who are you tellin'?*

We board the elevator. If I didn't know any better, I would think he was nervous too. Perhaps more so about the bite than anything else. *I hope this is all just a figment of my imagination.* But the other part of me wants to know what the bite means and what Barbanon meant about making sure I'm the one, *even if it isn't real.*

I do want to get this over with though. I should've asked if we could stop by the bar. A shot might take the edge off a little bit. We reach the seventh floor and walk down the long hall. There weren't but four rooms on the entire floor. He grabs his key card from inside his jacket and waves it in front of the door lock. It clicks open to reveal this amazing suite,

roughly four times the size of my room. He escorts me inside and closes the door behind me.

“Wow,” I nod my head in approval, “You certainly spare no expense, do you Mr. Belvedere?” I glance back at him mockingly, he’s already removed his jacket and is now unbuttoning his vest.

“Would you, maybe, like to change into something more comfortable?” he inquires as he unbuttons his shirt sleeves then his shirt.

“What’d you have in mind? Did you already call and have someone pick me up some pajamas? Journelle perhaps?” I tease, wondering what amazing planned outfit he had for me this time. *He plans for everything.*

He laughs aloud, “Oh my Ms. Donado. I *have* spoiled you.” He reaches into his drawer and grabs a black tee and satin boxers, *obviously his*, and tosses it at me, “I was thinking more like, something of mine.”

I stare at it in my hands, “Oh.” I laugh; embarrassed I made such a trivial request. “This will work great,” I reply. He takes off his vest and his shirt, showing off his very muscular arms and chest. I find myself staring at him again; this man is quite literally perfect. He looks like the gym is his home and he’s always in the weight room.

He grabs something satin looking and walks into the bathroom, “I’ll go ahead and finish changing in there so that you can change out here.” He flashes me a flirtatious smile and I nod my head in promise as he retreats to the bathroom.

He shuts the door and I immediately bite my thumbnail. This man would be the one that would make me break every rule that I've ever made for myself. *Seriously, every rule.* I turn around and put my purse and the shawl down on the bed. I sit down to remove my shoes as I stretch my arms around to my back to unzip myself. The dress easily slips off, leaving me in just my bra and underwear.

I slip on the green satin shorts and the black shirt, which smells of that delightful cologne he wears. He yells out to me, "May I come out? Are you decent?"

"Yes," I call out. He comes out wearing a form fitting tank top and satin pajama pants. He has something in his hands. "Are you ready to do this Brie?" he asks.

My nerves are shot. "You wouldn't happen to have any wine or other alcoholic beverage, would you?" I anxiously rub my arm, staring at him bashfully, "I just need to take the edge off."

He opens his fridge and grabs a tiny bottle of rum. Giving me a peculiar look, he hands me the bottle as he sits next to me, "Drink up." I glower at him and take the bottle, shooting it quickly. Immediately the burning sensation down my throat warms me from toes to fingertips. Although I don't feel ready, I know there is no time like the present.

I pull myself further onto the bed, sitting legs folded in the center of it. Moving around my shoulders feels natural as I try to relax. *Stop acting like you're about to lose your virginity, for goodness sake.*

He puts on a pair of pearlescent glasses and turns to assess me. He carefully analyzes me, first looking at my left cheek then my left arm. “Which thigh is it on?” he smoothly asks as I stare off into the distance trying not focus on what he’s doing. I clear my throat and hike the shorts up on my right thigh just past the bite but before the curve of my hip is exposed.

I continue to look away as he delicately touches me. *It immediately turns me on.* His touch wasn’t sexual in anyway, but my body longs for this man. *If I was a man, he would already know... thank God I’m not.* He takes off the glasses and stares into my eyes. “Well,” he utters, inches from my face. But he doesn’t finish. He simply pauses for a moment and continues to gaze into what feels like my soul. I know this face, this stare, those deep blue eyes, the raven black hair, the lips.

He leans in and presses his soft lips against mine. Tasting his warmth for the first time is like heaven. The feeling of excitement and anticipation rushing through me and around me is invigorating. I lean into him to bring him closer and deeper into me. He wraps his arms around me, drawing me into him, against his powerful body. I wrap my legs around him, portentous of me longing for him more intimately. He lays me down and climbs on top of me as he continues kissing me, his tongue massaging mine. My entire body is turned on. *If he rubbed my toe the right way, I could peak right now.* As the kiss grows deeper, there’s a knock at the door.

He pulls away, quickly and suddenly. “Ignore it,” I plea, trying to bring him close to me again, but he shies away.

“I shouldn’t... *we*... shouldn’t,” he begins as he climbs off me, then off the bed. Flustered he adds, “I-I can’t.” He awkwardly walks towards the door and opens it. It’s room service with the food from the restaurant. “Just leave the cart, I will pull it in, thanks,” he states to the gentleman, pulling it in.

I stare at him, disappointed, embarrassed and worried, “What’s the matter?” He brings the table in front of him in an attempt to cover himself and prevent me from seeing his interest. *But oh, I had already seen it.* “Did I do something wrong?” I probe again.

He looks away and sighs, “No, you did absolutely *nothing* wrong. We can’t do this, you and I... *it’s complicated.*” He sighs again. *What the hell just happened?* I just want to slap him senseless. I confess my attraction and this is what I get. *Thanks for the lady blue balls, pal.* He sighs heavily again, “I need to tell you something,” he mutters out. Oh boy, *here we go.*

End of Sample

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CHARACTER REFERENCES

**For descriptive purposes only, to see my inspiration for the character.*

Eric Windsor/ Royce Eryx

Henry Cavill

Brie (Briellyn) Rene Donado

Terrene Davenport

Kalil Roketi

Dwayne Johnson

Justin Vandegrift

Chris Pratt

Marcus Vandegrift

Sam Worthington

Raymond Donado (Briellyn's father)

Morgan Freeman

Skyla Donado – Matthews

Meagan Good

Reilly Matthews

Brian J White

Eryn

Rooney Mara

Barbanon

William Levy

Fiorello

Tom Hiddleston

Senon

Dennis Haysbert

Palidon

Tony Goldwyn

T.A. Davenport

ABOUT T. A. DAVENPORT

Born and raised in New Jersey, Terrene is a proud mother of one (currently) and happily married to a sailor. As a veteran herself, she took her creative mind, her adventures, and her dreams, and then turned them into something that all may experience through this magical tale. She has a Bachelor's in Management, a Master's in Strategic Communication, and, currently working little by little, to earn a second Master's in Organizational Leadership. Writing and designing are her passions and she plans on pursuing it for as long as it takes to achieve success in it. She's very passionate about many things in her life and thanks God for allowing her to be creative and business minded. Half of her own lifelong fairytale became complete when she met her husband, later adding to it by creating a life that was equal parts of them. Hoping to add another chapter to that fairytale is enriching the minds of readers and helping them get lost in a fantasy world and keeping them entertained throughout the series. When she went through very hard times in her life, her first instinct was to write. She wants to encourage and help others through those their tough times by giving them something that's different, inspiring, and entertaining.