

Bossy Romance



a single dad

romantic

comedy



NIA ARTHURS

BOSSY ROMANCE

BILLIONAIRE DADS BOOK 6

NIA ARTHURS

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(V1)

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Billionaire. Genius inventor. Surprise... father?

Adam Harrison is the undercover boss of a billion-dollar tech company.

Handsome. Charming. Heart of pure gold.

He trusts me—his ruthless executive assistant—to run Vision Tech.

But after years of working together, the lines between us are impossibly blurred.

It takes a horrible date gone wrong to realize I need to take my life back. *Now*.

On the day I announce my resignation, Adam gets another harsh surprise...

In the form of an eleven-year-old on his doorstep.

I'm sure I can help Adam with this latest crisis and then quietly disappear.

Only my boss has no intentions of letting me go. At least not without a fight.

Extravagant gifts. Trips overseas. Foot massages. He even lets me sleep in his bed.

But is all this fuss because he wants *me* or because he wants a competent CEO stand-in?

I wish I could answer that question.

I wish my heart wasn't so tangled with his.

I wish he didn't kiss me that night.

And I really wish we never found out the real reason Adam's son showed up on his doorstep.

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CHAPTER 1

THE NOOSE

NOVA

“YOU SHOULD DRINK SOMETHING.” A bottle of water magically appears in front of me.

“Should you be back here right now? It’s almost time for your presentation.”

Tan knuckles rap against the table. “No arguing. You’ve been on your feet for three hours straight and I haven’t seen you take a sip of anything. I’m not moving from here until you hydrate, darlin’.”

I roll my eyes—privately—before grabbing the water and glancing up at my boss, Adam Harrison.

‘Drop-dead gorgeous’ is a phrase that’s been thrown around to describe him, so I feel comfortable using the term.

Objectively, of course.

Adam is tall, with broad shoulders, big brown eyes, a chiseled jawline, dark hair that’s a little curly, and a warm smile that’s never far from his face. As usual, he’s wearing a tight T-shirt with his pecs straining against the cotton. Jeans and his favorite cowboy boots complete the look.

His vivid brown eyes find mine and linger, waiting until I’ve finished with the water before he takes it and returns the cap.

He’s been working hard lately. I can tell by the dark circles under his eyes. Even looking a little more tired than usual, he’s still every bit the hunky country boy-next-door.

Realizing that I’m staring, I avert my gaze and try to get my thoughts back in order.

Adam grabs a napkin and swipes it against my bottom lip. “So messy.”

My heart does a little pitter-patter.

I move my head back. “You should be out front.”

“In a minute.” Adam sits on the edge of the table, his back muscles rolling like well-oiled drums. The light from the stage creeps into the private room, throwing his profile into shadows.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I’m trying to dial back on my excitement. If I go on a tangent, that won’t be good for anyone.”

“Just do what we practiced. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s a given.” He leans toward me and cocks his head to the side. “You’re way more intimidating than any of those judges.”

He smiles and I...

I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I keep getting shocked by how attractive my boss is.

I never used to notice. At least, not in a way that I’d find distracting.

Of course I’ve always *known* Adam Harrison was gorgeous.

Based on social cues alone, it was pretty cut-and-dry. Women batting their lashes, hands clinging to his biceps, voices turning high-pitched and giggling—there’s so much giggling whenever Adam opens his mouth.

Again. Understandable. That Southern drawl of his is more dangerous than a snake charmer.

I know my boss is gorgeous.

I *know*.

But it’s been bothering me how that knowledge keeps affecting me more and more.

Applause breaks out from the crowd. I turn my head toward the conference room, slip my feet back into my pumps and rise.

Adam stands with me. “I guess I’m up next.”

“Do you have—”

“The presentation notes organized according to your cute little color-coded system? Yes.” He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the index card binders that I like to use. “Right here. In fact, I re-organized them last night to make the flow better.”

I narrow my eyes. *Is he getting cheeky?* “I see you didn’t need my help.”

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

I look at him for a few seconds. “What do you have planned?”

“Nothing.”

He so does.

I sigh because he’s the boss and it doesn’t really matter. Whatever he announces, I can make it work. “Remember to—”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I do,” he says, his gaze intent on mine.

My chest rises and falls on a shaky breath. I'm nervous for him. Not because I think he'll fail but because I know how much doing well means to him.

Without another word, I jut my chin at the door.

Adam grabs a lanyard from the table, slides it over his head and strides confidently toward the lights of the main room. I stay back a few minutes and then follow in the same direction.

Vision Tech banners are strung all around the conference room, proudly proclaiming the company sponsorship. This is the first round of the competition and the excitement is high.

Long tables hold the most unique and cutting-edge inventions of the year. Holo-boards reveal summaries of the devices as well as the headshots of up-and-coming inventors.

Adam is already at his table. The cameras are pointed at him, sending footage of his face to the giant screen on the stage.

He looks calm and confident in front of the cameras. It's baffling why he refuses to do a single magazine photoshoot or interview. Not only would it boost exposure for Vision Tech, but he would be an ace at it.

"One of the issues we found when creating the MTB," Adam says, pointing to the headband device that allows deaf music students to 'experience' the vibration of an instrument, "is battery life. The technology of our time still has severe restrictions on energy usage. Sorry to that little bunny, but after a while, energy dies out."

Chuckles break through the room.

A camera flashes.

They're eating this up.

Adam's brown eyes slide over the crowd. "Although we settled on removable batteries, I felt intense dissatisfaction. There had to be another way to improve the energy source. I just had to find it."

The other inventors start bobbing their heads. They're all driven by that primal sense of wanting more, knowing there's a different way, a *better* way to do something, and fighting tirelessly to make that vision in their heads a reality.

Working with Adam forced me to appreciate a person's 'charge into the unknown' spirit. Even if that run-first, figure-it-out-later mentality is why so many inventors are broke.

“That’s why I went back to the drawing board and created the world’s smallest, self-sustaining, non-nuclear battery.”

Oohs break out in the room.

I don’t even bat an eyelash.

“What’s unique about this battery is that it’s powered by movement.” Adam lifts the invention to show it off. “And you might say that kinetic batteries have been around for a while, but I would remind you that there’s a reason they haven’t taken off yet. The amount of kinetic energy a human body alone can create is not enough to power a calculator. Unless you can find a way to harness and multiply that energy.”

Another round of ‘oohs’ break out.

I glance at the judges. They’re leaning forward, salivating, eager to pounce from their elevated podiums and get their hands on Adam’s invention.

He has them in the palm of his hand.

One of the judges talks into the microphone. “Why does your invention force people to become physically active? Why make the recharging method so inconvenient?”

A crinkle appears above Adam’s nose.

He’d been anticipating this question.

“I believe that technology should make our lives better in all ways. Which is why the battery has a mode that functions as normal and one that encourages movement. In other words, if you want to charge it, you don’t have to move. However, recharging with movement is the angle we’re going to push because that’s the part that saves lives.”

Applause breaks out.

People are nodding.

Adam’s lips curl up. He’s trying so hard to be humble, but it’s difficult for a man that brilliant to pull it off.

Walking to the left, Adam picks up a water bottle and takes a sip. His eyes find mine in the crowd and he gives me a little smirk.

My heart tightens. I dip my chin in response.

Adam whirls around to face the judges. It’s time for his closing statements.

To my surprise, he doesn’t say anything more about the batteries. “I thought it was a little boring to only present these batteries to you today.” He reaches under the table and lifts a bag.

I immediately tip my chin to the ceiling and sigh in annoyance.

He did not.

“This is a hover-bag.” Adam proudly gestures to it. “Powered by the batteries, it hovers above the ground, making transportation a breeze. It can hold up to a hundred pounds of weight and can be stored anywhere.” His eyes are glittering in that—well, I call it the ‘Mad Hatter’ way. “Imagine you’re at the airport and you’re trying to drag all these heavy bags behind you. With the hover-bag, it’s as easy as dragging a basket of flowers.”

The crowd seems just as confused as I am.

No one says a word.

Adam grins broadly, glancing around for encouragement before finally pointing his smile at me.

I pull my lips in and shake my head.

He doesn’t look disappointed by the restrained reception at all. Clamping his hands together, he announces, “Any questions?”

A bunch of hands go up.

I retreat from the room to prepare for the next segment of the convention. The inventors will enjoy champagne, network, chat and wait for the judges to make their decision.

In the background, I hear Adam droning on about his hover-bag.

Laughter builds in my chest, but I have no idea if it’s rooted in amusement or utter despair.

What am I going to do with you, Adam?

“Courtney, Henry,” I motion to the two Vision Tech interns, “help me set these tables so catering can bring out the refreshments.”

They hurry to follow me and whisper to each other.

“Are all inventors that eccentric?” Henry, a young, college-aged guy who’s interning at Vision Tech, mumbles. He wears his hair in a high afro that reminds me of Will Smith in *Fresh Prince*.

I take out my index cards and flip through them, listening keenly to the conversation while I triple check my to-do list.

“That guy wins the competition every year.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Sometimes, his inventions are genius. And sometimes,” Courtney shakes her long blond hair out of her face, “they’re just stupid.”

“Stupid?”

Courtney glances around as if she's scared someone will overhear. "This one time, he invented a spinning knife, fork and spoon. Like... you just press a button and a different utensil pops out."

Henry's eyes widen. "But that's kind of cool though."

"Cool?" Courtney scoffs. "People have been using separate utensils for ages. Inventing another tool to eat with is a total waste of time."

I step in between them to brush out the table cloth. "If it had served a market, then it would have been worth the fuss. The problem is that some of his inventions are commercially viable and others..."

Mentally calculating the surface of the table, I realize that we'll need more room. Thankfully, I'm always prepared for the unexpected.

"Henry, can you bring a few more tables from the storage closet?"

Henry walks off and returns with the tables. He sets it up just in time for the caterers.

I'm too busy running back and forth between the floor crew, the caterers and the management team to keep track of Adam.

It's not until someone taps me on the shoulder that I anticipate coming face-to-face with my boss.

Except it's someone else.

"You're the owner of Vision Tech, right?" A man with greying hair and a pleasant smile motions to me.

"No, I'm not the owner." Although I've been mistaken as such many times.

"The face then? Whenever I see Vision Tech at these things, I'd see you."

"And who exactly is it that's been spying on me?" I arch an eyebrow.

He pulls out a business card. "How impolite of me. Leroy Foster."

I check his card. "Yoon Technologies. You work with renewable energy."

"As well-informed as you are beautiful, I see." He laughs gently. "You're familiar with our work?"

"You've managed to consume most of the commercial market share in renewable energy and natural resources. I was beginning to think of you as competition."

"There goes my opportunity to wow you with our company slogan."

My lips curl up. "Are you here to scout out our inventors?"

“I heard a rumor that Mr. Harrison’s recent invention would have something to do with self-sustaining batteries. I couldn’t resist.” His eyes twinkle. “Vision Tech throws these conventions just to scoop up the best inventors before the rest of us have a chance. I was determined to get ahead of the game.”

My smile blooms a bit more.

Adam walks up to us. His grin is intact, but his eyes are carefully assessing when he sticks a hand out to Leroy. “Hey, man.”

“Mr. Harrison,” Leroy takes the outstretched hand, “we were just talking about you and your brilliant invention.”

“The hover-bag?”

I keep my face intact but, inside, I snort a little.

Leroy’s eyes dart to me and back. “Uh, no. The self-sustaining kinetic batteries.”

“They’re just a little something I threw together,” Adam says flippantly.

Leroy gets that shocked look again as if he can’t decide if Adam is joking.

He’s not.

The man can solve complicated problems before breakfast and then spend all his time coming up with fanciful inventions until midnight.

“Mr. Foster,” I gesture to Leroy, “is the CEO of Yoon Technologies, a leader in non-nuclear renewable energy.”

“Ah.” Adam dips his chin, but he doesn’t look that impressed.

Leroy lets out nervous laughter and flashes a business card. “I would love to discuss a research position at our company. I might not be able to match Miss Delaney in beauty, but I can promise you amazing benefits and all the creative freedom you want.”

“If you can’t even match Miss Delaney’s beauty, then why would I want to work with you?” Adam asks.

I furrow my brow and subtly jab him in the stomach.

Adam makes a pained sound and then covers it with a cough.

I smile politely. “Mr. Foster, it’s about time for the judges to make their announcement. Why don’t I escort you to the front?”

“I’ll come with you.” Adam sticks close as I lead the way into the atrium.

A few moments later, the MC makes the announcement and the rest of the contestants file in to hear what we all knew—Adam is the winner.

I applaud politely and oversee the doling out of prizes from behind the scenes. The moment the ceremony is over, I call the event company in charge of the after-party.

I'm on that call when Adam finds me again. The conference room is completely empty, the lights shut off and most of the inventions cleared out.

I lift a finger, asking Adam for a moment, and he nods.

"Please make sure no reporters sneak into the after-party. Last year, our latest invention was almost plastered on the front page news. We can't have that again."

"Understood, Ms. Delaney."

"Thank you." I pocket my phone and glance at Adam who has a glass of champagne in each hand.

He extends one of the drinks to me. "Non-alcoholic. I checked."

My fingers wrap around the cold glass and I smile slightly. "Are you donating your prize to the children's home again?"

"Yes." He thinks about it and then adds, "I'll match the prize money. Sister Clarence mentioned they needed a new van to get the kids to school."

I lift my phone and tap out a note.

Adam never keeps his prize money. In fact, he almost acts like it's dirty.

I wish I could share this side of him with the world, but my boss's generosity is another thing he keeps under wraps.

"You didn't seem all that excited about my little surprise," Adam says, noting my expression.

"Vision Tech isn't in the business of creating suitcases."

He laughs. "Hover-bags, Nova. Hover-bags. It's the next big thing."

"Is this one of those situations where I'm expected to humor you or can I be honest and remind you that nobody is asking you to reinvent the wheel."

His eyes glimmer. "People don't know what they want until you give it to them."

"That applies to what they *don't* want too, you know. Sometimes, it takes getting something to realize you don't want that thing at all."

"Pessimist."

"Feel free to lead the marketing campaigns if you're so confident."

He scowls. "You play dirty."

"I'll get you in front of the camera one way or another, Harrison." I take a sip of the champagne. It's bubbly in my throat. "You can't hide who you

are forever.”

“As long as I have you, I’m not worried about anything.”

A strange, strangling sensation fills me.

I glance down. “It’s your business, even if I’m running it.”

“Nova, I’d prefer to participate in these competitions every year than own the business. You know that.”

My smile is strained. I finish off the rest of the champagne. “I saw you talking to the second-place winners. You found our newest engineers?”

“Their robotic arm was brilliant.”

I shake my head. “You have a serious thing for robot arms.”

“They’re cool. What else can I say?”

“I liked them too. I’ll offer them positions on Monday and have their lab ready by Wednesday.”

“A private lab? You must really like them,” Adam says with a grin.

“Medical technology is a booming industry. We need legs in a commercially viable market, especially when our brave and bold leader starts skipping down rabbit holes.”

Adam coughs. “Now you’re just being mean.”

My phone vibrates. I glance down with a smile on my face, but the smile disappears and my entire body goes stiff when I see who’s calling.

Lyra.

“Who is it?” Adam asks.

My fingers close over the phone and I turn it so he can’t see the screen. “No one. I’ll head out now.”

“Come with me. I’ll take you to the after-party.”

“If the contestants see us together—”

“Their first thought will be that I own the company? That’s a big leap.”

I shake my head delicately. “I’m not going to the after-party.”

Adam looks stricken. “Why not? Are you not feeling well?” He moves as if he’ll put his hand on my forehead.

I jump back on instinct.

Adam freezes.

My heart pounding, I drum up a polite smile. “There’s something I have to take care of. Something... private.”

His eyes flash with an emotion I can’t name, but he hides it quickly. Flashing me the charming grin that I’ve seen melt women into literal goo, he nods. “Sure. You worked hard, Nova.”

I dip my head and hustle out of the building, calling Lyra back.

She answers with a yawn. “Hey, big *siiiis*. Ready to talk?”

“Where are you?” I ask stiffly.

She gives me directions and I catch a cab to the café.

Lyra is sitting around a booth, eating a burger and a giant plate of fries. She’s got her hair closely cropped with the back full of waves. The top is spiky and dyed red and white. Giant hoop earrings with the term ‘goochie’ in the middle swing along with her head.

“Nova!” She raises a hand and yells so loudly the entire café turns to look. “Girl, over here!”

I cringe a little and slide into the booth across from her.

“Mm.” She gives me a head-to-toe scan while sucking on each of her fingers. “Don’t you look tidy and *official*. Like those old ladies at the church mama forced us to go to. Remember? The ones with the big hats and the pressed white skirts and the pantyhose... wait a minute. Let me see if you’re wearing a pantyhose.” She scoots down like a worm and peeps under the table.

I pull my legs back and cross them at the ankles.

“You are!” She bursts out in loud guffaws.

More eyes dart over to us.

Heat flares in my cheeks and I press my fingers together.

“You look like such a *square*, Nova.” Lyra grabs three fries at once, dips them into ketchup and pops them into her mouth. When she’s done, she wipes her fingers on her cleavage-baring halter top that looks like she fished it out of the trash.

“I sent you all the money I could,” I say calmly, holding my head up. “If you’re here for—”

“It’s not enough.”

My eyelashes flutter.

Lyra takes a sip of her soda and talks with her mouth full. “But I ain’t worried ‘bout that. Can you get me a job?”

“A job?” I choke.

“Yeah. A job at your fancy office. Your boss left the whole thing for you to run, right? I’m sure he won’t have a problem.”

My nostrils flare, but I keep my tone calm. “What is this about, Lyra? Since when were you interested in engineering?”

“I ain’t gotta do that.” She speaks with exaggerated head-bobbing. “I can be a secretary or sum’im. Like you.”

That feeling I’ve been having lately—like there’s a noose around my neck and it’s pulling tight, increases. I take a deep breath and then another. “I’m sorry, Lyra. I can’t help you.”

“It’s because you’re ashamed of me, ain’t it?” Her eyebrows slash low over stormy brown eyes. “You don’t want anyone to know we’re sisters.” She points an accusing finger. “You think if you talk perfect English and dress like the white folks, they’re gonna accept you? Nah, fam. At the end of the day, blood is thicka than anything.”

I lift my eyes to the window and think about my to-do-list.

Leroy Foster wants to set up a meeting with Vision Tech to cement future collaborations.

The top-ten winners from the competition today will receive free access to parts and equipment for next year’s competition. I need to talk to the manufacturing companies to oversee that process.

Adam has a meeting with the board and, if he plans on pitching the hover-bag, I need to prep the board for that. They rarely welcome his outlandish ideas with open arms...

Lyra taps a long, triangle-shaped nail on the table. “Hello? Are you listening to me?”

I blink slowly and my sister comes back into focus.

Lyra flings herself against the booth. She’s slim and athletic. Her skin is pure brown and most of it is on display, including her chest which is jiggling generously. “Are you going to get me the job or not?”

“I can help you get a job at another company. Not Vision Tech.”

“Why not?” Lyra whines.

I grab my purse and rise steadily. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, Lyra, but I’ve helped you as much as I can. Don’t call me again unless it’s an emergency.”

“Sell-out,” she spits under her breath.

Prickles of anger skate up my skin, but I step around the table and catch a cab home.

On the ride, I unbutton my blouse and press my face against the cool glass of the window.

The pulling at my throat keeps getting worse.

The noose is tightening. Tightening. Tightening.

And seeing Jax leaning against my door when I get home twenty minutes later only makes the pressure worse.

“Did we have a date tonight?” I ask him, noticing the flowers and the bottle of wine in his grip.

It’s a rhetorical question. I wouldn’t have forgotten a date. It would have gone into my calendar and I would have had several reminders on my phone.

Plus, I wouldn’t have scheduled a date with Jax on the day of the convention.

“No.” Jax saunters toward me, his smile bright against his dark-chocolate face. He’s wearing a pressed navy suit, bright red tie and shiny loafers, “But I wanted to surprise you.”

Color me surprised.

“Can I come in?” Jax motions to my door.

I think about shooing him away, but I realize I shouldn’t be stand-offish. I promised myself that I would be more open to love this time.

There’s absolutely nothing wrong with Jax and I’ve looked. Trust me. If there’s anything I can do, it’s sniff out the flaws in men. But Jax is a genuinely good guy with a good job and family values. Plus he’s tall and handsome. Basically everything I could want in a man.

And it’s not like I’m getting any younger.

I let him into my apartment and kick off my heels. He glances around, looking impressed by the open floor plan, the sleek, minimalist furniture, and the sprawling kitchen that I hardly use.

“I’m going to change and be right back,” I tell him.

He nods.

I slip into my bedroom and close the door, leaning against it to catch my breath.

Be present in the moment, Nova.

As I take off each of my clothes, I shed thoughts of Lyra, the company and everything else from my mind. One by one, I lay them in the hamper and pull on a fresh T-shirt.

I’m feeling a lot more peaceful when I return to Jax.

He’s sitting in the living room, his tie loose and his eyes dewy and brown. I know exactly what he has in mind before he even opens his mouth.

“Wine?” he asks, gesturing to the coffee table. I notice he went ahead and took my wine glasses.

“You know I don’t drink, Jax.”

“Come on. Just one glass.”

Don’t overthink this, Nova.

We’ve been meeting for about six months now, texting each other when we have the time and going out occasionally. It’s not like he’s a stranger.

Jax hands me a glass and, when our fingers brush, I’m reminded of the moment when Adam handed me champagne.

Shaking my head, I take a sip and relax into the sofa.

“Long day?” Jax asks.

I nod.

He eases closer to me. “Me too. We’ll have to take our case to trial. The boss is on my back about it.”

I make a sound of consolation.

Jax rubs my shoulder, his thumb caressing the sleeve of my T-shirt. “Today, when I was exhausted and irritated, all I could think about was you. *What’s Nova doing tonight? I wonder if she’d be up for dinner.*”

My lips curve up. I drain the rest of the wine.

Jax takes the empty glass from me with a pleased smile as if I’m a child who just took all their medicine. He closes the distance between us and kisses me slowly. At first, the only parts of us that are touching are our lips.

And then his hands rise to my face and he caresses my cheek while his kiss gets rougher.

My heart starts beating fast, but I tell myself I’m enjoying this. This is great. I’m having a wonderful time with a wonderful man.

Jax grazes his fingers under the back of my head, cupping my long braids. I’m starting to feel extremely hot, but it’s not in the way I think I’m supposed to—the kind of heat where I want to get out of my clothes or want him out of his.

This is the kind of heat where I want to get out of my own skin, out of my own head. Like I’m being burned, my feet dragged through a fire that I can’t see.

As Jax’s kisses become less controlled, his hands find the hem of his shirt. He pauses long enough to yank the shirt over his head, but that brief moment of disconnect makes me feel better.

I don’t have time to seek out why that is before he’s on top of me again, his kiss more intense and his hands dragging off my jeans and panties.

Suddenly, it’s all getting very real, very fast.

Jax lowers his head and kisses his way down my thighs. I squirm away, a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

He glances up, his eyes full of eagerness. "Baby, don't worry. I brought protection."

Of course he did.

He came over to my apartment with roses and wine... and condoms.

Because he'd already decided that tonight was the night. He'd invested six months and now it was time to reap the return on his investment.

I don't know why that annoys me.

Jax pushes me into the sofa, his weight smothering me. "Relax, Nova."

The instruction is followed by a kiss to my mouth and a caress of my thigh. His touch is invasive.

Discomfort boils in my gut.

I don't know why Jax groping me makes me want to go take a bath and apologize to...

Apologize to whom?

I gulp in air, but the more I inhale, the harder it is to breathe.

Hands reaching for his naked shoulders, I push Jax off and quickly step into my panties.

He gives me a confused expression, his eyes dazed. "What are you doing?"

"I can't. I'm sorry." I grab my pants and pull those on too. They're stretchy yoga pants, although I don't do yoga at all.

Jax's lips turn firm. Brown eyes narrowing until he's squinting at my TV, he grumbles, "Are you not into me?"

"No, I think you're great, but..." I cover my torso with my hands, trembling.

"They warned me about you," Jax mutters, shaking his head and laughing bitterly. "They told me you had this weird relationship with one of your inventors."

"What are you talking about?"

"Harrison." His eyes lift and he points an accusing gaze on me. "I heard you two are close."

"Close?" I blink rapidly.

"Are you two screwing?"

My heart drops to my toes. The mere suggestion is... it's... insane.

“You know what? Forget this? I don’t need this at all.” Jax roughly grabs his shirt, his car keys and his flowers. A short second later, my front door slams shut.

Silence.

I stare at the place where the flowers had been and then I ease forward, grab the wine he left behind and drink it straight from the bottle. Minutes later, I throw my guts up in the bathroom. *As if I needed more proof that liquor and I don’t mix.*

When I’m finished, I sink against the toilet. My fingers come up to massage my throat. The noose around my neck is starting to ease, not because anything’s truly changed but because Jax’s words shook something loose from my heart.

I think I might know why I’ve felt so trapped lately.

And I think I might know a way to be free.

CHAPTER 2

THE SURPRISE GUEST

ADAM

“I DON’T THINK we should invite Dejonae and Sazuki on Saturday.” Nova glances up with a panicked expression. We’re both in my lab. I’m eating lunch like a maniac while she’s looking pretty and polished as always as she picks at chips. “I want it to be just us.”

“Just us?” I blink rapidly.

She nods.

“What’s wrong? I thought we liked them?” I mumble, chomping down on turkey slapped between two pieces of wheat toast. Nova insists that wheat is better for me and although I was staunchly against it at first, I’ve come to love wheat bread more than white.

“We—I do like them. But I was only planning to make you a meal and... just you and me...” She stutters over her words.

I take note of it. Nova doesn’t usually stammer. Well, she doesn’t say much in the first place but, when she does, it’s always smart, illuminating, or cut-throat. Sometimes all three at once.

“If you really want it to be just us, then that’s fine.” I give in with a nod.

The thought of spending the entire day with Nova sounds like a dream. I enjoy being around her.

Maybe a little too much.

And it shows.

Rumors about us are starting to become more aggressive. Although I have no problem with people thinking we’re dating, I’ve seen Nova’s response to the whispers. Her nose scrunch of distaste is enough to let me know she’d rather not encourage such conversation.

To counteract the rumors, I’ve been trying to make sure there’s someone with us at all times.

Not a chaperone per say...

But chaperone adjacent.

And you might say, who the hell cares? People are going to talk either way.

But Nova being upset? That’s a major problem for me.

I can't have my CEO feeling uncomfortable and thinking of leaving Vision Tech. There are a ton of companies that will snap her up in an instant.

Nova's our most important asset, and Vision Tech would fall apart without her.

I'd fall apart without her.

"No, you're right. We should invite other people. It's your birthday after all. I'll do what you want." Her shoulders slump. "I'll call Dejonae."

I study her face keenly. Nova's long braids are up in a ponytail today and she's wearing a fancy, black checkered skirt and jacket with a yellow blouse underneath that flatters her dark skin. She looks like the sexy librarian every guy in my high school class fantasized of at least once.

As usual, I studiously ignore the stir she causes in my body. There are some lines you back away from slowly and some that you run like hell from.

Nova's in the second camp.

I need her too much to let something like a raging physical attraction mess up a good thing.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" Nova rises to her feet and brushes off her blouse.

Her long legs jut out of the hem of her skirt and my eyes run down their length before I remember to behave and drag my gaze back to her face.

"I'll make the arrangements. Dejonae and Sazuki will probably not have a problem."

"Right."

Wrong.

There's no way Sazuki will show up without kicking and screaming. The Japanese piano legend ventures out of his house for only two people—his daughter Niko and his girlfriend Dejonae. The rest of the world can burn for all he cares.

However, I thought it would be too pathetic to have *no one* to invite to my party. When it comes to friends, I value Sazuki's company the most... outside of Nova.

"It's going to be a good time." I grin.

Nova does not.

I fold my arms over my chest and watch her sashay out of the lab. Nova doesn't shuffle or plod. Whenever she walks, her head is always up, her hips sway slightly and her eyes cut through the distance.

I've lost count of the number of people who've asked if she used to model.

There's a quality to her, a substance that's hard to explain. I just know it's expensive and *way* out of my league.

I set my sandwich on the table and join her outside. The sun is shining brightly and I'm unprepared for the heat. My lab is air conditioned and dim. My eyesight is so messed up that I can't handle too much light—at least not when I'm working.

Squinting, I lengthen my stride and catch up to Nova. She's halfway to her car. Steve is waiting for her, dressed in a white shirt and dark slacks.

I don't travel with a chauffeur because I don't need anyone in my driver's seat, but I made sure that Nova had a driver. When she's on company business, she represents Vision Tech, the best in the industry. And thus, she deserves the best too.

Nova hears me coming and stops. Turning slowly, she pins those sultry brown eyes on me. I can't remember the last time I saw her looking this withdrawn.

Something's going on.

"If it's too much, we don't have to do anything at home this weekend," I tell her. "How about we take a trip instead? We can go to the Maldives or to Paris. Step away from the company and the inventions for a bit and get back to basics."

She shakes her head. "We don't have time to go on a trip. The board meeting is coming up soon and your kinetic batteries are on the line for patent approval."

"Yes, but—"

"Also, you agreed to receive the Inventor of the Year award and that requires an interview."

I scowl because I really do hate interviews.

"No cameras," Nova says. "I made sure they wouldn't take your pictures. They went out of their way to work with us, so we have to honor it."

I inhale a deep breath and agree because I've never gone wrong listening to her. Nova's got smarts and spunk. It's an easy next step to

assume that she's the owner of Vision Tech, and with all the decisions she makes on the day-to-day running of the company, she might as well be.

Nova turns to get into the car.

I chase after her and hold the door open. "Hey."

She glances up from the back seat, her phone already out and her tablet on her lap, turned to a fancy spreadsheet. There's someone from the company ringing her phone, as usual. There's never a moment where she has any peace.

"Thank you," I say.

Her face is carefully blank. "For what?"

"Holding things down at the company. Planning something for my birthday dinner. All of it."

"Of course. It's my job." She glances down, scrolling through the tablet.

All-business. All the time. It's a challenge to keep myself from smiling. "You can tell the Inventor of the Year people to come over around one next Tuesday. I'll meet them in the office."

"I'll do that."

"And I'll cook on Saturday. You don't have to worry about it."

"It's your birthday, Adam. I can't let you cook."

"I got it." I wink.

Her fingers freeze on the tablet. "Adam..."

"What?"

She clears her throat. "On Saturday, I have something important to tell you."

"O...kay."

I think about Nova's words long after she leaves. What the heck does she have to tell me on Saturday?

* * *

SAZUKI PLACES his hand on his girlfriend Dejonae's knee. The two are sitting close together in the couch after clearing their plates. Now, they're watching me open the presents Nova got me.

We get each other something every Christmas and birthday, but I'm surprised by the number of presents that Nova got this year.

“Another one?” Dejonae asks teasingly. “Nova, you’re putting me to shame. Now Sazuki is getting ideas.”

Sazuki laughs and throws adoring eyes at his college-aged girlfriend. I get the feeling that Dejonae Williams doesn’t have to do anything but show up and it’ll be enough for him.

Nova’s eyes are carefully avoiding mine. She reaches over the couch. “This is the last one.”

It’s an envelope.

Dejonae leans forward.

Sazuki looks on with interest too.

I feel the intrigue in the air and shake the paper twice, smiling. “I wonder what this is?”

I’m thinking it’s a ticket for a cruise, a deed to a car—something, *anything* other than what Nova says next.

“This is my resignation letter.” Nova’s voice is quiet.

At first, I don’t believe my ears. I stiffen up and stare at her, waiting for her to burst into a smile and tell me it’s a joke.

Honestly, that wouldn’t be Nova’s style, but hell, I’d laugh along and call it the best joke of the year. As long as it’s not true.

From the corner of my eye, I notice Dejonae clutch Sazuki’s hand. He gives her an astonished look in return. But I’m not focusing on what they’re doing because my brain is still struggling to make sense of Nova’s words.

Nova...

Leave...

Me?

No way.

No freaking way.

I stare at her in confusion as a devastating sense of loss barrels into me.

The room falls into tense silence.

“Is this a joke?”

“I’m sorry,” Nova says, her eyes on the ground.

Sorry?

She’s... sorry?

“What the hell is the meaning of this?” I hear my voice tremble, but I can’t help it. If she’d come at me with a hammer to bludgeon my brains out, it would have been less of a shock.

At that moment, the doorbell rings.

I barely hear it.

I'm just waiting.

Waiting on her to look at me.

Waiting to gauge the validity of this ridiculous proposal.

Nova feels me staring and slowly faces me. I meet her eyes and I'm shocked by the resolution I see there. She's not sad. She's not angry. She's not even disappointed.

She's just... done.

"Why?" I growl out. She's blindsiding me and it feels especially cruel because I didn't have any sense of doom. None.

Normally, I can figure out where she is in a room just by following a feeling. I can interpret exactly what she thinks by a quirk of her eyebrow and whether or not that little sparkle enters her eyes.

I don't know any language other than English and Nova—everything she is and everything she wants to be, I've somehow gotten into the habit of studying her.

Damn.

What is this bulldozer running over my heart?

"Adam," Sazuki calls urgently from the doorway.

I glance up, stunned that Sazuki and Dejonae aren't sitting around the couch with us. I have a vague recollection of the doorbell ringing earlier, but when did those two get up to answer it?

"You should go," Nova says quietly.

I want to say something snarky. It doesn't even have to make sense, it just has to convey my frustration.

But I keep my mouth shut.

Launching to my feet, I stomp to the door.

At first, I don't see anyone.

Then I look down.

My gaze falls on a little boy wearing a backpack and a baseball cap. His dark hair is smushed on top of his head and he looks expectant.

Poor thing.

I hope he doesn't hold on to that expectation too long. Someday, he's going to meet a girl he thought he knew and she's going to blow up his entire world. He needs to be freaking ready.

"Look, kid," I snap, "I'm not buying anything."

"I'm not here to sell anything," the kid responds.

Then why the hell is he here?

I feel Nova come up to the door too. My entire body strains toward her as if it's counting down the seconds until she disappears for good.

"What are you here for then, sweetie?" I hear Dejonae using her 'teacher' voice. She works at Sazuki's foundation and has a great way with kids. Or so I've heard.

The kid lifts a scrawny arm and points it at me. "I'm here for him."

"Me?" I balk.

The kid nods with all the seriousness of a criminal getting sworn into court.

"Why are you looking for Adam, hun?" Dejonae asks, bending over and clutching her knees to get on the kid's level.

"Because," the kid blurts, "he's my dad."

That's not funny.

I glare at Nova. "Did you set this up?"

She shakes her head no, her eyes wide in surprise.

The kid keeps staring at me like he's waiting for me to invite him in and show him his bedroom.

My heart is about to burst.

I feel like punching a hole in the wall.

"Look, kid," I say sternly, "I don't know who set you up to do this, but you need to call your parents or guardians or whoever and go back home before I call the cops."

"Adam," Nova says softly.

It's a warning.

A caution.

I don't freaking want to hear it.

A phone starts buzzing.

The kid lifts his cell out of his pocket and shows it to me. "It's my mom."

I refuse to accept the phone. I feel like I'm in a horror movie and it's at the part where the television is showing static, a ghost just moved a curtain in the corner and now the phone is ringing off the hook.

The kid shakes the phone intently.

The name on the screen reads 'mom'.

"Do you want me to take it?" Dejonae asks, her brown eyes clawing into my face.

I release a shaky breath. “Sazuki, can you do me a favor? Can you take the kid to the station and get to the bottom of this?”

Sazuki dips his head.

I turn away. Since I’ve made a bit of money, I’ve been on the receiving end of a few elaborate scams. Mostly charities that turned out to *not* actually exist. It’s why I have Nova do the investigations before I give any sum of money...

Not that I’ll have Nova to rely on in the future.

My blood pressure rises again. I close my eyes and try to keep breathing.

“I don’t need to go to the station,” the kid says. “You’re my dad.”

I whirl around, my temper spiking. “Listen you little—”

A calming hand appears in front of me. It’s Nova. She places a gentle touch on the middle of my stomach and gives me a ‘don’t dive off the deep end’ glance.

My nostrils flare, but listening to her is a habit and I can’t kick it that fast. I curl my anger back, wrap some self-restraint around it, and pin my lips shut.

“Who told you that he’s your dad?” Nova asks the kid in a quiet voice.

“My mom.”

“What’s your mom’s name?”

“Alexa Vaughn,” he says smartly.

A bell starts ringing in my head and it’s not a pleasant sound.

Nova twists her neck and looks up at me. She reads my face in an instant. “You know her.”

“She was my college girlfriend. Well, not really a girlfriend. We had a fling...” My eyes drop to the kid because I’m not sure I should be talking about flings and friends-with-benefits in front of a minor.

The kid just looks up at me unflinchingly. “I don’t know what else to tell you, mister. You’re my dad.”

My world tilts off axis. I reach a hand out to the wall, glad that I have something nearby that I can use to steady myself.

“No, I’m not,” I argue.

I know I’m being ridiculous arguing with a kid, but I can’t help it. I’m desperately grasping on to any sense of normalcy I can find.

“Why are you here?” Nova asks calmly.

“Mom said it’s his turn to take care of me now,” the kid informs us.

“Where is your mother?”

The kid shrugs.

“You don’t know?” Sazuki asks with a hint of concern.

“Mom disappeared.” His eyes land on me. “She said you might try to send me back, but there’s no ‘back’ to return to.”

The kid’s phone keeps ringing.

Nova reaches for it and answers. “Hello?”

I pin my eyes on her, watching every expression that flits across her face.

“I’m Adam Harrison’s executive assistant,” Nova says in a calm, crisp voice. “Are you...” She pauses and glances at the kid. “What’s your name?”

“Rowan.”

“Are you Rowan’s mother?”

I hold my breath.

Nova’s eyes slice sharply to me and then she hands over the phone. “You should talk to her.”

The last thing I want to do is take that phone.

This can’t be happening. Someone’s playing a cruel joke. As long as I pretend it’s just a dream, maybe it’ll all go away.

Nova lifts my hand, smacks the phone in my palm and gives me a look that says ‘answer it’.

I put the phone to my ear and step away from the audience of Dejonae, Sazuki, and Rowan.

“Alexa?”

“I should have told you years ago.” A voice I haven’t heard for over a decade blasts in my ear. “But he’s really yours, Adam. I put his birth certificate in his backpack. You also have my permission to take him for a paternity test, but it won’t change the truth. He’s your kid.”

“MY...” I realize I’m shouting and lower my voice to a hiss. “My *kid*? Alexa, you can’t just dump a human being on my doorstep without warning and expect—what the hell do you expect?”

“Let him stay with you for a bit.”

“No.” I’m resolute.

“Why not? I dealt with him for eleven years without your help and support. It’s your turn now.”

“My turn?”

“I heard you’re a famous inventor now. You can afford it. Just feed him, clothe him, and keep an eye on him. There’s nothing to be afraid of, Adam.”

My heart is pounding. “Alexa.”

“I’ll be a little hard to reach for a while, but don’t worry. Rowan’s a smart kid. He can teach you the ropes.”

“The ropes?”

“Of being a father.”

I let out a frantic laugh. I’m supposed to learn how to be a father from an eleven-year-old?

“Take care of our boy, Adam. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait! Alexa—”

The line goes dead.

I stare at the phone desperately, as if glaring at the screen can bring her back on the line. The cell goes dark and my powers of intensely wishing for things to be different fail me once again.

“Are you going to let him in?” Dejonae asks from the doorway.

I glance over my shoulder and find everyone staring at me. *I guess I don’t have a choice.*

“Come in,” I croak.

The kid bounds into my living room like he owns it and throws his backpack on the ground.

“Chips. Cool.” He dunks a germ-filled hand into the bowl, scoops up a bunch of chips and shoves them into his mouth. Crumbs go flying everywhere.

My chest rises and falls on a short breath.

That is mine?

My kid?

Hell no.

No way.

Footsteps patter toward me. It’s Sazuki. His eyes are narrowed to concerned slits. He places a hand on my shoulder. “Adam, would you like us to take him?”

It’s a big offer, especially coming from someone like Sazuki.

I must really look like I’m about to keel over.

“Dejonae suggested,” Sazuki adds.

Which makes a hell of a lot more sense.

I shake my head. “No, he’s... the kid... um, I’m going to sort this out.”

“Okay.” Sazuki steps back.

Dejonae approaches me next. Her expression is hesitant. She’s wringing her dark hands in front of her as if she’s afraid I’m going to explode and leave splatters of guts and blood on her face.

“Adam,” she croaks, “I have no idea what you must be feeling right now...”

Try *horrified*.

Mind *blown*.

Totally *lost*.

“... But you’re not in this alone, okay? Sazuki and I are here to help and Nova,” Dejonae freezes, “I mean, Nova will probably help until she has to leave—”

“Thanks.” I cut her off a little sharply. The only thing worse than finding out I have a kid is finding out that Nova is leaving me... I mean, the company.

“Dejonae,” Sazuki calls.

Dejonae nods at her boyfriend and then offers me an encouraging smile. “We’re going to leave now. Give you some privacy to work out your problems as a family. Without an audience.” She pats my back kindly. “I mean it, Adam. Sazuki and I are here for you. Whatever you need.”

I dip my chin.

Dejonae passes Nova, gives her a nod, and then joins Sazuki at the door. He places his hand on the small of her back and leads her down the porch steps.

Nova closes the door behind them. Her eyes meet mine and all traces of shock are swiped clean. Now, she looks as polished and put-together as usual.

“What would you like me to do, Adam?” Nova asks.

What do I want her to do?

Freaking *stay*.

At the company.

At Vision Tech.

In my life.

But it’s not exactly the best time to try and convince her when I have a whole new human being who suddenly depends on me.

“I...” I shake my head, not sure what to say.

She takes a long look at my face and then nods as if she heard me loud and clear.

“Rowan, are you hungry? We have more food in the kitchen.”

“These chips are good enough for now,” Rowan drawls, kicking up his feet. He’s wearing worn sneakers with markers covering the edges and the toe. The ends of his jeans are frayed and he’s got a bandage around his left thumb.

“I’ll still get you a plate,” Nova says calmly. Turning, she walks into the kitchen.

I give the sofa a wide berth and hustle after her.

Nova’s in the fridge pulling out the potato salad when I get there. She glances up calmly.

“Breathe, Adam.”

“I can’t do this.” I lean toward her, my voice quiet but urgent.

The open floor plan means that there aren’t any walls between us and the living room. Voices carry and I’ve got a feeling the kid is listening to everything we’re saying.

But I can’t stop.

It feels like my heart is bursting and I’ll explode if I don’t point out how crazy this all is.

“I haven’t seen Alexa in over a decade. I’d completely forgotten she existed before now and all of a sudden, she has my kid?”

Nova spoons out a dollop of potato salad. “Until you can verify his parentage, you’re going to have to accept that it’s true.”

“What’s true?”

She stops and gives me a frank look. “You’re a father.”

If she’d speared me in the heart, I would have preferred that.

“Father?” I’m right behind her as she goes to the oven, pulls on the handle and takes out the roast I made this morning.

I enjoy cooking, especially if I get to change things up. It’s all one big lab experiment to me. But now, just the sight of the roast makes me want to upchuck in my mouth.

“Most of the time, I barely remember to make my own meals. Now I have to worry if some kid has eaten and if he’s studying... hell, school. Does he go to school? Am I supposed to enroll him in something?”

“Adam.” She pins me with a hard look. “The first thing you have to do is breathe.”

I suck in a deep breath through my mouth.

“The second thing,” Nova says calmly, “is to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Calling him ‘some kid’. I told you. Until we can verify his parentage, he’s not ‘some kid’. He’s yours.”

I feel a knot at the back of my neck that not even the best massage could smooth out.

Nova finishes dishing out the food and takes it into the living room. I watch her offer it to Rowan, whose eyes glitter with happiness when he sees how neatly she filled his plate. Then he pins those glittering eyes on her and I know she’s locked in his adoration for life.

Same, kid.

Nova’s phone rings.

She gets that tight look on her face and pockets the phone without answering. I’ve noticed her doing that a lot lately and it nags me.

Even though we spend most of our time together, she keeps a few cards close to the chest—things like her past, her family, her love life, it’s all been off the table.

I’m a lot more transparent with her than she is with me.

Most of the time, it’s not a concern.

But now that she’s suddenly decided she’s leaving Vision Tech, I’m starting to wonder if I should do my own investigation.

Nova disappears into one of the backrooms and returns ten minutes later. Keeping her distance, she looks at me with her sober brown eyes. “I changed the sheets in the guestroom and set fresh towels in the guest bath. He can stay in there for the time being.”

“Thank you.”

She dips her chin and turns as if she’s leaving.

“Are you going home now?” I ask. My voice has a tinge of desperation that, were it not for the strange boy eating food in my sofa, I’d be ashamed to hear.

“Yes. It’s getting late.”

That’s it.

That’s all I’m getting.

She’s a few steps away before I remember that Rowan’s sudden appearance wasn’t the only bomb that was dropped on me today.

“Nova,” I stalk to the door before she can leave, “about your resignation letter—”

“Let’s talk about it on Monday,” she says firmly.

I watch her walk down the stairs.

Steve lifts his hand. He’s waiting in the yard, the dusky evening painting the sky in dark blues behind him.

I return his gesture with a nod and close the door.

As the engine rumbles and then gets softer in the night, I turn to face my new guest.

Rowan stares frankly at me.

“Uh,” I rub the back of my neck, “you good?”

“Yeah.”

“Need anything else?”

“No.”

Awkward silence fills the air.

“Where were you and your mom living before this?”

“Far from here,” he says.

“Was it always just the two of you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Are you in school?”

“I was. It’s summer break now.”

“Okay.”

Another beat of silence.

The kid juts his chin at the door. “Your girlfriend’s pretty.”

“Girlfriend?”

“The tall lady.” A small smile touches his lips. “She’s nice.”

“Nova’s not my girlfriend.”

“Huh.” An eyebrow quirks. He licks his thumb and stares me down. “Guess you’re lamer than I thought.”

Great. He’s a smart mouth.

“You finished with that?” I point to the plate that he inhaled. It’s been three seconds. I have no idea how he packed away so much food in the blink of an eye.

“Yeah.” He plants both feet on the ground, hefts his backpack over one shoulder and glances around. “So where do I sleep?”

“First room down the hall.”

“Thanks, Adam.”

“Adam?”

“That’s what I heard them call you.” The kid tilts his head. “You’d prefer I call you something else?” His lips quirk up in disdain. “I’m not going to call you ‘dad’.”

“Please don’t,” I respond quickly.

His face falls, and I feel a tinge of guilt even though the thought of anyone calling me ‘dad’ makes me break out in hives.

“Uh, you should get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I reach out as if I’ll awkwardly pat him on the head and then I think better of it.

He smirks at me like I’m an idiot and swaggers to the bedroom. I cringe when the door slams shut.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, when I go to bed, I can’t sleep.

I know nothing about this kid except the fact that Alexa claims he’s my son. What if she’s lying? Not just about who he is but about his age? What if he’s a baby-faced eighteen-year-old con artist? What if his only job is to trick unsuspecting marks and open the door for his seedy criminal friends while I sleep?

Uneasy, I grab a bat and roll back into bed, staring at the ceiling and listening for any weird noises.

What feels like seconds later, I’m startled awake by the sound of something crashing to the ground. I launch up and notice sunshine on my face.

Is it morning already?

Another loud crash sounds.

My heart beating a mile a minute, I jump out of bed. Sprinting down the hallway to the kitchen, I wield the bat around, swinging like a kid at a piñata.

It takes a few seconds to realize that my kitchen is *not* over-run with thugs, but it *is* over-run with dirty pots and pans, milk spilling on the floor and a banana peel hanging from the low-lights.

I blink rapidly. “Rowan.”

“Morning.” The kid slinks toward me. He’s holding two plates of eggs, bacon, and waffles. “I made breakfast.”

I note the flour on his face and on his T-shirt. It looks like he went to an EDM rager.

“Who asked you to do that?” I bite out. I’m trying to be calm, but I can feel my annoyance meter spiking.

“I always make breakfast at home,” he says innocently.

“And who cleans up when you make breakfast?”

“Mom.”

Alexa is a saint.

A burning sensation hits my chest and I glance down to make sure it’s not singeing through to my T-shirt.

“I’m gonna take this into the living room and eat,” Rowan says, casually walking away.

A moment later, I hear the TV strike up with Sunday morning cartoons.

My head aching, I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a tight exhale.

I really hope this kid isn’t mine.

I am not ready to be a father.

CHAPTER 3

THE EXTRA EMPLOYEE

NOVA

“HOLY CRAP,” Island, my hair dresser, tugs painfully on my braid.
“Seriously?”

“What?”

“You’re going to wear your natural hair?”

I rip my gaze away from the file I requested from Human Resources and pin it on the woman who sees me more often than I see my doctor, my therapist, and my own family. “Yes.”

“Yes? Just like that? Just yes?”

I blink up at her.

“Nova, I’ve been doing your hair for... how long have you been working at Vision Tech?”

I shut my tablet off, lick my lips, and think about it. “Seven years.”

“Seven years.” She snaps her dark fingers. Island wears long nails and, somehow, they don’t stop her from being the best hair braider this side of the country. In fact, I think her nails are her secret weapon. “You walk through those doors every three weeks like clockwork and you’ve never *once* in all those seven years, asked for anything other than braids.”

Rather than answer, I turn my tablet back on and get to work.

Island tends to be on the dramatic side and I sometimes wish I could ask her to have a talk-free session, but I don’t want to risk offending her.

Despite her chattiness, she is the best in the business and one of the youngest salon franchise owners in history. She also graciously agreed to do my hair on Sundays since it suits my schedule the best.

“Are you dying?” She leans down and whispers, her eyes filled with concern.

I purse my lips. “No.”

“Then do you have cancer?” She covers her mouth with a gasp. “Are you wearing your natural hair out because all your hair might fall out soon?”

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip and struggle to maintain my composure. “No.”

Please just be quiet.

It's no shade to Island. I find that most hairdressers tend to be the friendly, nosy type. It's why I used to stubbornly insist on doing my own hair... until I realized that I could accomplish so much work in the six hours it took to painstakingly part and braid my curls.

Besides, no matter how good I get at doing my own hair, no one does hair like Island.

"So this is a personality shift then? Because of a new guy? Or an old one?" She gasps loudly. "Are you finally getting it on with that boss of yours?" Island thrusts her hips twice and sticks out her tongue, emphasizing exactly *what* part of Adam should be getting into me.

I let out an irritated huff.

"I don't blame you, honey. That man was cute before, but when I found out he was rich too..." She shakes her head and licks her lips.

Island is one of the few who's aware of Adam's real position in the company. Years ago, he made the mistake of escorting me to the hair salon. Island started chatting him up and, using that secret power of backing people into corners, got him to admit he owned Vision Tech.

Since then, Adam's skirted the hair salon, refusing to even drive past it. *I'm afraid I'll tell her my bank account information if she gets her hands on me again.*

It's not an unfounded fear. Island either doesn't choose to pick up on social cues or has no idea what polite conversation even is.

"White boys are not my type, but if I had to have a baby daddy, it would be him," she adds.

I shuffle in discomfort. Under ordinary circumstances, a woman joking about wanting to have Adam's babies would be unfortunate, but it's even more disarming given Rowan's surprise visit.

That reminds me...

I should check on Adam and make sure he hasn't gone totally crazy after spending the night under one roof with his son.

Before I can shoot the text, Island spins me around so I'm facing her instead of the fancy, well-lit mirrors. She's wearing a face full of makeup and her wig is long and grey. On anyone else, the look would be tacky, but Island is young and charismatic enough to pull it off.

"Are you not answering because it's true? Did you finally bed the billionaire?"

What is that? The name of a cheesy romance novel? “Adam and I have a boss-employee relationship.”

She rolls her eyes. “Honey, no boss in the *world* would hire a driver for their employee.” Island gestures with a rat-tail comb to the glass door through which we can see Steve parked outside, waiting for me. “And they definitely don’t *insist* on paying for their employee’s trips to the hair salon. I’ll never forget the day that hunky man slapped his card on my counter and told me that you were *never* to pay for your own hair. I almost jumped him then.”

“The way I present myself is important to the image of Vision Tech,” I argue.

Island bats away my explanation like it’s cheap cologne. “No, sweetie. No one in their right mind would believe that.”

Well, it’s a good thing Island isn’t in her right mind.

Realizing she’s going to harp on me and Adam if I don’t tell her what she wants, I admit, “I’m changing my hair because I’m entering a new phase of my life.”

“New how?”

“I’m moving on from Vision Tech.”

“Moving on? To what?”

“To unemployment. I’m resigning.”

The comb slips out of her hand and rattles to the floor. Her jaw drops right alongside it.

Keeping my tone level, I add, “I’ve always been interested in learning how to care for my natural hair, but I didn’t have the time. Plus, I wasn’t sure if it would be professional to wear my hair out at work. Now that I’ll be stepping down from my position in a month, I’d like to start learning.”

She blinks unsteadily.

Did I do the unthinkable? Did I break the unstoppable chatterbox?

“Why are you resigning?” Island stammers.

My phone lights up with a call from Adam.

“Excuse me.” I put the phone to my ear. “How was your first night with Rowan?”

“He *ruined* my kitchen!” Adam hisses. From the low volume of his voice, it’s clear he doesn’t want Rowan to overhear. I can picture him ducking in the bathroom, railing about his son behind closed doors.

“What do you mean?” I ask calmly.

“The kid made waffles by throwing flour on every surface in the kitchen and hoping some of it hit the bowl. My sink looks like a murder scene. And there’s a banana peel on my freaking chandelier, Nova.”

“Okay, then ask him—nicely—to clean up after himself.”

“You think he’ll listen to me?”

“He has to take responsibility for the mess he made. He probably got to this point because his mother was always cleaning up after him. If he learns that cooking messily comes with cleaning duties too, he might learn to be more careful.”

Adam lets out a sound that’s part grunt, part groan. I bet his stress line—the lone wrinkle that appears on his forehead—is out in full force right now.

“I don’t think I can do this,” he admits.

“It’s only been a few hours.”

“Exactly. How much worse is it going to get?”

My lips twitch. “Ask him to clean up and offer to help him. It can be a good bonding moment for you two.” Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Island listening in keenly. Clearing my throat, I say, “I’m at a hair appointment now, but I’ll come over when I’m done.”

“Thank you.” He sounds relieved.

I hang up and put the phone away.

“Was that Adam?” Island asks, grabbing the scissors and cutting off the tail end of a braid.

“Yes.” I open the tablet again.

“Have you told him? About resigning?”

Another braid falls to the ground like a defeated snake.

I don’t respond, but Island comes to her own conclusions. Tutting, she shakes her head. “He must be drowning in regret. That man relies on you like you’re his best friend, lover, and business partner all rolled into one.”

My throat squeezes tightly. I feel that noose again and it makes me want to grab a paper bag and blow into it.

“What is he going to do without you?” Island makes another sympathetic sound in her throat. The scissors *snip* and a braid sinks to the floor. “Girl, that’s cruel of you to leave him on the lurch when he needs you so badly. You better have a good reason for ditching that job and devastating that gorgeous man or you’re just... well you’re just a bad person.”

“Why am I a bad person?” I snap heatedly.

Island goes still.

“Do I owe him my life? My body? My future? Am I expected to give him everything just because he treats me well?”

Island’s eyes are wide enough to take over most of her face. She blinks at me.

I realize I lost control and shame burns my heart like a brand. I hang my head, pick up my tablet again and studiously swipe through the files.

Island, by some miracle, gets the hint and doesn’t say another word.

* * *

I TOUCH my curls and chew on my bottom lip nervously. My head feels a lot lighter now that I’ve changed my hairstyle.

I glance at the ground. My shadow looks like I have a cotton ball for a head. Having this much volume is going to take some getting used to.

Steve, a mild-mannered man with brown eyes and a quiet smile, gives me an approving nod as I approach the car. “You look stunning, Miss Delaney.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He opens the back door for me.

I climb in and glance at the salon. Island’s last words as she handed me the bottles of natural hair gels, creams, and conditioners echoes in my head.

Just because you want something new doesn’t mean you have to kick the old to the curb. You can rock your natural hair and you can always go back to having braids. Doesn’t have to be one or the other for the rest of your life, honey. It’s not a prison sentence.

It felt like Island was trying to tell me something, but I’m not interested in learning life lessons right now. I just want to resign from Vision Tech with as little friction as possible.

Once I find someone who can adeptly handle the responsibilities to both the company and to Adam, I won’t feel so torn anymore.

“Where are you going, Miss Delaney?” Steve asks.

“Adam’s.”

He drives silently. I love that Steve feels no need to fill the quiet with chatter. It’s why we’ve gotten along so great for the past seven years.

I enjoy the peaceful car ride and I don't even realize we've arrived until Steve gently calls to me.

"Miss Delaney."

I glance up from my tablet, almost in a daze. Just outside my window is Adam's two million-dollar manor. "Oh, thank you, Steve."

"Should I wait for you?" Steve asks.

I check my watch. "No, it's a Sunday. I'll take a cab."

He looks worried.

"I don't want to take up any more of your time," I explain.

"It's my pleasure, Miss Delaney. Mr. Harrison pays me well to make sure you don't have to drive yourself around or take cabs."

"A cab ride every once in a while won't hurt me." I pop the door. "Enjoy your Sunday with your family, Steve." I stop halfway out of the car and scoot back in my seat. "Oh, I spoke to the MIT advisor. If your son is really interested in interning this summer, he can contact them."

"Wow. Thank you so much."

"I'll see you tomorrow." I leave the car and walk up to the porch.

Cracking my bag open, I fish around until I find the key Adam gave me. I'd only been working for him for a year when he presented the key to me with the excuse that it was too much hassle to hear me arriving when he was in the lab.

I let myself in and hear the television. It sounds like a cartoon show. Taking a few steps out of the foyer, I see Rowan stretched out in the sofa.

Adam doesn't believe Rowan is his son, but I believed it the moment I looked into the child's brown eyes. He's got the same intensely focused gaze, high nose bridge and smile as his father. He's also lanky, which means he's going to be tall like Adam too.

I don't know what Alexa looks like, and I'm sure Rowan takes after her in some ways, but—to my eyes—Rowan is his father's son.

"Hey." Rowan sees me and scrambles to a sitting position. His gaze is on my hair. "You're back."

"Hi, Rowan." I glance past him and notice that the kitchen is still a mess. I cringe when I see the flour everywhere and the sink piled up with dishes.

Adam's lab always looks like a hurricane ran through it, but he's militant about keeping his living area clean. It's a quirk that I've learned to roll with.

Unfortunately, Rowan hasn't picked up the memo.

"Where's Adam?" I ask.

Rowan shrugs. "I dunno."

Leaving an eleven-year-old unattended for hours without checking in? I guess Adam isn't trying to ace this dad thing.

"I'll go find him." I take a step in the direction of the back door.

"I like your hair," Rowan says.

I turn back around. *Isn't that sweet?*

"You look even prettier." Rowan grins. "Like a model."

"Thank you." I smirk. "You and Adam have that in common."

"What?"

"You're sweet-talkers."

He scrunches his brows together. A little line forms in the middle of Rowan's forehead and it almost knocks me flat off my feet.

That expression...

Adam looks exactly like that when he's perplexed.

A little freaked out, I back away from Rowan and hurry across the yard. I hear Adam working on something before I've taken a step inside the lab.

He's by his worktable, arc welding. I wait until he's done before stepping beyond the shadows and making myself known.

"Ehem."

"Nova." He speaks even before he's turned around.

Then he does.

And the welding machine slips out of his hands. It crashes to the floor with a loud *clang*.

Adam clumsily reaches for the machine and fumbles around with it as if he doesn't know what to do next. He's still wearing the welding mask, so I can't see his face to gauge his expression.

I move purposefully toward him. "What happened? I thought you were going to ask Rowan to clean up?"

Adam rips the welding mask off his face. His eyes are stuck on my hair, the same way Rowan's was. Except Rowan's slack-jawed stare didn't make me feel little tingles of pleasure in my stomach.

"Why didn't you talk to him?" I ask.

"Who?" Adam stammers.

"Rowan?"

"Who's Rowan?"

I fold my arms over my chest and give him a pointed look.

Adam blinks once, twice and then seems to come back to himself.
“Right. The kid. Uh, he said he’d do it ‘later’.”

“And you just dropped it?” I ask, gawking.

“What was I supposed to say?”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling. Sometimes, it’s easy to forget that Adam is a genius. Especially when he acts like the simplest concepts are beyond him.

“You say ‘I gave you an instruction. Do it now, young man’.”

His eyebrows knit in confusion.

I toss another sigh at the ceiling and turn on my heels.

Adam tosses his gloves and lengthens his stride to catch up with me.
“Your hair...”

“What about my hair?” I slam to a stop.

My hair is a touchy subject because it’s been so closely-tied to my professional appearance. The more responsibility Adam entrusted to me through the years, the more I didn’t want to let him down—not with my work ethic, my speech or my look.

I wait for his assessment with a pounding heart.

“You look amazing.” He clears his throat and drags his eyes away from me. “Like... really, *really* good.”

A smile presses against my lips and I fight to hold it back. “Thank you. Now let’s deal with Rowan.”

“Deal with him?” Adam’s eyebrows fly up. He takes big steps to keep up with me. Even though I have shorter legs than him, I tend to move fast.

“Yes, we’re going to deal with him,” I say matter-of-factly.

Adam looks a little scared.

We stride across the yard and I throw the side door open. The television is still on. Rowan hasn’t moved from his spot on the couch. The only difference now is that he has his phone to his face.

Rowan glances up, sees me and brightens. Then he sees Adam and the smile immediately falls flat.

Adam grunts. “He always stares at me like I’m enemy number one.”

“Maybe if you smiled at him more, he’d smile back,” I mutter.

Adam huffs.

I stalk ahead of him. Leaning decisively over the sofa, I snag the remote and take off the television.

“Hey, I was watching that!” Rowan throws his hands up in betrayal.

“You’ve had breakfast and you’ve had time for the food to go down. You need to start cleaning the kitchen now.”

“Isn’t he rich?” Rowan flings himself into the chair and points at Adam. “Doesn’t he have a maid or something?”

Adam scoffs as if he can’t believe how immature Rowan is. I don’t know what he expects. That an eleven-year-old who just got shoved into a strange man’s house would be perfectly behaved and overflowing with eternal wisdom?

Rowan hears his father’s grunt and narrows his eyes in response.

I get between the two of them, but I maintain eye-contact with Rowan. “Mariana doesn’t clean up after people who don’t know how to clean up for themselves,” I tell him crisply. “Aren’t you embarrassed to let someone see that mess?”

“No,” Rowan says without a care in the world.

I curl my fingers into fists. Enough with the good-cop routine. “Rowan...” I swing around to face Adam. “What’s his last name again?”

“Vaughn,” Adam supplies helpfully.

“Rowan Vaughn, I am *not* asking. You need to get into the kitchen and start cleaning up. Now.” I put enough of a black mama bark in my voice to let him know I mean business.

Rowan’s lips push out so far he could knock the TV over, but when he sees pouting isn’t going to change my stance, he climbs out of the couch with the exasperation of a much older teenager.

“*Fine.*” He throws the word at me as if I—somehow—am the one who’s being tolerated.

“Wow.” Adam looks impressed.

I fold my arms over my chest. “What are you doing?” Jutting my chin at the kitchen, I command, “Go help him.”

“Why do I have to clean up? I didn’t make the mess. I didn’t even eat the breakfast.”

I give him a scolding look.

Adam throws his hands up. “*Fine.*”

I laugh when his back is turned and add his belligerence as one more point for him and Rowan being related.

How are they so similar when they’ve never met before?

I notice Rowan's frown deepen when Adam joins him in the kitchen. The two work on opposite ends of the room. While Adam expertly wipes down the counter, Rowan is sweeping the flour back and forth on the floor.

I snap my ponytail holder from my wrist and try to put my braids up when I realize I don't have braids anymore. Awkwardly hefting my curls off my neck, I approach the two reluctant boys in the kitchen.

"Rowan, what kind of music do you like?"

"I dunno." He stabs the broom on the floor and keeps his head down.

"I like to work with music on. I'll turn on the speakers if you don't mind."

He lifts a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug.

Adam gives the eleven-year-old an annoyed look, but I lift a hand and make a 'calm down' motion. It's only Rowan's second day here. And if he's anything like his father, he's stubborn to a fault. It will take some time for Adam and Rowan to find their own rhythm.

Turning swiftly, I connect my phone to Adam's bluetooth speakers. I've been over here enough times that it automatically pairs.

"I found a new artist the other day." I listen to the piano trilling through the air and smile. "It's great, right?"

"It's boring." Rowan sticks out his tongue.

"Just wait for it." I approach him, take the broom from his hand and point to the sink. "Why don't you wash the dishes?"

"Uh, I hate washing dishes."

"We all do things we hate sometimes." I maintain my stance so he knows he can't wiggle out of it.

Rowan sighs as if I asked him to climb Mount Everest and swim with hungry sharks.

While he tackles his new task, I sweep in time to the classical music and bob my head a little more when the hip-hop track twines seamlessly with the piano.

Adam gives me a surprised look. "This doesn't seem like your type of thing."

"What is my type of thing?"

He scrubs his chin, bringing my attention to his square jaw and full beard. "Music that doesn't bend too many of the rules."

"Well... my type of thing is changing now."

He gives me a thoughtful look.

I squirm and glance away, glad to point my attention to the flour on the ground.

“This isn’t too bad,” Rowan admits, rocking his head when the bass drops and the music goes harder.

I feel a thrill of validation.

After the song ends, the room settles into a productive kind of quiet. Rowan fills the sink to wash the dishes. I finish with the floor and join him there.

Adam squeezes in next to me. He smells amazing, like flames and metal and something unique to him. When his arm brushes my hand, I feel a skitter of goosebumps on my skin.

I try to squeeze in closer to Rowan, but it doesn’t work. Adam’s hand brushes my arm again and brings a spark of awareness.

“We can assembly line this thing,” Adam says in a more upbeat voice. “Rowan, you wash. Nova will rinse. I’ll dry.”

“Why do you get the easy job?” Rowan grumbles.

“You can do it on your own then,” Adam fires back.

Rowan shakes his head. “I’ll wash.”

I smile softly and accept the bowl from him. We make quick work of the dishes.

I notice Rowan sneak off while Adam and I are wiping the stove and removing all banana peels from the light fixtures.

When Adam glances up and notices Rowan isn’t around, his expression turns thunderous. I see him gearing up to yell for his son and stop him with a look.

Adam scowls. “He thinks he’s slick.”

“He’s eleven. Of course he does.”

Adam shakes his head, makes one more swipe over the stove and then whips the rag out over the sink to dry. “At least he didn’t set the house on fire.”

“Don’t jinx it, Adam.”

My boss winces. Throwing his gaze to the ceiling, he yells, “I take it back!”

I laugh softly.

Adam watches me with an equally bemused grin.

Feeling those sparks in my stomach again, I glance down and check my watch. “It’s that late? I didn’t realize.”

“You going home already?”

I nod.

“Stay. Having you here is the only time I feel like I can communicate with him.”

“He’s not a house pet, Adam. He’s a little boy. Just talk to him.”

“Easy for you to say,” Adam mumbles. “If he’s not glued to the television, he’s glued to his phone. I don’t remember learning about humans having a mini-computer attachment in high school biology.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Hm.” He grunts. “You really can’t stay?”

I shake my head. “I’ve got an appointment with some files.”

He arches an eyebrow, waiting for me to explain.

“I’m doing an in-depth analysis on our admin staff. Before I go outside Vision Tech to find another manager, I’m hoping I can train someone in-house.”

Adam’s smile disappears instantly. He runs his fingers through his dark hair. “You’re already looking at a replacement?”

“I only have a month to make sure we pick someone who can handle all the responsibilities. There’s no time to waste.”

Adam pulls his full bottom lip into his mouth as if he’s trying not to say something.

“What?” I prod.

He places one large hand on the counter behind him. The move causes his shoulders to roll and contract.

“Have you really decided, Nova?”

“I have.”

His intense brown eyes are staring at me like he wants my answer to change. “You can have as much vacation time as you want. Forget the rules. If you need a six month sabbatical, hell, a *year* off, you can do that.”

“If I take a year off, I might as well resign.”

“Are you saying no to vacation time?”

I nod.

He shakes his head, watching me. “I’ll increase your salary by ten percent.”

“My salary is already very generous.”

He rubs his lip with a thumb. “Twenty.”

I’d laugh if he wasn’t so earnest. “No.”

“Did someone at Vision Tech offend you?”

I frown. “No.”

“It doesn’t matter who they are. If they disrespected you, they’re gone. No questions asked.”

“I have a good relationship with the staff.”

It’s kind of surprising. Many of our engineers have more degrees than me and graduated from prestigious universities. All I had was my grit and determination to work hard. Thankfully, those two things mattered more to Adam than whether I went to an Ivy League.

It’s his respect for and belief in me that made me feel confident enough to lead a company like Vision Tech.

“Are you... getting married?” he asks, his throat bobbing.

I feel my cheeks heat. “No.”

“Good.”

I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean and I don’t ask. “It’s time for a change,” I say as coolly as I can, hoping he can’t tell that my heart is beating fast and my hands are getting sweaty.

Adam studies me as if he doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. Slowly, he pushes off the counter and approaches me.

The air around us turns intense.

I retreat on instinct, moving away from him until my back hits the counter. My heart forgets how it’s supposed to beat and trips all over itself.

Adam leans toward me. “Don’t bother looking for another replacement.”

“Adam—”

He straightens and gives me a pointed look. “I’ll do it.”

“You’ll... you’ll do what?”

“Show me the ropes. Give me the responsibility.”

I blink once. Twice. Stunned. Adam’s the picture of practiced ease when he crosses his arms and looks down at me again.

“Are you serious?”

“It’s my company and I don’t trust it in anyone else’s hands. If someone’s going to learn from you, it might as well be me.”

“You?”

“That’s what I said.” A ghost of a smile lurks at his lips, as if he’s enjoying my confusion. After a few seconds of staring at me, he clears his throat. “Didn’t you need to leave?”

“Right.” I turn woodenly. “I’ll call a cab.”

“Did you give Steve the afternoon off again?”

I nod before I realize what I’m admitting to and then I shake my head.

“No, I just... want to support the taxi industry.”

Adam arches a brow. “I’ll take you home.”

“You can’t. You have a kid now, remember? You can’t just leave him at home alone.”

My words seem to stop him in his tracks.

“I’m fine.” I assure him. “I can get home on my own.” I glance down the hallway at Rowan’s bedroom. “What are you going to do with him during the day? You have meetings at Vision Tech all morning.”

“I guess I’ll have to take him to work with me,” Adam says with a sigh.

“Do you know how long he’ll be staying with you?” I lift my phone and swipe to my notes. “I can talk to Sazuki and Dejonae about Niko’s summer school program.”

Adam’s jaw clenches. “Nova.”

“Hm?”

He runs a hand over his face. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“This isn’t your problem.”

My eyebrows hunker low. “I can handle my work and helping you with Rowan. You don’t have to look so burdened, Adam.” I stare intently at him. “My job is to help.”

“Your job...” He laughs darkly. “I know. Thanks.”

I can tell he’s upset about me leaving the company, but I feel a note of something heavier in his voice. If I were braver, I would ask what it was.

Since I’m not, I let it pass.

“I’ll call a cab now,” I say, giving him my back.

To my surprise, Adam grabs my hand. His fingers are warm and firm when they wrap around my wrist.

I gasp. “Adam.”

“Rowan!” he yells. “We’re taking Nova home! Throw on some shoes and let’s go!”

I blink rapidly. “You don’t have to do that.”

Adam gives me a dark look. “I want to.”

Rowan appears in the hallway, dragging his feet. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

But Adam doesn't listen to his son's whining. He ushers us both out the door and it's not until I see Rowan staring pointedly at something below us that I realize...

Adam and I are both holding on tightly to each other's hands.

CHAPTER 4

THE MIRACLE OF YOU

ADAM

“DON’T TOUCH ANYTHING. Don’t breathe on anything. Don’t even go near a vending machine. You stay here in this office with your butt glued to that chair. If you get bored, here’s a coloring book.”

“A coloring book? How old do you think I am? Five?” Rowan snorts.

I purse my lips and count backwards from five to stop myself from answering with an equally snarky reply.

Apparently, I’m supposed to be the adult here and that means I can’t drop to Rowan’s level.

Or so Nova warned me last night when I took her home.

“You can play on your phone,” I say, trying to coax him into having a better attitude. “We’ve got great Wi-Fi here. Our fiber optic cables have direct links to—”

Rowan makes a disdainful sound in his throat. “Nerd.”

This kid is my flesh and blood?

This kid?

I shake my head. “Entertain yourself until I get back. I won’t be too long.”

He rolls his eyes.

I turn my back on him and then whirl around. Wiggling a finger, I remind him, “Don’t touch anything.”

“I got it.”

I give the eleven-year-old a dark glare as he swings around in Nova’s chair.

I have a really bad feeling about this.

The door opens before I can run away from the tiny gremlin.

It’s Nova.

She takes my breath away as she saunters in with her new haircut, her delicate cheekbones, and her mouth that’s pure, soft temptation.

I stare at her for a solid ten seconds, admiring the way her curls frame her dark, oval face. Should one little change make a woman *more* beautiful, *more* sexy, *more* charismatic and attractive?

It's just a new hair style. Why does it feel like a gut-punch every time I look at her?

"Morning, Rowan. Adam." Nova nods to me.

I nod back, unable to speak.

Maybe it's because the countdown is ticking, but I can't stop myself from throwing admiring eyes at her.

Normally, I'm better about keeping my expressions in check.

But today...

Nova looks stunning.

How am I supposed to restrain myself?

My eyes slide down her white jacket and sharp red dress with a belt tied at the waist. Her long legs flow down to fancy red heels.

I'm relieved that her suddenly leaving Vision Tech has nothing to do with another man, but if she keeps this up, it won't be long before someone succeeds in stealing her away.

Half the engineers in Vision Tech are secretly in love with her. If they weren't too afraid to shoot their shot, Nova would probably have a hard time keeping them back.

Fortunately, she doesn't give anyone at work the time of day.

Nova is professional and efficient when it comes to letting her admirers down. And that to-the-point delivery is a hell of a blow to the ego. I've heard her give those speeches enough times to know that I don't want to be on the receiving end of one.

"I brought you some snacks." She lifts the paper bag.

"Cool!" Rowan's eyes light up.

Nova sashays across the room and drops the bag on the desk. "There's a fruit cup, sugar-free gummies and organic chips."

Rowan scrunches his nose. "Gee... thanks."

"I also bought brownies."

"Sweet!" He dives into the bag and goes straight for the junk food.

Nova's eyes find mine. Her lips curl up softly. *Predictable.*

I shrug. *Thanks for trying.*

"What do you have planned for him to do this morning?" Nova asks.

"I told him to stay here until I'm done with the meeting, then I'll take him back home."

Nova arches a brow. "That's it?"

"That's it."

She gives Rowan a concerned look.

The kid shrugs.

“Will just locking him in here be enough to keep him occupied?” Nova asks.

“Mom used to leave me at her work too, so I know what to do.”

“Where did Alexa work?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Lots of places.”

I frown at his dodging.

Nova smiles kindly at Rowan. “Would you like to go on a tour of the office? I can show you around.”

“A tour?” I frown. “Do we have time for that?”

Nova lifts a delicate hand and surveys her watch. “We have about twenty minutes.”

Rowan is already scrambling out of his chair in excitement. He clamors to Nova’s side and tilts his head up, waiting for the next instruction.

I’m not happy about this, but I’ve been out-numbered, so I don’t protest when Nova takes Rowan out of the office and escorts him to the labs.

“Upstairs, we have our administration office, but I didn’t think you’d be interested in watching people in cubicles answer phone calls.” Nova flashes her access pass at a scanner and the doors slide apart. She motions Rowan forward. “This is our on-site R&D development lab.”

“What’s R&D stand for?” Rowan asks.

“Research and development,” I inform him.

He bobs his head as if he understands, but I can tell that he doesn’t.

“We have labs all over the country, but the on-site labs are for inventions that we’d like to experiment on as a collective.” Nova’s heels tap on the cold tiles. She motions with long, delicate arms to the ‘hall of fame’.

“Many of these inventions were invented by your... by Adam.”

“Lame,” Rowan says, stalking past the wall.

Nova’s eyes trip to mine and she flinches.

I grit my teeth.

“What’s this?” Rowan calls from deeper in the room.

Nova and I turn to him. He’s standing next to the ‘miracle goo’ machine.

“Don’t go near that,” I say in an urgent voice.

Rowan jumps back.

Nova addresses him in a calmer voice. “Our team is experimenting with a new, environmentally friendly foam that can expand to the length and width that a customer desires.” She places a gentle hand on his shoulder and steers him away. “It’s not ready for prime time yet. The engineers are still working out the kinks.”

Rowan gives the goo an interested look.

“Let me show you the cafeteria next.” Nova nudges him toward the door.

Rowan shuffles along with her and I take up the rear.

The staff in the cafeteria all stop and watch as we walk in.

“Morning, Nova.”

“Miss Delaney.

“Morning.”

The greetings come from all over. Employees know Nova as the face of Vision Tech and they treat her with respect.

She responds with a regal head nod.

“Who’s this?” Henry, one of Vision Tech’s youngest interns, stops in front of us. He’s sipping on a mug of hot coffee, his brown eyes studying Rowan like he’s another species. “Are we working on a kid’s toy?”

“No, this is my new friend,” Nova says. “I’m giving him the tour.”

A flush spreads over Rowan’s cheeks when Nova calls him a ‘friend’.

“Hey, kid.” Henry offers his hand for a high-five.

Rowan smacks his palm enthusiastically.

“Isn’t he *cute*?” Courtney, another one of our interns, shuffles toward us. She drops to her haunches and smiles at the kid. “What’s your name?”

“Rowan.”

“Rowan.” Courtney grins harder. “How do you know Miss Delaney?”

“Uh...” Rowan shoots me a panicked look. “She’s... uh...”

“Like I said, he’s a friend.” Nova’s voice is crisp and holds a hint of a warning.

“Oh.” Courtney’s eyelashes flutter. She straightens slowly.

Nova’s phone alarm goes off. She takes it out of her jacket pocket and says, “We have five minutes until the meeting. Henry, Courtney, can you set a fresh pot of coffee and bring it in along with the presentation notes?”

“Sure.”

The two interns scurry away.

Nova gestures to Rowan. “We’ll walk you back to my office now.”

We escort Rowan to the elevator. I note how the kid naturally edges up to Nova, as if he's already decided that she's his person.

I can't lie. I feel a little jealous when Nova glances down with a smile and pats Rowan on the head.

It took months before she ever cracked a smile at me. When we first started working together, she always had her game face on and never crossed the line, no matter how much I tried to get her to loosen up.

Rowan's got her looking all soft and sweet in only one day.

What is this kid's secret?

"I don't know how long the meeting will be. Feel free to use my couch if you want to take a nap later," Nova says, ushering Rowan into the office. "If you need anything, you can contact Rochelle. She's the OA, uh... office assistant." Nova turns to me. "He has your phone number too, right?"

I cringe.

A muscle in her cheek jumps. "Adam."

I feel the weight of her censure, but I'm not ready to give in. At least not in front of Rowan.

Nova sighs, pulls out the index card binder she always has with her and scribbles her number on it.

Stuffing the page into Rowan's hand, she says, "That's my personal cell phone. You can call me if you have any issues."

Rowan doesn't respond, but he seems touched.

Something tells me that he'll be calling Nova whether there's an emergency or not.

* * *

AS WE LEAVE THE OFFICE, Nova slants me a scolding look. "What's going on with you?"

"What?" I ask, lengthening my stride to keep up with her.

"You're awkward around him."

"I think we're doing much better today than yesterday."

This morning, I took care of breakfast. Two bowls of cereal—one for each of us. There was no explosion of flour and eggs in my kitchen and no need to have a mini-heart-attack about fruits on my light fixtures.

"Adam."

“Nova.”

She narrows her eyes.

I shake my head. “He’s an unexpected guest who’s claiming to,” I lower my voice so the other employees can’t hear, “be my son. You think it’s that easy to wake up one morning childless and find out I’m a dad a day later? There’s not a ‘dad switch’ I can flip. I don’t even know if I *need* to flip that switch at all.”

“You still don’t think he’s your kid?” She purses her plump lips.

Today, she’s wearing a sharp red lipstick. It would be an understatement to call her mouth a distraction.

I take a moment and deliberate how to answer. The politically correct and acceptable response would be to say that I love the kid and believe he’s mine because I feel it in my heart. But I’ve never been accused of being politically correct or acceptable.

“I need to see it to believe it.”

Nova sighs heavily and turns the bend. “Rather than spend money on a paternity test, you should invest in making that guestroom more kid-friendly.”

“You’re saying he’s definitely mine?” I whisper. “On what grounds?”

“He looks exactly like you, Adam.” She punches a button on the elevator, her body rigid as she waits for the doors to open. “Even his mannerisms are like yours. It’s uncanny.”

The doors open.

Nova stomps in first and I follow her, feeling a flash of annoyance. “Why are you getting angry?”

“I’m not angry.”

I study her stony face. “You’re annoyed then.”

“I just think that you’re wasting precious time here.” She huffs. “The more stand-offish and distant you are with him, the more rejected he’ll feel. This is your first impression. You don’t get to press reset and start again if and when a piece of paper tells you you’re his dad. This is it. This is what’ll set the tone for the rest of your relationship.”

The doors slide open.

A lab tech steps into the elevator.

Nova clamps her mouth shut and stares a hole in the door.

“Miss Delaney, Mr. Harrison,” the lab tech says, giving us both nervous looks. She probably senses the tension in the air.

My jaw muscles clench and unclench.

I stare straight ahead until we get on the right floor.

Nova steps out first and the tech sidles up to me. “The boss looks angry. Did you do something wrong?”

“Probably,” I grumble.

She pats my back. “Oy. Good luck climbing out of that hole.”

“Thanks.” I hurry to catch up with Nova and pick up the thread of the conversation. “Look, about Rowan—”

“Mr. Harrison, can we discuss this later? I’d like to concentrate on the meeting.” Her tone is in-control, firm, and a little like a principal doling out a suspension notice.

Does Nova know she sounds like the nightmares I used to have about getting in trouble while I was in middle school?

Maybe she can’t help it. Her bossy nature is a plus and being the woman at the helm of a huge ship like Vision Tech probably exacerbated that personality quirk.

Rather than let my irritation fester, I release a deep breath and follow her into the conference room without another word.

It doesn’t matter either way.

Nova’s thorny personality won’t change the fact that I need her.

That she’s good for Vision Tech.

That she... means a lot to me.

To sooth my bruised ego, I tell myself that Nova probably cut off our conversation to preserve my privacy. We’re surrounded by the PR team director as well as the financial director. Neither man needs to know about the changes that barreled into my life this weekend.

“Miss Delaney.” Tony Roberts, our financial director, smiles sappily at Nova. He’s been flirting with her since her first day on the job and it’s my everlasting joy to see Nova brutally ignoring his signals.

Nova nods and takes her seat at the head of the table.

“My, my. You look especially fantastic today.” Roberts directs another flirty grin at her.

“Thank you.” Nova’s tone doesn’t change at all. Still in business mode, she places her index cards on the table and flips through them “Let’s start with our first agenda.”

I preen when Roberts melts into his chair with a look of tight embarrassment.

That's right. Keep your distance, Roberts.

"First, let's give a round of applause to Mr. Harrison," Nova says.

My head whips up in surprise.

"Once again, he received the first place award at the convention last weekend, continuing his impressive victory streak." Nova claps.

The rest of the room joins in.

As a proud little smile tilts her lips, I realize that I'm truly, incomprehensibly pitiful.

It doesn't matter if Nova's sharp and prickly.

It doesn't matter if she's bossy.

I could endure a hell of a lot worse than her harsh tone just to have that smile beaming in my direction every now and again.

"Thanks, Nova." I dip my head and try to play it cool.

Nova glances around at the others. "Mr. Harrison agreed to receive the Inventor of the Year award, so I'd like Vision Tech to mention that in the upcoming press release."

The PR team director scribbles it down.

Nova checks her index cards and flips her pen around her fingers. "Vision Tech is on course to have an explosive fiscal year, but that's preceded by a hefty financial investment..."

As Nova dives into a conversation about financial risks and our upcoming product launches, I watch her.

She speaks clearly and elegantly. She listens just as attentively. When she tilts her head and looks to one side, it means she's concentrating hard. Anyone under her firm gaze tends to squirm as if they find her stare intimidating, but I find the head tilt unbearably cute.

Nova spins her pen around and around. Every so often, she scribbles something down on her index cards.

The woman runs a cutting edge company with access to the latest technologies, but her obsession with glitter pens, stickers and stationary means she'd rather write on a plain piece of paper than a tablet or computer.

Nova casually glances over at me, sees me staring and her pen-flipping falters. The ball point goes skittering over the desk. Loudly.

The PR director stops speaking.

Everyone stares at her.

Nova's skin is too dark to show a blush, but she hides her eyes beneath thick lashes, nervously grabs the pen and motions the director to continue.

I lean back in my chair, my smile collapsing into a thoughtful frown.

Nova's an ace at this—ruling an empire. Taking charge. Running a tight ship.

She commands the room without having to raise her voice. Her decisions are rational and her ability to plan for the future is unparalleled.

She's good at this.

Why does she want to stop?

I drum my fingers on the table, thinking deeply.

If she's tired, I'll share her load.

If she's frustrated, I'll push her enemies out of her way.

I'll do anything...

Except let her go.

Nova Delaney *must* remain at Vision Tech. She *must* remain at my side.

But how do I get her to change her mind? It would be easier to pull blood out of stone than convince Nova to do something she doesn't want to do.

I rub my chin and think deeply. My inventions are usually born from an inconvenience I encounter. Once I settle on a problem I want to solve, I research everything about it until I know the why's, the when's and the where's.

Why should Nova be any different?

The first thing I have to investigate is *why* she wants to step down from her position. Then—and only then—can I figure out how to keep her here.

"Mr. Harrison. Mr... Adam." A voice breaks me from my thoughts.

"Huh?"

Nova and the rest of the table are staring pointedly at me.

Heat flushes the back of my neck. I sit up straight. "Sorry. Can you repeat the question?"

"Why does he get to sit in these meetings when he's clearly not interested?" Roberts asks with a hateful frown.

Nova ignores Roberts' grumbling and answers patiently, "The kinetic batteries you created—was any of your research based on previous patents?"

"No, it's all original."

She jots it down. "We're in talks with our patent lawyer now. As long as there are no issues, we can get both functional and design patents. The kinetic batteries will be our hundredth patent."

Applause breaks out around the table.

It's an impressive feat and it's one I owe exclusively to Nova. She's a beast when it comes to patenting inventions.

Just then, Nova's phone starts ringing.

She stops and glances down. Her eyebrows pull tight in confusion. "Mr. Roberts, can you take over? I need to answer this."

I meet her eyes when she gets to her feet. *What's wrong?*

She shakes her head. *I'm not sure.*

I keep staring at the door, my heart shifting nervously. That unsettled expression plays on a loop in my brain.

Something's wrong.

Planting my hands on the desk, I move to follow her.

Roberts stares me down with eyes that could kill. "Where do you think you're going, Harrison? The meeting's not done yet."

"I gotta use the bathroom," I say.

He lets out a bitter laugh. "You're an adult. Can't you hold it?"

"Guess not, bud." I ignore his muttering and launch through the door.

Nova is in the hallway. "Rowan, I can't understand you," she whispers into the phone.

I place a hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. He's not saying anything that makes sense."

I take the phone from her. "Rowan, what—"

Before I can interrogate him, an alarm goes off in the building. I glance up, noticing the red lights flashing on either side of the conference room door. Since we have several labs that work with explosives, we took extra precautions and made sure to install a state-of-the-art alarm system to keep people safe.

Nova gives me a frantic look.

My heart is about to leap out of my chest. I yell into the phone, "Rowan, where are you?"

The cell goes dead.

I try calling back, but all I get is voicemail. "He's not picking up."

"Adam..." Nova looks genuinely distraught.

The conference room door bangs open. Roberts is the first to come stampeding out.

"What's going on?" he yells.

"I don't know. Just keep everyone calm and get them outside in an orderly fashion." Touching Nova's hand, I urge her. "You too. I'll check the office for Rowan and meet you out there."

I start to march away when I feel Nova's presence behind me.

Whirling around, I glare at her. "Nova, I told you to go outside."

"I'm not leaving you alone," she bites out. "So don't you dare ask me to."

Her expression is fierce and determined. Watching her, something heavy thuds in my heart.

I really can't live without her.

"Come on. We have to find Rowan." Nova slips her hand into mine and I get a little lightheaded.

How does she do that? Manage to make me feel both utterly invincible and embarrassingly helpless all at the same time? I don't understand it. I just know I'm in deep. All she has to do is touch me and it's all better. It's all manageable, like there's nothing I can't overcome.

I shake my head to clear the thoughts.

The most important thing is to get to the office, get Rowan, and drag Nova and the kid to safety.

* * *

THE OFFICE IS EMPTY.

A packet with brownie crumbs is lying messily on the table next to an untouched fruit cup. Rowan's backpack is sprawling open on the ground.

There's no sign of him anywhere.

Nova looks surprised by the fact that he's gone, but I'm not. The moment I heard those alarms, I felt a sense of déjà vu, like I'd been here before and I knew what the end result would be.

"Where would he go?" Nova asks, eyes darting around. "You think he might have gone outside already?"

I shake my head.

Her phone rings.

"It's the security company."

"Put it on speaker," I say.

Nova doesn't wait for the security office to speak first. "Why did the alarms go off? Did one of the labs catch on fire?"

"Miss Delaney, we do have an issue with one of the labs, but it's not regarding a fire."

"What is it about then?" I stiffen. "Leaking gas?"

That's a much more dangerous problem. At least a fire gives a warning. If we inhale harmful gases, our lives could be in danger with every breath we take.

I hope Rowan really is outside.

The thought barrels out of nowhere and takes me by surprise.

"No, it doesn't seem to be gas." There's a pause. *"It looks like... goo."*

Every muscle in my body goes tense.

Nova gasps in surprise. "Goo?"

"I think I know where Rowan could be," I bite out. Wrenching the door open, I storm outside.

Nova follows me down the hallway. Since the alarms locked down all the elevators, we take the stairs to the lab. I'm full-on sprinting, but Nova can't keep up in her heels.

When I try to slow my pace, she pushes me forward. "Go! Make sure Rowan's alright. I'll be right behind you."

I don't want to leave her, but if Rowan got caught in that goo...

"Go!" Nova insists.

I pull ahead of her and crash through the stairwell door with my shoulder.

I don't even take a step forward before I see it.

Miracle goo.

It's pushing against the lab's display window like a puffer fish gone mad. The orange fluid is lashing the door with such force that it's starting to bend at the joints.

My heart leaves my chest and explodes somewhere outside of me.

If Rowan is in there...

I take giant, determined steps toward the door, ready to dive into the goo and search for his body in the expanding substance, when I see movement around the corner.

My boots skid to a stop. I focus on the human-sized shadow as alarm bells wail loudly overhead.

Someone small with dark hair and pale skin crouches out of sight.

I stomp that way, my face a mask of fury. "Rowan!"

He climbs to his feet. His eyes are on the ground and his hands are locked in front of him. I can see remnants of the goo plastered on his palm, sure evidence of his involvement in this emergency.

"Did you do this?"

"I... I..."

My vision goes red. "I told you specifically not to touch anything! Do you know how dangerous this could have been? You could have gotten seriously hurt or hurt other people! Is this how your mother taught you to behave?"

A gentle hand lands on my back.

Nova.

Her brown eyes barge into mine, silently beseeching me to stop.

I inhale deeply, my chest rising and falling. The blood is pounding in my head. So much restless energy. So much fear.

Rowan stares at the ground, still not saying anything.

Nova calls the security office. "Can you send someone from the medical bay? A child came into contact with the miracle goo and needs to be checked out." She pockets her phone and drops to her haunches in front of Rowan. "Do you feel dizzy? Lightheaded? Nauseous?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"That goo is a volatile substance. Who knows what'll happen to you if you ingested it," I snap.

"Am I going to die?" Rowan croaks, his eyes wide and filling with tears.

"No." Nova thinks twice. "Probably not."

Rowan makes a distressed sound.

"As long as you didn't eat any of it, you're probably fine," I grumble.

"But it's better to be sure," Nova adds. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I found one of your access cards in the cabinet and I wanted to check out which door it opened." His eyes dart back and forth. "It turned out that it opened this lab. I just wanted to see the machine spin. I swear. I didn't know it would go crazy like that."

My nostrils flare. I pull in my bottom lip to keep my words locked up inside me.

At that moment, one of the on-staff medical team appears with a first aid kit. She takes Rowan aside to check on him. Nova goes with them while I watch from afar, stewing in agitation.

“From what I can see, he’s fine.” The medic gives Rowan a pat on the shoulder. “But if he shows any symptoms of food poisoning later, vomiting, stomach pain, you should take him to a hospital.”

“Thank you,” Nova says. Turning to me, she speaks calmly, “I’ll let the staff know they can come back in and I’ll explain this away as a random accident. No one will know Rowan was here today.”

I dip my chin down, my shoulders stiff.

Nova steps close to me, her flowery fragrance slowing my heart down a bit. “Go easy on him, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Rowan and I both listen to her heels clicking on the tiles until it fades to nothing.

She’s gone.

I glance over and notice the goo is slowing down.

Good.

At least it’s not going to take over the building.

I rub the bridge of my nose while Rowan cowers in front of me. He’s shaking like he’s trapped in a freezer.

With a sigh, I shrug out of my flannel jacket and drape it over his shoulders. Next, I grab my handkerchief out of my pocket and kneel in front of him.

“I’m sorry,” Rowan whispers. He’s not doing a great job of holding back his tears.

I reach for his hand and wipe the goo off his palm. It stubbornly remains.

“I’ll need alcohol,” I mutter.

Rowan grabs my hand when I start to pull away. My heart dislodges from its perch in my chest and rattles around like an empty metal can.

Damn. The kid messed up bad.

But... he looks small and scared and lost. I can’t stay angry at him.

“Is it going to cost a lot to fix?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll pay for it,” he says.

I stare at him, finding that declaration odd.

“You won’t tell my mom, right?” His eyes implore mine.

“Stay here. I’ll get the alcohol.”

I locate the alcohol solution from a nearby lab and pour it over his hand. The goo hisses as it dissolves.

“I’ll take you to wash your hands in the bathroom,” I tell him.

Rowan plods behind me, keeping quiet.

The hallway seems to stretch out forever. It feels a little eerie to see no one around.

“You need my help?” I ask Rowan, stopping outside the bathroom.

He shakes his head and avoids my stare.

“I’ll be waiting outside.”

Shoulders slumped, he plods into the bathroom. I hear the water running a few moments later.

I lean against the wall and close my eyes.

He’s okay. He’s going to be okay.

The click of a woman’s heels on the floor pumps air into my deflated heart and sends it soaring. I glance around eagerly for Nova.

Disappointment crushes me when I see another woman traipsing down the hallway. Something about the way she’s moving is odd though. Her head whips back and forth and she’s staring at the paintings on the wall as if she’s never seen art before.

“Ooh, this is nice.” She lets loose a wolfish grin, her eyes darting around.

I give her a surveying look.

The woman sees me up ahead and freezes guiltily. Her dark hand drops to her skirt where she wipes it. Then she paints a grin on her face and moves over to me. “Adam? Adam Harrison?”

“Do I know you?” I watch her warily.

“No, but I know you. You’re my sister’s little pet. The goose with the weird inventions and the golden eggs.” She gives me a broad grin, flashing a gold tooth.

“Your sister?”

Rowan returns from the bathroom at that moment. There are tear tracks on his cheeks and he looks even more defeated than before.

“Yeah, Nova’s my sister.” The woman grins smugly.

Urgent footsteps fill the hallway before I can ask any more questions.

Nova appears in my line of sight, but she’s not looking at me. A mask of horror descends on her face as she stares at the woman with the gold tooth.

“Lyra?” Nova chokes out the name.
Lyra grins wide. “Hi, sis.”

CHAPTER 5

THE OPPURTUNITY

NOVA

“THIS PLACE IS *FANCY*. How much did those sculptures cost, girl? And are these paintings real? They look real.”

I stare in horror as my sister swaggers toward Rowan and Adam. She’s wearing a cheetah-print romper that barely covers anything. Her hair is extra-spiky at the top and dyed blue today. She’s chewing gum with her mouth wide open.

My fingers curl into fists and I grind my teeth to dust. Launching ahead, I fling myself at Lyra and wrap my fingers around her arm.

“Ow. Girl, you’re hurting me.”

“Let’s go. *Now*,” I growl into her ear, trying to drag her away.

“No.” She wrenches her hands free and steps back. Massaging her arm, she pastes that seedy grin on her face again. It’s the expression she wears when she’s up to no good. “I just got here. I’m not ready to leave.”

“How did you even get in?” I hiss. Because we deal with sensitive information as well as secret projects, Vision Tech has a strict security code. Nobody is allowed to enter without a visitor’s pass and Lyra isn’t wearing a lanyard.

“It was such chaos downstairs that I just... swept right in,” she explains with a defiant thrust of her head.

I suck in a sharp breath to keep the groan from seeping out. Just my luck that my sister was here and able to capitalize on the frenzy.

Why did she have to stop by today of all days?

“Lyra, I don’t have time to mess with you right now,” I snap. “As you can see, we’re a little busy.”

Our lab technicians have been called in to discuss clean up and the employees are returning to their desks. An announcement will be made on the official communication network, but I’m sure the conspiracy theories and private chats are alive with rumors. I have to get in front of that.

It’s doubtful that anyone will guess today’s incident was caused by our secret boss’s secret son, but it’s still important to calm them down.

My phone buzzes.

I don’t need to look at the screen to know reporters are calling.

The alarms alerted the local precinct, which alerted the local news. We've got news vans packed like vultures outside.

This isn't the kind of press Vision Tech needs.

The day already feels super long and Lyra's presence is only making things worse. My head aches like I'm being slammed in the head with an invisible hammer.

"Leave," I say under my breath. "Now."

Lyra's mouth twists into a thin, bitter smile. I sense that she'd explode and start cussing at me if we didn't have an audience.

My gaze slides to Rowan, who seems to have temporarily forgotten his guilt and is watching us both with curious eyes.

"Now, Lyra," I command when my sister doesn't move.

She takes a step back.

"Whoa. Hey." Adam jogs toward us.

I squeeze my eyes shut and dig my teeth into my bottom lip. *Please, Adam. I don't need you playing the Southern gentleman right now.*

"I didn't know Nova had an older sister," Adam says in a friendly voice.

"Actually, I'm the younger one," Lyra corrects him.

"Oh." Adam looks taken aback.

I'm not surprised. The path Lyra chose was a difficult one. Although she's beautiful, there's a hardness to her. She wears the sheen of someone who's addicted to making the worst possible decisions in life.

"We got two different daddies, but we look alike 'cuz mama had a type." Lyra smirks mischievously. "I'm Lyra Houghton."

"Adam Harrison." Adam shakes her hand firmly.

I want to wrench their fingers apart.

I know my sister. She only shows up when she wants something, and that something is never good. The amount of times mom had to bail her out of jail is unthinkable. Even at the end, when our mother got sick, Lyra was still making trouble.

The death certificate says one thing, but I know mom died of a broken heart.

Adam, clueless as he is, gives Lyra a welcoming smile. "Did you come to see Nova?"

"Yeah. I asked her for a job the other day and she said she'd look into it, but she never got back to me."

"Lyra," I hiss, my heart slamming against my ribs.

“A job?” Adam fastens me with a quizzical look. “Of course we’d have a job here at Vision Tech for you.”

I feel the blood rushing out of my face and going straight to my toes.

For someone who claims to know me so well, Adam is being intentionally obtuse right now.

“No, we don’t,” I snap. Turning to face him, I try to beam ‘stay out of this’ from my eyes.

Adam’s eyebrows pull tight.

I suck in a deep breath because I don’t want to unleash my irrational side in front of him or Rowan. The little boy has been through a lot today and the last thing he needs is to witness me fighting with my sister.

Lyra turns to the eleven-year-old. A curious gleam in her eye, she bends over until her breasts are practically dangling out of her shirt. “Who do we have here?”

I step in front of Lyra to cut her out of Rowan’s sight. “None of your business. Get out, Lyra.”

“Nova...” Adam sounds astonished.

“I’ll see my sister to the front door and then I’ll ask Steve to take you guys home. Please be prepared to leave, Mr. Harrison.”

Adam’s shock is palpable, but I don’t give him time to correct me. Grabbing my sister by the arm again, I drag her away. Lyra fights me, squirming like a fish out of water, but I’m desperate to kick her out and she’s unable to shake my grip.

We turn the bend and my eyes widen when I see all the employees flooding the hallway. Some of them are moving fast while others are walking slowly, huddled in groups with their heads pushed together.

“Miss Delaney.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Was anyone hurt?”

The questions come barreling at me like bullets.

I drop Lyra’s arm and try to keep my voice level. “Uh...” I blink rapidly. It’s hard to swallow right now, much less think. “We’ll make an official announcement later. But no one was hurt.”

Sighs of relief break out in the crowd.

As the news dissipates, I notice people giving Lyra weird looks. She stands out... and not in a good way.

Who is she?

Why is she with Miss Delaney?

What's going on?

No one speaks aloud, but the questions are practically popping on their tongues.

"If you'll excuse me." I gesture for them to make a path.

They step back and allow us to walk past.

One step.

Two.

I'm about to let loose a breath of relief when Lyra breaks away from me.

My pulse picks up speed as she whirls around and faces the Vision Tech employees.

"I'm her sister," Lyra announces, lifting a hand. "I'm related to your boss."

"Stop it," I warn in a low voice. Hauling her around, I drag her into the elevator and slam on the button so the doors close.

When we're alone, I give my sister a stormy look.

Lyra smirks at me, her exaggerated lashes looking like she cut the tail off a bird and stuck it to her eyes.

"What is wrong with you?" I ask heatedly.

The smile remains intact. "You're such a rancid witch."

Her words singe my skin like poison.

"You really have no idea how disgusting you are, do you?" Lyra taunts.

"I don't care what you think."

"No, obviously. You only care what these privileged little white nerds think." She leans against the wall, her chin tipped up in challenge. "Do you know how pathetic you look? You're the big boss and you still crawl like a worm in front of them."

"This is my place of *work*, Lyra. You can't just barge in when you feel like it and make a commotion."

"A commotion? No, honey. You were the one making a commotion. Dragging me around, acting like you'd done something wrong for being seen with me." She pushes off the wall, one corner of her lip curling up. "It must really bother you every day that your skin is dark like mine, huh?" Her eyes slide up and down over me. "How you must *wish* you had their lips and their noses and their backgrounds. It kills you, doesn't it? That you can

never fit into this world, no matter how hard you try to force yourself. It's like a square box trying to fit in a round, little white hole."

"I don't have anything to prove to you." My eyes stare straight ahead.

Lyra laughs. "By the way, nice hair."

I self-consciously touch one of my curls.

"You think wearing your natural hair will make you like yourself more? Nah, sis. You're still buttoned up so tight that not even an afro can save you. There's just too much you gotta wade through before you're free."

"You think you have any right to lecture me?" I spin on her. "Why did you show up at Vision Tech, Lyra? Was it to beg me for money? Or maybe to beg Adam for the cash I wouldn't give you? You think there's anything honorable about that? You think you're making the world a better place by being lazy and bitter and blaming your circumstances on everyone else?"

"At least I'm not conforming."

"Conforming to *what*? Having a stable job? Goals? Ambitions?" The words claw at my throat. I hate that I'm unravelling. I hate that she can get under my skin. "What do you really want, Lyra?"

"What are you talking about?" She blinks innocently at me.

"You think I don't know how you move?"

"I told you. I don't need no more money from you. I just want the job."

"And I told *you* that I can try to pull some strings somewhere else. Not at Vision Tech."

"If it's not here, I'on want it."

My eyes narrow on her. "Why are you so obsessed with getting access to Vision Tech?"

Her gaze spills to the floor.

I step toward her but, before I can push the conversation, the elevator doors open.

Lyra springs out. "Thanks for the mini-tour, sis. Next time, you can show me more of the place."

I stumble out of the elevator, but Lyra's fast. She takes off through the turn pikes and disappears out the front door like a poof of smoke.

My heart burns. Something tells me that today's visit wasn't so innocent or coincidental, but I don't have any proof.

What is she up to?

"Miss Delaney, are you okay?" Henry approaches me, a concerned wrinkle between his bushy eyebrows.

“I’m fine, Henry. Thank you.”

“You look like you’re going to faint.” He slides a chair over to me so I can sit.

“I don’t need it.” The words escape on a wheeze.

Henry doesn’t listen. He waits stubbornly until I take a seat and then he runs off to get a bottle of water for me.

“Thanks.” I accept the bottle from him and untwist the cap.

Henry folds his arms over his chest. “Was that really your sister?”

“Yeah.”

“She seems... interesting.”

I let out a bark of laughter. *That’s one way to describe her.*

“You need anything?” Henry asks me. The way he’s looking at me, I sense that his offer of help is sincere.

He’s a good kid.

A smart one. He won scholarships all the way through to his Masters and is now working on his PHD.

As Henry continues to stare, I feel something growing between us. The connection isn’t born from smarts or even from working at the same company. It’s that unspoken understanding that comes when people of the same complexion, the same background, enter a room where they don’t fit.

I release a sharp breath. “I’m okay.”

“Sure.” He bobs his head.

“Really.” I clear my throat. “Get back to work. Even with today’s surprises, we still have a lot to do.”

He hesitates.

“Henry, if you intend on earning a permanent position, I suggest you listen to me.”

He trots away quickly.

I smile at his back.

“Miss Delaney,” a security guard approaches me, “we’re trying to keep the reporters away, but they’re refusing to take no for an answer. Should we get the police involved?”

“No, that’ll only make this bigger.” I rub my temple, hating that I didn’t bring my purse with me. I keep my headache pills in there and I could really use one.

The security guard looks expectantly at me.

I drop my hand. “Tell them we’ll post a press release in two hours. We won’t be giving any exclusive interviews so they’re just wasting their time hanging around.”

He nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

As he hurries to do what I asked, I call the PR director. “Send out a memo. Tell everyone to avoid the reporters.”

“Already done. But I’m not sure how we’ll control this. The reporters will still try to corner people. They’ll just do it out of sight.”

“I know.” I check my watch. “In the next hour, I want someone from PR to go downstairs and pretend to be surprised by the reporters. Be as clueless as you can and let them coax you into giving an interview.”

“What? You want us to tell them what happened today?”

“No.” I straighten my shoulders and walk determinedly to the elevator. “Steer the conversation towards our convention and Mr. Harrison’s Inventor of the Year award.”

“You want to use this for free publicity,” he says with quiet understanding and a little awe.

“If they want to write about Vision Tech, let’s give them something to write about.”

“You’re incredible, Nova.”

I shrug off the compliment. “Not every journalist will bite, but let’s see if we can control the story.”

“How many people do you want on this mission?”

“Three. More than that will look suspicious.”

“Got it.”

My head is throbbing even harder.

I really hope this day ends soon, but I have a feeling that my wish won’t be granted.

* * *

ON THE WAY back to my office, I contact my acquaintance at the security company. Cell phone to my ear, I demand that they keep the security footage private.

“If I see any hint of what happened today on the news or on social media, I’m coming at you like a shark. We pay our lawyers a lot of money

to be very ruthless. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." I end the call and approach my office.

I'm surprised to see Adam waiting for me.

He and Rowan are still here?

I throw the door open, my heels clicking hard against the tiles. Adam spins and his brown eyes fall on me.

"Ad—"

"Don't." He marches up to me, steers me around and pushes me to sit in the sofa. His touch is warm and firm.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my headache easing as if his presence is a cure to my ailments.

"Adam." His name escapes on an exhale, a relieved sigh. It's distressing—that's what it is. Just being around him helps my pinched nerves. And I can't have that. I shouldn't be relying so much on him when I'm leaving.

"Miss Nova, are you okay?" Rowan squeaks.

I startle and realize that Rowan is sitting in my office chair. He's leaning forward and looks ready to rush over at a moment's notice.

Adam's voice is urgent. "Rowan, can you get Nova's purse?"

The little boy pops up, grabs my purse and brings it over to his dad.

"Thanks." Adam unlatches the top and pushes his hand in as if he owns the bag. His arm muscles bulge when he fishes around and, finally, he pulls out my headache medication.

I point. "Can you get my coffee from the table?"

"You're not supposed to drink this with coffee," Adam says firmly.

I bristle at his tone. It sounds like he's going to be stubborn about this. "The side-effects make me sleepy, and I can't afford to feel drowsy right now."

"Rowan, I need you to get a cup of water from the kitchen," Adam instructs his son, completely ignoring me.

"Okay." Rowan bobs his head.

Adam stops him with a sharp look. "Don't go anywhere else than the kitchen. Come right back here."

"I will," Rowan promises.

"Thanks, Rowan," I say in a more gentle tone.

The little boy scurries out of the room and shuts the door behind him.

I notice Adam staring at me and struggle to sit up straighter. "I'm fine."

“You don’t look fine.”

“How do I look?” I toss back.

His brown eyes flash with concern, then spin through a kaleidoscope of unreadable emotions, finally landing on one I can name—frustration. “You look like you’ve been carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders for way too long.”

“You’re over-exaggerating.”

His fingers skate over my head. At his touch, my stomach flutters with a horde of deranged butterflies.

That’s bad.

Very bad.

I cannot have butterflies with my boss.

“You’re sweating,” Adam whispers.

“People sweat.” I gently push his hand away.

He eases back. “I contacted the PR team. I heard what you’re going to do with the reporters.”

“Are you trying to scold me or praise me?”

His lips twitch. “If I say I’m scared of you?”

“A compliment then.”

He chuckles.

“We don’t have time to waste.” I close my eyes. “Since the news is so eager for something to report on, we should give them something to work with.”

I *feel* him smiling. I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s as palpable to me as my next breath.

“Did you see your sister off?” Adam asks.

I clamp up.

Adam notices my discomfort, but he doesn’t let it go. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a sister?”

I dig my fingers into the couch.

Okay, *normally* Adam is just as effective as my pills.

But not when he starts prodding and prying at the parts of me that I keep separate from him.

I open my eyes and notice his dark gaze boring into me. It’s like a power drill trying to make its way into my skull. And since I have my own jackhammer currently going to town inside my cranium, I could do without another power tool.

“You don’t need to know her,” I say finally.

“Yeah, well, for a second there, I thought I didn’t know you.”

I frown at him.

His eyes, as dark as the midnight sky, are firm on my face. “Why did you treat your sister like that?”

No.

No freaking way.

I’m not doing this with Adam. Pushing off the couch so he has to back away from me, I stumble to my feet.

“Nova, I’ve never heard you talk to *anyone* that way. Not even a staff member who messed up badly.”

I turn away from him.

“What’s going on between you two?” Adam presses.

“It has nothing to do with you, Adam,” I spit. He’s prying at the wounds inside my heart that I never let anyone close to. It hurts too much.

“Why don’t you want to give her a job? I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Well, I do.”

“Why?”

“Because she doesn’t deserve it,” I snap.

“No matter what she’s done, she’s still your sister.” He points out. “I’m sure she wouldn’t have come to you unless there was no other option.”

He has no idea what he’s talking about.

“Maybe it isn’t my place to intervene—”

I whirl around, my eyes burning with flames. “You’re right. It’s not.”

He doesn’t flinch. He just watches me like he’s trying to figure me out.

“Why are you harping on this?” I demand.

“Honestly? It was uncomfortable watching you treat your sister like that when I know that’s not who you really are.”

I open my mouth to blast him about the way he’s been treating Rowan and how he has no right to judge me. Just then, Rowan pokes his head into the room. When he sees that he’s been noticed, he walks over and hands me a cup of water.

“Thanks, sweetie.” I take a headache pill and knock it back with water.

Rowan stands right in front of me as if it’s his personal responsibility to see me take the pills. When I’m done, he accepts the cup back from me and looks down. “I’m sorry, Nova.”

“Don’t be, sweetie.”

My phone rings again.

I round the desk and take my seat, outing yet another fire.

Adam's stare is unwavering and there's a dangerous moment where I feel myself feeling almost guilty. But why should I? *He's* the one who's meddling. He's the one who's judging from the outside looking in without knowing the facts.

I turn away from him stubbornly and stoke the flames of my anger. At least those butterflies have dropped dead. That's a step in the right direction.

Adam finally gets enough of burning me with his gaze. He motions to the door so I know he's leaving.

I nod and dismiss him coldly. He can have a say in how I do business, in how I handle PR nightmares and even in how I choose to style my clothes, but he has no right to meddle in my personal life.

Not a single one.

* * *

I END up staying late at Vision Tech. The press release went out, and our plan to distract the journalists was a rousing success. Now, the news that Adam is receiving the Inventor of the Year award is plastered everywhere.

With all the buzz around Vision Tech, I asked the PR team to work overtime. There's no way I'm going to let an opportunity like this slip by. It's best to keep the momentum going while we still have people buzzing about us.

I return to my office wearily and flip on the light.

I'm surprised to see a paper bag from my favorite sandwich place sitting on the desk. My lips curl up, but I refuse to let Adam's peace offering sway me.

He's not going to get out of the dog house that easily.

Sighing hard, I step out of my pumps and massage my feet.

There's a knock on the door.

I glance up expectantly and my face falls when I see Henry striding in.

"Hey."

"Hey..." I answer hesitantly.

"Were you expecting someone else?" he asks, adjusting his glasses.

“Oh no. Not at all.”

“I saw your light was still on so I came to check on you,” Henry says, staying near the door. His eyes swing to the paper bag and return expectantly to me.

My heart thuds. “Did... you buy this?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “Uh, I’ve seen you eat sandwiches from that place before and I didn’t see you eat much today so...”

“Thank you.” I blink, taken aback.

“Sure.” Henry offers me a shy, youthful smile. “Sure.”

I slip my feet back into my pumps. “Did you have something else to say?”

“No. That’s it.” He turns away. Then he immediately turns back. “Miss Delaney, I wanted you to know that I really admire you,” he blurts.

I lean back.

“You’re so brilliant and put-together that I thought you were from...” His eyes drop to his shoes and he wrings his hands together. “I mean, I guess... I thought you were like all the people here. The ones who attended private schools since kindergarten. The ones with dads who own country clubs and play golf on the weekends. I thought you—”

“Were privileged and rich?”

He licks his lips nervously. “I wouldn’t say it like that.”

“Of course not.”

I get it. He saw my sister and realized where I come from. He took one look at Lyra and he knew exactly who she was, what kind of life she’d probably led and where she was going.

Everyone does that. We make snap judgements about a person based on their looks, their personality, their intelligence. I’m not surprised that Henry would buy me a pity sandwich after finding out my family comes from a less-than-stellar background.

“I really don’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended, Henry. We all have our own baggage.”

“That’s not—” He sucks in a deep breath and his eyes skitter away. “I’m screwing this up.”

I check my watch. It’s late and I’m not exactly sure what the purpose of this conversation is. “Did you need something else, Henry?”

He must have read the dismissal in my tone or in my expression because he looks a little hurt. Backing away, he shakes his head. “No, uh, enjoy the

rest of your night.”

The door clicks shut.

Alone again, I glance at my messy desk. There’s no way I can leave the office like this. Collecting all my colored pens, I sort them according to matte, regular, glitter, and bronze. After straightening my documents, I abandon any further desk organizing, collect my purse, and make my way downstairs.

The sandwich no longer looks appetizing and I’m not sure if it’s because I’m tired or because it didn’t come from Adam.

I need help.

My head is *killing* me. The headache medication I’m using should only be taken once every twelve hours, but I might cheat and pop another one before falling into bed.

I meet Steve downstairs and he opens the back door for me.

“Goodnight, Steve,” I say, ducking inside. “I’m sorry to have you working so late.”

He shakes his head at my apology. “I heard it was an eventful day.”

“It was.” I say nothing more of the matter and Steve doesn’t ask.

After a few minutes of driving, I notice Steve heading south instead of north. Alarmed, I unbuckle my seatbelt and scoot to the edge of my seat.

“Steve, this isn’t the way to my apartment.”

Steve glances over his shoulder. “I was instructed to take you to Mr. Harrison.”

My shoulders tense on impact. “I’m not going there.”

“Miss Delaney, I have my instructions.”

“Who do you work for, Steve?”

He thinks it over. “Mr. Harrison.”

Traitor. “When did he give that instruction?”

“About four hours ago.”

What is Adam planning?

I massage my forehead. “Steve, I appreciate that you have your loyalties, but I’m not in the mood to deal with Adam today. Can you please turn the car around and take me home?”

Steve looks conflicted. “Mr. Harrison said you might protest. I’m supposed to tell you to call him and let him explain.”

I’m not calling Adam.

“It’s fine, Steve.” I flounce back. I’ll just wait until Steve fulfills his duty and takes me to Adam’s. Then I’m going to call a cab and go home.

Unfortunately, I don’t have a chance to follow through with my plan.

Adam is standing on the driveway when Steve slows the car. He opens my door and motions for me to get out.

My eyes narrow on him. I remain in the car.

“Come out, Nova.”

“Steve is going to take me home.”

“Why are you so stubborn?” he mumbles.

“Me? Stubborn.” I glare at him. “You’re the one who—ah!” I let loose a frightened shriek when Adam dives into the backseat, slides his hand under my knee, presses the other to my back and scoops me out of the car like I’m a fish caught in his net.

I let out another yelp when he gives me a little toss to readjust me in his arms.

Moonlight spills over his strong face, raking silver fingers through his hair. His warm, espresso eyes are set with a defiant glint.

“Adam, what are you doing?” I hiss.

“See you tomorrow, Steve.” Adam uses his leg to kick the door closed and carries me to the porch.

His house is casting a warm, golden glow on the front lawn. The screen door is open and Adam doesn’t slow down when he swings me over the threshold.

I cling tightly to his neck in case I fall, but he has a good grip on me.

“Do you know what time it is, Nova?” Adam asks, his tone frustrated.

“I’m sure you have a watch.”

His hands tighten on me and I feel his chest rumble with a reluctant chuckle. “You’re still mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

He gives me a slightly crooked, *yeah right* smile and an invisible fist closes around my throat, tightening until I can’t breathe.

“Why did you ask Steve to kidnap me? And where’s Rowan?”

“Rowan is asleep. I think I get dad points for putting him to bed on time.”

“D-dad points?”

“And about why I kidnapped you...” Adam sets me down in the sofa and drags a box that was beside the chair. He lifts the lid and, inside, is a

beautiful pair of soft slippers.

My jaw drops. "Adam."

"I was out of line today." He reaches for my ankle.

I recoil, pulling my foot back.

He stubbornly goes for my heels and slips one off. His head is bowed and focused on the task, so all I can see is the top of his curly hair. "I shouldn't have judged you or pretended to understand your family dynamics. Especially with the way I've been treating Rowan." He glances up, an eyebrow hiked. "I know that was what you were going to tell me."

My heart bursts open and starts beating like it's been shot with way too much electricity.

"I care about you, Nova." He slips my other heels off and sets my foot into the soft shoe. It feels like moving from the hottest flames of hell to stepping on a cloud. I almost sigh in relief.

"And I'm sorry if I'm overstepping my bounds."

My eyelashes flutter. "You kidnapped me just to tell me that?"

"And to feed you." He gestures to the kitchen where a pan of lasagna is waiting. "Although I'll have to heat it up. It's gone cold now because *someone* doesn't know when to stop working."

I scrunch my nose at his scolding. "Says the man who'll stay up for seventy-two hours building a bag that can hover."

"Touché."

My lips tremble as I try not to laugh.

Adam glances up, his eyes locked on me. "Am I forgiven?"

"Depends on how good the lasagna is."

He pretends to wipe sweat from his brow. "Oh, now the stakes are high."

I laugh softly.

"There's that beautiful smile."

Shyness steals over me. The choking sensation is back again.

Does he mean that? Or is he only saying that to placate me?

Adam clears his throat and gets up abruptly. "Let me warm the lasagna."

As he walks to the kitchen, his phone chirps.

Adam checks the screen and goes stiff.

The air immediately sharpens.

"Who is it?" I ask, on alert. If Lyra somehow got his number...

Adam turns the phone and shows it to me. The contact reads 'Unknown Number'.

"What does the text say?"

"*Hi, Adam. This is Alexa.*" He looks a little unnerved as he skims the rest of the message. "She says she needs to talk to me."

CHAPTER 6

THE SLEEP-OVER

ADAM

I CLOSE my bedroom door tightly and stare at my buzzing phone screen. The last time I spoke to Alexa, she told me I had a son.

What could she possibly want this time?

Uneasily, I answer. "Hello?"

"Is this Adam Harrison?"

"How did you get my number?"

"From your assistant."

A prick of something dark stabs my heart. I should be surprised that Nova intervened and forged a link between me and Alexa behind my back.

But I'm not.

Nova has a habit of making moves and then informing me about them later. I trust her implicitly, so I've never had a problem before. But now... I wish she'd given me a heads up.

A simple *'hey, remember that fling you had in college who sent an eleven year old to your doorstep? I gave her your number'* would have gone a long way.

"How's Rowan doing? He didn't respond to my texts tonight. He's supposed to call me before he goes to bed."

"He's..." I stammer over my words. "He's good." I clear my throat. "For the most part."

"For the most part?" What does that mean?"

I rub the back of my neck.

"What happened to my son, Adam?"

"He had a minor accident in one of our labs today."

"What?"

"It shouldn't be fatal. I don't think. We're going to observe him over the next few days." I try to make my voice more upbeat when I say, "But he should be fine. I'm eighty percent sure."

"Adam, it's been forty-eight hours since he's gone to live with you and he already has a medical emergency?" Her voice rises to another level of frantic. "I've had my son for eleven years and he's only gone to the hospital a handful of times! You need to do better than that."

“I’m sorry, Alexa,” I grind out, my annoyance seeping into my tone. “Maybe if I’d had a little warning, I’d be better at this dad thing. But since you decided to sic Rowan on me at random, I’m still trying to get used to it.”

“He’s a child, not a dog, Adam. I can’t *sic* him on you.”

“You know what I meant,” I grumble.

“You’re his father. You should have been involved from the start. You’re eleven years too late.”

“And whose fault is that?” I bite out.

She goes silent.

I feel a flash of regret for lashing out at her and speak in a quieter voice. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know, Adam. Maybe it’s because we were never anything serious?”

“Come on, Alexa. That’s bull and you know it. If you’d told me, I would have taken responsibility.”

“I know.” Her words escape on an exhale. “I wanted to tell you. I went all the way to your dorm. Then I overheard some guys talking about how brilliant you were and how you were going to do great things. I didn’t want to clutter your life with a kid you didn’t ask for. I didn’t want to shackle you to me when I knew you didn’t love me. I thought I deserved more than that.”

I rub a hand over my face, my heart fraught with guilt. “You still should have—”

“We can’t change the past. Rowan’s with you now and you can prove exactly how you would have taken responsibility back then.”

“Of course I’m going to take responsibility.” *If the kid’s really mine.* “But Alexa, you were okay with hiding him for eleven years. I think I deserve to know why you suddenly changed your mind about keeping Rowan a secret.”

Her breath skitters through the phone.

She says nothing.

Finally, fabric rustles on her end of the line. “Look, let’s forget about everything else. Our son is all that matters.”

Our son.

That’s still so mind-boggling to me.

“Whether you knew or not, the truth is that you weren’t involved in Rowan’s life for over a decade,” Alexa says. “But now that you have him, you can’t keep ignoring him. That’s not how parenting works. You need to pay more attention to him if you want to keep him safe.”

“I’m doing my best here, Alexa.”

“Then obviously your best isn’t good enough!”

Her words scrape against my skin. I know I’m fumbling around on this ‘dad thing’ and it’s embarrassing. I don’t need anyone else rubbing salt in the wound.

“You can’t just drop him on me and expect my life to magically shift around. People don’t wake up and suddenly become the perfect dad.”

“Did I ask you to be a perfect dad, Adam?” Her voice rises. “I just asked you not to have our kid in the freaking hospital.”

I massage the bridge of my nose, my frustration bubbling up. “He’s fine.”

“Eighty percent fine.”

“That’s a passing mark.”

“Not in my books.”

I groan. “See, this is the reason we couldn’t make a real relationship work. We can’t communicate. You don’t get what I’m saying and, obviously, I don’t get what you’re saying either.”

“You’re right. We never could understand each other. But as crazy as we were, we did one good thing. We made a kid together.” She lets out a breath that whooshes over the phone. “I don’t care about our history or what you think of me, Adam. I don’t care about your excuses either. All I care about is Rowan being safe.”

If that’s true, then why did she shove her son on a bus by himself and let him show up on the doorstep of a total stranger? Why didn’t she come with Rowan and explain everything?

Something isn’t adding up.

“I need you to figure out this dad thing. Fast. Okay? You don’t have room to make any mistakes.”

“Why did you send Rowan to me after all these years, Alexa?” I ask urgently. “What’s really going on?”

“I have to go. Tell Rowan to call me tomorrow.”

“Alexa—”

The line goes dead.

I lean my head against the wall and grip my cell phone tight. Making a fist, I pound the wall once. Twice.

I feel like I'm standing on a rooftop that's cracking into pieces. Any minute now and I'm going to fall right through and get buried under rubble.

Damn. I hate feeling helpless more than anything. And right about now, I'm walking in the dark with my hands tied behind my back.

Alexa's hiding something, but I can't even begin to imagine what that something is. What's her real plan? What isn't she telling me?

I take a big breath.

Another.

Another.

Obsessing over it won't bring me closer to the answer.

One step at a time, Adam.

After a few more moments of freaking out and breathing hard, I feel calm enough to head outside and face Nova.

I turn the bend. "Nova, when did you give Alexa my... phone number?"

My words falter when I see my executive assistant curled up in the couch. Her hands are pressed together and flattened under her cheek. Her eyes are closed and she's breathing deeply.

I move backward as quietly as I can. Hurrying to the closet, I pull out an extra blanket and return to the living room.

Nova adjusts her head as if she can sense me coming. Half of her curls are crushed against the sofa while the other half expands like a cloud. Her nostrils flare lightly with each breath.

My heartbeat slows down. Just watching her seems to untangle the knots that formed while on the call with Alexa.

I drape the blanket over her. It can get chilly out here at night and I don't want her to tremble in her sleep. Nova snuggles into the blanket as if seeking out more of its warmth.

I crouch in front of her, my eyes tracing her dark forehead, the slope of her straight nose, and the shape of her luscious, brown mouth.

It's strange. When Nova's awake, she looks like an impenetrable wall of efficiency. Always on the go. Always tackling one problem or another.

In sleep, her shoulders don't seem as strong. She looks smaller and more fragile, like a butterfly with delicate wings rather than a hawk with a sharp beak and talons.

“You must have been exhausted,” I whisper. Glancing up, I notice that the lasagna is untouched. She didn’t even eat before she fell asleep.

A surge of protectiveness washes over me. But it’s different than what I usually feel. This time, the surge is like an invisible fist that grips my heart until it’s almost painful.

“I want to make your life easier, but I don’t know how,” I admit.

Nova clutches the blanket and burrows deeper into it. She sighs so heavily that her eyelashes tremble.

Should I take her to my bed?

A picture fills my mind immediately, as if it had been waiting for a chance to debut. I see myself draping Nova over my bed. I see my fingers dragging over her collarbone, down to her belly button, moving lower, lower still.

Have mercy.

Stabbing that idea in the gut, I back away from the sofa.

I need to go to sleep before I do something stupid.

Like wake Nova with a kiss.

Like wrap my arms around her and move her to my bed.

Like drag that sensible skirt to her waist so I can see what’s underneath.

She’s not interested in me like that, and revealing how she makes me feel would be the biggest mistake of my life.

It’s one thing to lose her as an executive assistant.

But if I mess up and lose her altogether—

I wouldn’t be able to survive that.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up earlier than the sun. My bedroom is dark and my body is aching from the dream I had.

A wispy image from the dream carries on the wind.

Nova.

In lingerie.

Smiling at me from my bed.

I shake my head and stiffly shuffle to my feet.

My first instinct is to check on Nova, but I don’t trust myself to be near her right now.

Shower first.

And I'll make it a cold one.

When I emerge from the bathroom a few minutes later, I've got the beast inside—the one that wants to gobble up Nova every time she so much as bends down to pick up a pen—in check.

I've been wrestling with that dragon since Nova's first day. Once he's chained up where he belongs, I stand a better chance of keeping my hands to myself.

On the way to the living room, I pass Rowan's room.

I stop and ease the door open. He's lying beneath the blanket. It's a cream shade, *sandstone*—at least that's what Nova called it when she picked it out for me.

My eyes trip over the plain cream walls, bare except for a painting of the ocean. There's a lamp next to the nightstand, a dresser and a small closet. The attached bathroom is decorated just as plainly.

Instead of getting a paternity test, you should make the guestroom kid-friendly.

Nova's words return to haunt me.

I'm definitely getting the paternity test but... I can also do something about Rowan's room. Nobody said I can't do both.

I start to walk away when Rowan makes a sound of distress in his sleep. Alarmed, I hurry to the bed and bend over it. Noticing the sweat on his brow, I realize he might be having a bad dream and set a hand on his shoulder.

"Rowan, hey, buddy. You okay?"

At the sound of my voice, his expression eases and he goes back to sleeping soundly. I study the kid. With his face smushed into the pillow and his arms flung out, he doesn't look so annoying. In fact, if I squint a little, he looks kind of sweet.

I remove my hand from Rowan's shoulder. He rolls toward me as if he wants to keep me from leaving.

I'm surprised by how pleased that makes me.

"I'm still here, kid." I run my hand through Rowan's dark hair, noticing that it's the same color and texture as mine.

I don't know if he's my son yet. But I *do* know that Nova's right—I haven't been putting much effort into getting to know Rowan.

Maybe that's because I'm scared.

Scared that the moment I open my heart to him, my life really will be changed forever.

But is keeping my distance worth the risk?

Nova's warning in the elevator yesterday, that I can't make another first impression, seeps into my head.

I've been treating Rowan like an inconvenience.

Which he is.

But it doesn't scrub away my responsibility.

"I'm going to try and do better, bud," I promise under my breath. "It might take some adjusting, for the both of us. But I'll get there."

His mouth opens further and drool starts sliding out.

Ugh.

I back away from the bed and tiptoe to the living room. I half-expect Nova to be gone, but she's still there.

I can't begin to describe the relief that fills me when I see her trim body hidden under the blanket.

She's sleeping peacefully.

As I watch her, another dream fills my head. Except this time, Nova has her clothes on. She's gliding through the manor, getting ready for work. She's there when I open my eyes in the morning. Every morning. She's kissing me before she gets into the car with Steve.

My heart starts beating faster and faster with excitement.

Remember the line, Adam.

The warning does nothing to help me calm down.

Maybe I need something stronger than a cold shower.

Leaving the living room quietly, I head outside with my phone. The view of the sunrise is captivating, but that's not what holds my attention.

A quick check of my phone reveals a new development.

Sometime last night, I got a text from Dejonae.

Hey, Adam. Just checking in. Remember, if you need anything, feel free to give me a call.

I re-read the message, hearing Dejonae's earnest voice in my head.

It's a mystery how Sazuki landed someone as warm and big-hearted as his girlfriend.

I smile to myself, and then I glance over my shoulder and study my slumbering executive assistant.

Come to think of it, I could use Dejonae's help with something.

I text her back, assuming she'll call me when she's got a free moment.
But my phone lights up immediately.

"Hey, Adam."

I blink in surprise. "Hey, I didn't mean to bother you this early."

"It's okay. Niko woke us up an hour ago. She's excited about the barbecue at the farmhouse tonight. She was up before the birds wanting to get ready for it."

At the mention of Sazuki's daughter Niko, I get a warm feeling in my chest.

Sazuki is fiercely protective of his kid. He didn't even allow me to meet her, despite how long we've known each other. However, since Dejonae entered his life, he and Niko have been socializing a lot more. I hear his daughter has her own set of faithful friends.

"How is Rowan settling in?" Dejonae asks.

I lean against the porch railing, trying to decide if I should mention the goo incident. "Uh, he's doing well. You know... we're... adjusting to each other."

"So it's been close to a disaster?" Dejonae deduces.

I cough. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." She laughs.

I hear something rumbling in the background.

"Oh, Sazuki's here. I'll put you on speaker, Adam."

"Morning," I greet him.

The famous musician grunts in response.

Always a conversationalist, that guy.

Dejonae takes over. "Your text mentioned you needed a stylist?"

"Yeah." I look back at Nova again. "No cap on the budget. I just want someone good."

"Is this for Nova?" Dejonae pries.

I hesitate.

"Did she stay over?" Dejonae presses. "Are you two finally together?"

"What? No," I sputter.

"Well, that sucks."

Sazuki grunts again. I can't tell if that's a good grunt or a bad one.

"She slept on the couch." I don't know why I'm telling them that, but the words come pouring out. "She's been working hard lately and I want her to get an extra hour of sleep, but I know she'll freak out when she

wakes up. Especially if she has to go home, shower, and get changed. I figured, if she got ready here, she could rest for a while longer and then go straight to work.”

“Isn’t that romantic?”

“Why is that romantic?” Sazuki asks darkly. “It’s just a change of clothes.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she fires back.

“You find the strangest things romantic,” Sazuki mutters.

Dejonae laughs. “Adam?”

“I’m here.”

“You don’t have to worry about hiring a stylist. I’ll do it.”

“No, I couldn’t ask you.”

“It’s fine. You know my sister’s a model, right? I picked up on some things just by hanging around her.”

I squint into the distance. I faintly remember Sazuki mentioning that Dejonae’s sister worked in fashion.

Still, I resist. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Adam, why ask a random stranger, who’s never met Nova before, when I could help? I’ve got a good sense of her measurements and I know her style. I’m confident I can do a good job.”

“Just let her do it, Adam,” Sazuki says. “Or she’ll pout all day.”

“I will *not*. Stop talking nonsense.” The thudding that follows tells me Sazuki got a punishment for his teasing.

I hear his low laughter and figure he’s not too hurt by it.

“Alright. If you really don’t mind.”

“I don’t.” Dejonae squeals. “This’ll be fun. I’ll ask Yaya to pull some strings.” There’s a pause and then the sound of rushed movement. “I’ll need at least an hour. Is that enough time?”

“That’s perfect.”

“See you then.”

I hang up the phone and head back inside the house, tiptoeing past the living room to the kitchen. Nova didn’t eat my lasagna yesterday, so I’ll hold her hostage by making her some wheat pancakes and bacon.

I’m halfway through popping the bacon when Rowan emerges from his bedroom. His hair looks like a bird’s nest, he’s got a pillow crease on his cheek, and I think I see dried drool.

“Morning, kid.” I lift the spatula and flip the pancake. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” He yawns.

I turn the stove on low and approach him. “Let me see your hand.”

He sticks both out to me.

I check his palm, glad that I’m not seeing any allergic reactions to the goo. Placing my hand on his head, I check if he has a temperature.

He gives me a strong look. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t feel like you have a fever,” I mumble. “Is your stomach okay?”

“I didn’t eat any of that stuff.”

“You can never be too careful. If you start feeling uncomfortable, you need to tell me right away.”

“You sound like mom,” he grumbles.

I’ll take that as a compliment.

See? Once I put my mind to something, I can get better at it.

I grin proudly and return to the stove.

Rowan glances past me and notices the lump in the sofa. He points. “Is that Nova?”

“Yeah. She’s really tired so…” I put a finger to my lips.

He nods.

I gesture to the stove. “Want to help?”

“Are you going to get angry with me for how I cook again?”

I shake my head. “I’ll keep a close eye on you this time. If things get messy, I’ll clean up by myself.”

“Deal.” He takes over the pancakes from me.

I clear my throat. “So, uh, did you have any plans for the summer?”

“Not really.” He pours batter smoothly into the pan.

“Not even with your friends?”

He shrugs.

“Did you have a lot of friends back home?”

He nods.

“You’re better than me. Growing up, I found it hard to make friends. They didn’t understand the things I was into. This one guy called me a freak when he saw me sketching out inventions in my notebook.”

“You sketch?” His eyes light up.

I take note of it. “Do you?”

He shrugs and flips the pancake.

So the kid likes to draw?

"I'll show you some of my old notebooks later," I promise.

He nods, an interested gleam in his eyes.

I hear sounds coming from the living room and twist around. Nova is sitting up, a perplexed look on her face. She glances down at the blanket, up at the walls and then smacks her head, cringing hard. When she swings around and meets my gaze, she goes completely still.

"Keep an eye on the bacon for me, Rowan."

The kid nods.

I walk out to the living room. "Morning, darlin'."

"I can't believe I slept over." Nova wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and touches her hair self-consciously. Her curls are a lot frizzier than usual. While one side is big and poofy, the other side—the side she was sleeping on—is adorably flat.

I can't believe how stunning she looks with her makeup mostly worn off and her hair doing its own thing. It's like I'm getting a glimpse of the wilder side of Nova, the *real* side. And I can't look away.

My pulse picks up speed. "I didn't have the heart to wake you."

"You should have. This is... I shouldn't be sleeping over."

"Why not?"

Her eyes dart to the side. "Because it's inappropriate."

"We didn't do anything wrong, Nova." I arch an eyebrow. "Besides, Rowan is here. We weren't alone."

She winces. "Still..."

"I, well, *we* made breakfast." I gesture to where Rowan is standing at the stove. "You can tell me how inappropriate this was over pancakes and bacon. *Turkey* bacon. I know how you get about pork."

"Oh no. I've already intruded too long. And I'm not hungry." She wraps an arm around her stomach, which growls loudly in direct defiance of her statement.

I chuckle.

The doorbell rings at that moment, cutting off the rest of her protests.

"That must be Dejonae."

"Dejonae? Sazuki's girlfriend Dejonae?" Nova's eyes widen.

"She's early," I mumble.

Opening the door, I nearly spring back when Dejonae launches inside with a bright smile. Another woman is with her. She's tall and exuberant with long black hair and expressive brown eyes.

"Morning, Adam." Dejonae charges past me. "Hey, Nova."

Nova stiffens and lifts a hand in discomfort.

"I brought my sister Yaya. She picked the outfit, so I guarantee you're going to love it."

Yaya makes a gesture with her hands.

"My sister says your house looks cozy," Dejonae translates. She stares at Yaya's hands as they keep moving. "She says you're pretty, Nova. And that you should model."

I go slack-jawed when I see Yaya signing. I hadn't realized that Dejonae's sister was deaf. No wonder Dejonae knew sign language and connected with Niko so well.

"We hope you like the dress," Dejonae says, shaking the garment bag hefted over her shoulder.

Nova doesn't smile. Her eyes shoot to me. "Mr. Harrison, can I speak to you?"

My excitement turns to apprehension in a snap. Whenever Nova calls me 'Mr. Harrison' in that tone, I know I'm in for it.

"Dejonae, do you mind watching Rowan for a sec? He's got the stove on and I—"

"Say no more." Dejonae flies into the kitchen. "Yaya, come over here. Let me introduce you to Adam's son."

For the first time, I don't flinch when hearing someone call Rowan my son. Progress.

My eyes return to Nova and I shrivel in the middle of her death glare. Swallowing hard, I follow her down the hallway.

When we're far from the living room, she whirls on me. "Why'd you bother Dejonae?"

"I didn't bother her. She offered to help."

Nova's eyebrows crash into an angry V. "Did you tell her I slept over last night?"

"I explained that you fell asleep on the couch."

Nova starts pacing and I study her in confusion. "What's the problem?"

"I don't know, Adam. Maybe it's that you dragged Dejonae into this for no reason."

“Dejonae doesn’t mind helping out. She’s practically chomping at the bit to come and check on us.” I step closer to her. “Nova, what’s wrong?”

She steps back. “Nothing.”

I don’t let her shake me off. She wore a thunderous expression when she stomped here with me and now she’s pressing a hand to her throat like she’s being choked.

“Nova, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t. Forget it. It’s fine.”

But I know those words are the biggest lies in the universe.

When she tries to scamper away, I press a hand to the wall, blocking her from leaving. She turns around and tries to escape the other way. I drop my other arm too, caging her in.

When it comes to that sassy mouth of hers, she can have me running in circles. But I’ve got her on brute strength alone. She’s not going anywhere.

Nova turns to me, her chest rising and falling. Anger spurts from her eyes. “How can I help you, Mr. Harrison?”

Again with the Mr. Harrison crap.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just wanted you to have breakfast and a change of clothes. If I knew involving Dejonae would make you so uncomfortable, I wouldn’t have done it.”

“It’s not about Dejonae,” she croaks.

“Okay. Then tell me what’s really going on.”

Her eyes skate away from mine and she licks her lips. I watch her pink tongue skitter over her mouth and my body tightens like I’m being held in a fiery clamp.

Damn, I can almost *taste* her tongue on mine.

It’s like my fantasies are tiptoeing into reality and the line between professional and unprofessional is getting blurred by the minute. There’s a gravity between us that pulls my very soul closer to Nova’s, stealing my oxygen before it hits my lungs.

“Tell. Me.” My tone is dark. Darker than I’ve ever used with her and it’s only because I’m trying hard not to thrust her body against the wall and stick my hand up her skirt.

Scorching brown eyes shoot to mine, hot in their defiance. I meet her stare unflinchingly, not bothering to hide my frustration or my desire.

Her angry look begins to crumble. She falters, either from the intensity of my gaze or from pure shock. Her eyebrows jump just a bit and her

fingers are quivering.

The silence is its own song, coiling around us, binding us together like a physical rope.

Nova holds my stare, keeping still and speechless.

She feels this too.

I can tell.

It makes me bold.

Lifting my hand, I skim calloused fingertips over the rim of her top lip, barely grazing the flesh of her mouth, dipping between the alluring cupid's bow and stopping at the fullness of her luscious bottom lip.

My touch is the barest dance of fingers on skin.

But I feel the heat as if I'd kissed her, a fire shooting through my body, spreading out from my chest to every inch of me.

I'm a freaking *inferno* inside.

I lean my forehead against hers, closing my eyes, my breath skittering as I fight for control of myself. I know I'm losing this battle. That light floral scent coming from her hair teases my senses. Her curls are like catnip. I want to bury my face in them.

I want to bury myself in her.

My hands are greedy for Nova, already anticipating how soft she'd be if I could just grip her.

Damn. If I could just kiss her.

Just once.

But I know that once won't be enough.

Not with Nova.

The air gets hot and sticky. Each labored breath from my mouth sounds like a gunshot in the hallway. I push my hands harder into the wall to keep from touching her. Restraint was never my strong suit, but I've had to grow a hell of a lot in that area. Especially when my assistant walks into view.

"W-what are you doing?" Nova croaks.

"You're driving me insane." I flatten my hands against the wall. My eyes rising to hers again, I whisper, "Is that intentional?"

Her fingers dig into her skirt. Her plump mouth falls open.

"Oh shoot. Sorry." Dejonae's voice is like a bucket of cold water.

Nova shoves me away with the force of someone twice her size. I go crashing into the wall and see stars.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt,” Dejonae says sheepishly. “I was just looking for the bathroom.”

“You didn’t interrupt anything,” I lie, massaging the back of my head.

Nova walks stiffly away from me.

Dejonae stops her. “Would you like to change now or after breakfast? I brought shoes and some underwear too.” She winks.

“Underwear?” Nova glances back at me, shooting lasers from her eyes.

“I didn’t ask her to bring underwear,” I defend myself, seeing the uneasiness in Nova’s face.

Dejonae looks up guiltily. “Oh, right. That was all me. I thought—”

“I won’t be staying for breakfast,” Nova barks.

I frown. “Nova.”

“I’m sorry you went out of your way,” Nova says, looking down at Dejonae. “I have a lot of things to do. I’ll leave first.”

Dejonae blinks in shock.

I shoot after her. “Nova.”

Dejonae steps into my path. She’s tiny but stubborn, like one of those loud chihuahuas. I step to the left, but Dejonae’s right there, an annoying burr in my sock.

To the right.

She blocks me again.

I can’t barrel past her. I can only stand back as the door opens and then shuts with a click.

Nova’s gone.

My heart slams into my rib cage.

I stare at the door as if I can will Nova back into the house.

But of course I can’t.

My shoulders tighten like a wind-up toy. I’m amped up from being near enough to kiss her and I’m still completely confused about what she’s angry about.

It’s like the closer I get to Nova, the more she pushes me away. I don’t understand.

“Adam, you can’t go after her like a cannon ball. These things require a delicate touch.”

“What are you talking about? What requires a delicate touch?”

“You and Nova.” She gives me a *duh are you stupid?* look.

I glance over Dejonae's head again, only half present. The other half of me isn't even *in* here. It's with Nova, stuffed in her purse like a forgotten chocolate bar.

Should I disregard Dejonae's suggestion and run after my executive assistant? Nova couldn't have called a cab so fast. If I get in the car, I can chase her down...

Suddenly, the front door blasts open again.

My entire body zings with energy when I see Nova hustling inside.

Rowan steps into the living room. "Did you come back for the bacon?"

"No, sweetie." Nova flashes him a brief smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

I rush out to meet her, recognizing that look of panic. "What happened?"

Crazy scenarios zip through my head. Did she witness a car accident on her way down the street? Did her taxi driver try to kidnap her? Was it aliens?

"We have a problem, Adam," Nova cries, her voice edging on a tone I've never heard from her before.

I stare at her, waiting for her to reveal what's got her so shaken up.

"I just got a call from our lawyers. We've been served with a suit." She pauses and takes a deep breath. "They're accusing you of plagiarism."

CHAPTER 7

THE MAGIC LUNCH BAG

NOVA

I STALK SHARPLY through the doors of my office, dressed in yesterday's clothes, my hair scraped back into as professional a bun as I could make it with only my fingers and water from the bathroom sink to smooth the coils.

Too many people stampede into my office behind me, crowding me with their frightened eyes and their desperation for answers that I don't have.

"Alright. Alright." I grip the back of my chair because there's no way I can sit down right now. My body's too full of restless energy and I'd probably bounce right up again like a spring. "One by one. Go."

The PR director starts first. "Articles about the plagiarism accusation have already begun circulating online. It's gaining ground on social media."

"So fast?"

"Because we made such a splash in the news yesterday, Mr. Harrison is a hot topic. It's catching fire faster than we can put it out."

I jut my chin down sharply, trying to remain calm.

At least on the outside.

On the inside, I'm as chaotic as the goo that was crawling out of the lab yesterday.

The clean-up crew still haven't scraped all the foam out, which is yet another problem on my docket. It's lower on the rung, but I still can't forget about it.

"Next," I order.

Roberts whips his laptop out and shows me a bunch of lines. "Our stocks are dropping. Fast. People don't want to be anywhere near Vision Tech's products and it's chomping down on the bottom line like a tyrant."

I process that information and then wave my hand. "Next."

"Some of the participants at this year's convention are calling for Mr. Harrison to be stripped of his rank before the second round of the competition."

I glance up harshly at the HR manager. "They haven't even waited for verification of the story."

“We think they’re capitalizing on the bad press in order to take Mr. Harrison down. They’re a small group, but they’re making a lot of noise.”

I lower my head and let a breath out slowly through my nostrils. I’ve known about the group of disgruntled participants for a while. They’re mostly sore losers who feel it’s unfair for a Vision Tech inventor to win every year.

I wonder how they would react if they found out that not only is Adam the best inventor in Vision Tech, he owns the whole thing.

“Anything else?” I call loudly.

The room falls silent.

I glance up, my eyes cutting through the crowd.

Rochelle, the office assistant, raises her hand. “Mr. Hall is on line four.”

I nod, glad that our lawyer can get back to us so soon. At least we’re not paying through the nose for nothing.

Glancing at each of the people in my office, I speak in a level tone. “I’m going to discuss our options with the lawyers first. In the meantime, come up with ideas to wrangle this out of the public eye. We can’t deal with the falling stock prices until we fix the image of Vision Tech.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

I pierce Roberts with my gaze. “We’ll have a meeting in an hour. Can you keep the shareholders calm until then? Assure them that we’re doing everything we can to fix this.”

“What exactly are we doing?” Roberts demands.

I glare at his tone.

He shrinks back, his eyes darting around. “They’re going to ask.”

“Assure them we are handling it,” I say through gritted teeth. “Can you not manage such a simple task, Mr. Roberts?”

He glances down.

“He’s got a point.” The PR director pipes up. “Shouldn’t we tell people that Adam didn’t steal those blueprints?”

I shake my head. “No one is going to listen to us at this point. We need to gather proof that can back up our statement and, to gather that proof, I need to talk to our lawyer first.” I frown. “Does anyone have any more questions?”

My voice is sharp and it cuts through the air like a knife. I’m not really inviting another problem right now and they know it.

“Good. If you’ll excuse me...”

They recognize my silent brush off and file out much slower than they did when they’d burst in. Unfortunately, they leave their worry behind.

I glance at the group of directors through the blinds. Their shoulders are tense and worry lines are wrinkling their foreheads.

I can practically taste their desperation.

It’s our first time taking a hit like this in public. After years of licensing new inventions, we’ve come across issues with patents and legalities. Most of the time, we’re the ones handing out the lawsuits though.

This is only our second plagiarism case, and the first one of this magnitude. The public being involved is a curveball and the bad press is mounting faster than I can manage.

My landline rings.

It’s the lawyer.

At once, all the strength leaves my legs. I fall into the chair, clear my throat and then pick up the phone. “Mr. Hall.”

We dive right into a discussion about our next steps, and I don’t like what I’m hearing.

“You’re saying, even if we have Adam’s blueprints, it’s not admissible?”

“That’s what I’m getting from the suit. I’ll need a little more time to untangle the red tape and get to the bottom of things but, from what I can see, Adam’s blueprint only proves that he built something new, not that he designed it.”

I stifle a groan. Fast-paced and worrying as the situation may be, what frightens me more is the fact that the blueprint got out. It’s illuminating a deeper problem than I have the energy to tackle.

“Adam would never steal from anyone,” I say firmly. “Whatever you do, I hope you attack this case from that angle. We will never admit guilt for something we didn’t do.”

“Understood.”

I throw the phone in the cradle and rub my forehead with my palm.

* * *

I'M FEELING IMMENSELY overwhelmed and it doesn't help that I haven't eaten since breakfast yesterday.

Food is the absolute *last* thing I have time for. Not when I have a million tasks tugging me in a million different directions.

What should I do first? I need to prepare for my meeting with Roberts. And the PR team needs approval for the newest press release. And I need to take a better look at those stock prices. And... and...

The room spins slightly and I close my eyes, trying to get back into the game.

My body can't fail me.

Not right now.

I have too much to do.

"Put your head between your legs and take deep breaths, darlin'," a voice rumbles.

I glance up as Adam rushes into my office, carrying a lunch bag. Not the paper bag, like the kind that was sitting on my desk yesterday. An honest-to-goodness lunch bag with a long strap and a zip down the front.

I fixate on that bag as if it's the solution to all the problems that are plaguing me.

The material is blue and puffy.

Blue is Adam's favorite color.

I wonder what Rowan's favorite color is? I have to ask him.

Adam sets the bag on the desk and kneels in front of me.

He really has to stop doing that.

Going down on one knee.

He did it last night when he took off my shoes and again today. Watching him kneel in front of me makes me feel like he's about to propose or...

I know I've lost it now if I'm thinking about Adam and marriage in the same sentence.

"Darlin'," Adam takes my hand and swirls his thumb over the back of my knuckles, "I need you to breathe. Okay?"

My eyes devour his face. Just like me, Adam looks like he didn't shower. He's wearing the same worn T-shirt that hugs his pecs. The same jeans with the holes in the knee.

Looking at this man, the last thing you'd think is that he owns a billion-dollar company.

I've never met someone who cared less about money than Adam.
Ironically, I've never met a man with as much money as Adam either.
Black dots start dancing in my vision.
I'm not passing out. I'm focusing on Adam.
I'm fine.
I'm great.
"Dammit, you're scaring me, Nova."

I suck in a deep breath. For someone who didn't shower, he still smells good. Like metal, always that metal, and something else. Sandalwood. Was he doing woodwork? His hair is wet. It must be raining outside. There's a drip of water running down his strong forehead, past his temple and along the curve of his unbelievably square jaw.

When it comes to the genetic lottery, I think Adam's right there in the winner's circle. It's like he fell on top of a sculptor's chisel when he was growing up.

His touch gets firmer. "Nova."

The world tilts and goes dark. I can see, but it's like a fog has settled on the room or like I'm trapped in a warm dream.

I'm suddenly aware of strong arms cradling me. I'm falling out of my chair, but I'm not on the ground. I'm in something soft. A cloud?

A lap.

Adam's lap.

I hear him mumbling, "It's okay, Nova. I got you. I got you, darlin'."

If I wasn't fighting to stay conscious, I'd push him away. What if someone came inside? What if they saw me sitting in my boss's lap and told everyone that Nova Delaney is being inappropriate with her employer?

The part of me that's made of ice and should care about things like that has started to thaw. I'm as limp and helpless as a newborn right now, but I'm not scared.

Adam's here.

He says he's got me.

As if I needed the words.

He's proven time and time again that he's someone I can rely on.

I close my eyes for a bit and breathe in time with Adam's rushing heart. I'm not sure how many minutes tick by while I half-sit, half-float in Adam's arms, but slowly I come back to myself.

The first thing I realize is that my fingers are curling in his shirt and my cheek is stuck to his left pec. Adam's lips graze my temple—did he just kiss me?

Stunned, I open my eyes wider and turn to look up at him.

"There you are. You okay, Nova?"

I land fully back into myself and battle a floundering panic. What just happened? Did I just *nuzzle* my boss?

Gah!

I want to cover my face and take a flying leap through the window. My body jumps as if eager to live out the command. Unfortunately, I can't go far because Adam has a good grip on me.

"Don't move too fast, Nova," he warns. There's a tender note to his voice and also a hint of amusement.

Embarrassed beyond measure, I push up so I'm sitting on my own instead of laying sprawled on his chest.

I can't even look at him. After that confusing moment in the hallway this morning, I renewed my promise to keep a distance from Adam. The scalding hot attraction I feel for my boss is getting harder to resist and I can't afford to make any mistakes.

Unfortunately, the mistakes are piling up so high, they'd reach outer space.

"That's the first time a woman's literally fallen for me," Adam teases, brushing my cheek with his knuckles.

"In your dreams."

His entire chest rumbles with a chuckle. "Good. You're firing back at me. It means you're feeling better."

"What are you doing here?" I whisper faintly. "I told you to stay at home and not to worry. I've got this."

"I am worried."

"I've—"

"Not about the lawsuit," he says. His brown eyes fall on me like a gentle rain. "About you."

I tremble a little.

Adam shakes his head. "It's a good thing I came too. Imagine if you'd hit your head on the edge of the desk? Then Vision Tech would have a much bigger problem."

Vision Tech. Right.

I try harder to push away from him this time, but Adam slides his arms around me and I collapse against his chest.

“Just a few more seconds,” he coaxes. “Relax.”

Impossible. Not with his hard, muscular chest at my back, with his familiar scent wrapping around me and with the strength of his arms across my stomach. And definitely not with the way my heart is picking up speed from being held like this.

“Mr. Harrison, this is... very inappropriate.”

He chuckles. “Don’t tempt me to show you what inappropriate *really* looks like, Nova.”

My eyes bulge. I start squirming around.

“Calm down, darlin’. I’ll let you go in a minute.”

“Now.”

“Take three deep breaths and then you can stand up,” Adam says.

I open my mouth and gulp in air like a fish. Then I pry at his hands until he loosens his grip.

Rolling out of his arms, I jump to my feet and pat down my hair. One swipe makes me cringe. I didn’t sleep with a bonnet yesterday, which was Island’s fiercest recommendation when joining Team Natural Hair.

Now, my hair is frizzy beyond measure and curls are popping out of my hair clip. I must look like a total mess.

“You look beautiful,” Adam says as if he can read my mind. He grips my arm and sets it down gently at my side to stop me from fussing with my hair.

His touch sends an explosion of electric sensations up my body.

I turn away quickly and try to forget about Adam holding me in his lap and calling me ‘darlin’ in that sexy voice.

Adam grabs a container from the bag and sets it on the desk. “I brewed your favorite coffee. Although I wish I’d gotten you water. I think that would be better for you.”

I pounce on the bottle. The beautiful scent of roasted coffee beans rises to my nostrils and gives me life.

As I take my first sip, the world rocks back into focus and things start making sense.

Maybe I only imagined Adam kissing my head.

Maybe it was my deranged mind that felt his heartbeat picking up speed as he cradled me.

Maybe all the things that I found sexy and romantic were just pure panic from a man who thought I'd die in his arms.

"Thanks." I cap the top of the travel mug and set it on the desk. When I glance down, I notice a file tucked in between the lunch box. I fish it out. "What's this?"

He snaps it from me. "That is something I'll show you after you eat breakfast."

I pout. "If you have something that could help, I need it now. I don't have time to—"

He slants me a firm look.

I give him a tight glare in return.

He doesn't budge. I'll have to play along if I want to see what he brought.

"Fine." Plunking down into my seat with a little less force than I wanted to thanks to my still-weary body, I accept the lunch box.

Inside are two pancakes with bananas for eyes and a blueberry smile.

I melt. "Rowan did this?"

"My kid's got an artistic flair."

My lips curl up. *My kid?*

I accept the fork he offers me. "Did you ask Dejonae to watch him?"

"No. She offered, but I didn't want to put her out. Mariana is watching him."

I nod. It was a matter of time before Adam's housekeeper found out about Rowan.

"Honey?"

"What?" I glance up in shock.

Adam shakes a packet in front of me. "I brought honey. For your pancakes."

"Oh." Why did my heart rush thinking he was calling me by an endearment? I must still be a little dazed.

I shove the pancakes into my mouth and then show Adam my clean plate. "See? Now what did you bring me?"

"So impatient." He opens the file and slides it across the table.

I push aside the empty container and draw his sketch close. "What am I looking at?"

"The blueprint I submitted to the patent office isn't the one I worked on originally. It's the rendition I formulated on a computer." He unfolds a long,

thin paper and shows me a much older blueprint. “This is the one I created with a pencil and my own crude measurements. It’s dated and notarized.” He points a pale thumb to the numbers. “I do that with all my original creations. Just in case.”

I snatch up the blueprint and bring it close to my face. My heart starts singing like a black choir at an Easter service.

“Adam!” My eyes widen. I can’t even form the words I need to express my relief.

He leans against the desk, smirking at me. “The lawsuit isn’t necessarily about the overall design, but about the bass frequency conduction functions. I have a dated blueprint for that too.”

My eyes move slowly up to his. “Thank you.”

He shakes his head. “I’m glad I could take one worry off your plate.”

I grab my phone, snap photos of the blueprints and then text our lawyer. Next, I grab my pen and write a comprehensive to do list. It calms me seeing the tasks lined up. Plus, now that I’m fueled up, I feel like I can tackle anything.

“The crisis is averted now, right?” Adam asks, studying me intently from his perch on the desk. “You don’t have to worry anymore.”

“Not even close.”

He frowns at me.

I lean forward. “Yes, the blueprints came in handy. We can counter-sue for damages and I’m sure the other company will back off...”

“But?” He prods.

“But how did the blueprints get copied in the first place?”

Adam rises to his full height. “You think it’s someone from the company.”

It’s not a question.

“Adam, consider it. It’s the only answer that makes sense.”

“I don’t need to consider that. It can’t be anyone at Vision Tech.”

I tip my head back to look at him, noticing the stubborn set of his jaw. “You can’t always believe that everyone at Vision Tech has the company’s best interests in mind.”

“What would be the point of leaking our blueprints? What would they gain by doing that?”

“Money? Evil satisfaction?”

“We have the most comprehensive benefits of any tech company, plus profit sharing after one year. Everyone knows that my work is property of the company, just like theirs is if they choose to sell. They’re paid well either way. There’s no need for betrayal.”

I stand too because Adam looking down on me makes me feel like I’m losing the argument. “Adam, I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but just because you treat people well doesn’t mean they’re going to treat you well too. You can’t be so trusting all the time.”

“Maybe you need to trust a little more.”

“Me?”

“You think everyone is out to get you.”

“And you think everyone is good inside.” I place my hand on the table and lock eyes with him. “You’ve been in your lab making inventions twenty-four-seven. You only deal with the people you want to deal with. I’m out here every day, protecting the company from the greed, jealousy and bitterness of others. I don’t get to have such an optimistic point of view.”

He studies me for a long moment before looking down at the blueprints. “I’m not discounting how much you’ve sacrificed for Vision Tech, Nova. And I’m sorry I didn’t notice before how much mud you had to slog through just to get us to where we are.”

“I’m not fishing for an apology, Adam. I’m only saying—”

Adam interrupts. “I know what you’re saying. But humor me. Where would you be spending your energy if you were sure that the culprit wasn’t someone from the company?”

I give him a perplexed look. “We can’t be sure though. It’s easy for someone from the company to sell us out. It doesn’t even have to be a recent employee. It could be someone who’s left already. An intern who didn’t get promoted. Someone I disciplined...”

He plants his hands on the table and leans over until his face is close to mine. “What if it was just you and me who created this invention? And no one else was at the company. Who would you be trying to investigate then?”

“I don’t know. The... patent office?”

He arches an eyebrow as if to say *bingo*.

I open my mouth to protest, but then it sinks in. He might have a point. It’s worth investigating at least.

Scrunching my nose, I poke a finger in his direction. “We don’t know if you’re right.”

“We don’t know if I’m wrong.”

I shake my head at him and sling my purse over my shoulder.

“Where are you going?” Adam asks. “You could just give them a call.”

“It’s too easy to shake someone off on a call. I need to investigate with my own two eyes.” I round the desk.

Adam is right behind me.

I stop and stare at him. “I don’t need your help.”

“And even if you did, you wouldn’t ask for it.” He steps closer. “You’re supposed to be showing me the ropes, remember? How am I supposed to learn if you leave me in the dust?”

I hesitate. Adam’s a distraction and, after that embarrassing episode in his lap, I’m afraid of what I’ll do if he catches me off-guard again.

“You’re too close to this case,” I say to deter him. “It’s better if I handle this alone.”

“Then at least let me drive you.” When I scowl, he holds up both hands. “That’s all I’m going to do.”

“I know you, Adam. You’ll walk in right beside me.”

He looks guilty as charged.

I don’t want him following me around. I’m definitely going to tell him. I will not—

“Okay,” I find myself giving in as though my mouth has a mind of its own. I whirl back around and jab a finger at him. “But I’ll do the talking.”

He gives me a grin that makes my heart skip a beat. “Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

I REALLY HATE when Adam is right. Not only because I hate being wrong in general, but because Adam knows how to lord it over me.

“Don’t say a word,” I whisper to him as we return to the company after our short but fruitful investigation.

Adam makes a zipping motion in front of his lips.

I glare straight ahead and march into the conference room where everyone is waiting.

All the directors are present and staring expectantly at me.

I lift my chin at the PR team. “The patent office’s internal investigation team will be in touch with us soon. They’re going to put out a statement clarifying the situation and absolving Adam and Vision Tech.”

A wave of ‘what’ and ‘how come’ echoes over the office.

I lift a hand for quiet. “The patent office was already investigating one of their own for selling blueprints and blackmailing inventors to make money. They’ll host a press conference. Today.”

“Then we’re saved!” Roberts declares, flashing me a big grin.

“Not quite.” I stop their early celebration. “The damage to Vision Tech is severe. We need ideas for an event that will align the company with positive news articles. Preferably something related to the kinetic batteries.”

“What about a sports day?” Adam suggests. “The kinetic batteries were created to encourage movement. We can invite the local schools or children’s homes to participate.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Roberts spits. “We’re a tech company. Not a community center.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “No, I like it. We can have the participants beta test low-budget prototypes and show reporters how the batteries are supposed to work. We also get to push the message that Vision Tech is here to make the lives of everyone easier. By involving the community, we can make the company look more accessible and warm-hearted rather than cold and distant.”

Roberts chuckles nervously. “You’re right. It’s a great idea! I love it.”

I slap my binder closed. “Take care of that,” I say to the PR director. “Roberts, invite our biggest shareholders to the event too. Let them see how the kinetic batteries work in advance. With their support, it’ll be easier to convince the board to green light in-house manufacturing.”

“Got it.”

I dismiss them and head back to my office.

Adam matches my pace. In the elevator, he checks his watch. “I’m going to make sure you eat lunch and then I’ll head back to Rowan.”

“I notice you’re not running away from him anymore.”

“Yeah, well, if he’s not my kid, I can write it off as babysitting for an old friend. And if he is... at least I won’t regret my first impression.”

I smile up at him. “I’m glad you’re seeing the light. But you don’t have to stay until lunch. I’ll make sure I eat.”

“I don’t believe you,” Adam says.

“You never believe me.”

“Maybe if you didn’t get so caught up in work and took better care of yourself, I’d worry about you less.”

“You don’t have to worry about me at all, Adam.”

He steps close enough that his cowboy boots are kissing my pumps. “It would be easier to stop breathing, darlin’.”

My eyes catch and hold on his.

The elevator turns into an electromagnetic field, zapping sensations at me one after the other. The air feels different all of a sudden. *I* feel different.

But different is not what I need when it comes to Adam.

I force myself to glance away. “I really do appreciate you bringing the blueprints today. And breakfast. Tell Rowan his blueberry smile brightened my day.”

“He’s going to love that.”

I offer a tired nod.

Adam’s eyes stay fixed on me. My heart tries to do a fancy backflip even though it knows well and good that it has no permission to do so. The stupid, idiotic butterflies stir to life and if I had a knife to shred their wings, Hannibal Lector style, I would.

I’m vaguely aware of the elevator stopping and the doors opening. But it’s only when I hear Henry’s voice that I break out of my Adam-trance.

Vision Tech’s most brilliant intern is staring at us. He gives Adam an odd look before bestowing me with a smile. “Miss Delaney.”

“Hi, Henry.” I lift my chin, doing my best to act cool and unruffled.

Note to self: no skipping breakfast and lunch around Adam. It makes me way more susceptible to his good looks and charm.

“Ehem. Are you getting in?” Adam asks a little abruptly.

Henry clamors into the elevator. Once the doors close, he turns to me. “I was just coming to see you.”

“Did you need something?” I ask, slipping into work mode.

“I, uh, wanted to check if you’d gotten home okay.”

My eyebrows cinch together. “Yes, I did.”

“And, um, did you enjoy the sandwich?”

I hear a sound of stifled laughter and glance up at Adam. One corner of his mouth kicks up and he gives me an innocent look.

I scowl at him and then glance back at Henry. “Yes, thank you.”

That’s a lie.

I didn't eat Henry's sandwich, but I don't want to tell him that. Not when he was being so nice.

"Good. Good." Henry bobs his head. He wipes dark hands on his lab coat and seems to be searching for something else to say. "I heard we're having a sports event."

"Yes, we are."

"I heard employees can participate."

"Yes, they can."

"Would you like to be my partner for one of the games?"

The smile drops right off Adam's face like butter from a hot skillet. He steps forward but, just then, the elevator stops.

I walk off.

Both Adam and Henry are right behind me.

"I don't know if I'll be participating," I tell Henry, my heels clicking on the tiles.

Since the most pressing matters have been averted, I'll try to shake Adam so I can work through lunch and then I'll go home early to shower. I'm starting to feel grimy.

"But if you do," Henry insists, "will you partner with me?"

My phone buzzes.

It's the lawyer's office.

"Yeah, sure," I say flippantly. Henry's a smart kid and I'm hoping to speak to him about continuing at Vision Tech in a permanent position. It won't hurt to pay him some attention before then.

Adam's eyes widen in horror.

I lift a finger before he can say whatever it is that's bubbling on the tip of his tongue.

"Hey, Hall." I move into my office.

Adam glares at me through the blinds and, for some reason, it makes me want to laugh.

Hall says something and I have to ask him to repeat it.

Enough staring at your boss.

I focus on Hall's outline of our next steps, a lot more comfortable with the game plan now that we have the truth on our side. I'm grateful this matter cleared up without dragging on for too long. But that's mostly due to Adam's evidence backing all the bad guys into a corner.

I realize I'm smiling just thinking about Adam and quickly fix my face.

When I'm finished with Hall, I notice a text on my phone.

Adam: Mariana had to leave, so I'm going back home to check on Rowan. I'll order lunch for you. Make sure you eat it!!

Adam: Also, Dejonae invited us to a barbecue tonight. I'm picking you up at five. No overworking today!!

I chuckle at his text.

Adam tells me I'm bossy, but the truth is that *he's* the bossy one. And what's with all the exclamation points?

Me: I've got a meeting at five. But I can try to end it by six.

Adam: Deal.

I set the phone away when it buzzes one more time.

Eagerly, I pick it up and check Adam's latest message.

By the way, tell that kid to back off. If anyone's partnering with you for that sports event, it's going to be me.

CHAPTER 8

THE UNEXPECTED OFFER

ADAM

I SET my phone down and motion Rowan into the lab. He gazes eagerly at the gadgets in various states of deconstruction.

The lab is huge, but it seems small because of all the clutter. There's a burnt metal smell baked into the walls. A few years back, Nova forced me to install a vent. *If you pass out from the fumes, I'm not attending your funeral.*

Between the large cabinets overflowing with random parts of machinery and the long, cold metal tables, I'm pretty sure this lab looks more like a torture chamber than anything else.

But at least Rowan seems dazzled.

"Careful where you walk," I warn him as he approaches me.

I have a tendency of leaving discarded projects on the ground. The only reason I have a cleared path to the desk is because I didn't want Nova to trip when she visits me.

Rowan steps lightly over a box of metal rods and joins me at my worktable. I push my goggles away from my face.

"You ever use a blow torch before?"

His eyes light up. "No."

"Well, you're not going to use one now." I put the torch away, far from his reach.

He pouts, but it's not like I'm dumb enough to feel sorry for him. The kid caused an explosion just by pressing a few buttons in the lab. He might blow up half the neighborhood if I give him a real weapon.

"What is this place?" Rowan mutters, shoving a hand into his pocket and looking around.

"It's my lab. I come up with inventions and work on prototypes here."

He squints at me as if I'm talking another language.

"Want to help me build this thing?" I motion to the hover-bag.

He shakes his head.

"It'll be fun," I coax.

He doesn't seem that interested.

“Are you any good at science?” I ask, hoping to drum up a conversation.

“No.”

“Like not at all? I’m open to medical science too.”

He sticks out his tongue. “Blood makes me woozy.”

My hope withers to ashes.

Since I’ve decided to try and get to know Rowan better, I was hoping to take a shortcut and find some common ground. It’ll be much easier to connect with him if we can talk shop.

“What about construction?” I ask hesitantly. “Woodwork? You any good with your hands?”

“Nope.” He shakes his head.

“Come on,” I insist. “You must have some kind of inventor bone in your body.” My tone is brushing on desperate.

He shakes his head.

Would a son of mine *not* be interested in science? If he keeps this up, Rowan’s on his way to being demoted back to ‘definitely not my kid’ territory.

I cringe inside, but outside, I plaster a smile on my face. “That’s fine. You might grow into it.”

“Science is boring.”

Sacrilege.

He touches my robot arm like ET, one finger pointed out and connecting with the metal digit.

My eyes are twitching, but I take a moment to absorb the fact that the kid just spit on science.

“Well, what are you into then?” I croak.

He shrugs.

“You don’t know?”

He shrugs again.

So we’re back to communicating via body movements? I feel like I’m in a game of *Gestures*.

“What was your favorite subject in school?” I prod.

He just looks at me.

“English?”

“No.”

“Math?”

He makes a disgusted face.

Guess he's not a mathematician.

"Why are you asking so many questions?" Rowan asks suspiciously.

I narrow my eyes in response. It seems like the guilt Rowan felt for the exploding goo incident is rubbing off.

Man, I wish I could go back to that night when the kid obediently got ready for bed and went to sleep without so much as a grunt in response.

"Uh..." *Come on, Adam. How hard is it to connect with an eleven year old?* "What do you watch on your phone all the time?"

"Stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"YouTube."

"Interesting," I mutter. "Just YouTube?"

"Yeah."

I'm running out of patience.

And things to say.

That's not his fault though. I'm currently not in the best mood thanks to witnessing Nova and that intern guy Henry in the elevator today.

I've seen Nova brush off flirtations before and it's always a good time, but I've never seen her accept an invitation.

Any kind of invitation.

Ever.

She's as amazing at drawing lines in the sand as she is at commanding the company.

But today, she didn't draw a line. She let that Henry guy waltz right into territory he doesn't belong in.

And he knew it too. *The punk.* He saw an opening and he went for it. Watching Henry's eyes light up with hope made me want to punch him into the next floor.

Do I have a right to feel jealous?

No.

Not even a little.

But will that stop me from feeling protective of Nova and wanting her for myself?

Absolutely not.

There's no way I'm letting Nova pair up with *anyone* at that sports event.

Especially a kid throwing moon eyes at her.

Especially when she's not telling that kid to keep his stupid moon eyes to himself.

"Can I go now?" Rowan asks.

I notice the impatience in his voice and it gives me pause. "Are you angry about something?"

He glances away.

I stare at him as if I can scan his brain with my eyes alone. Rowan seemed fine during breakfast this morning. Maybe he's angry that I had to run after Nova and leave him alone today?

"Did something happen when I left you with Mariana?" I ask. "Did you want to come with me and Nova instead?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Mom called," Rowan admits.

"What did she say?"

"Did you tell her about the lab thing?"

"What lab thing?"

"You know." He makes a poof sound and motions an explosion with his hands.

I lean one elbow against the desk. "Yeah, I told her."

Rowan's eyes turn heated. "You said you wouldn't rat me out."

"When it comes to your health, I don't think it's a good idea to keep secrets from Alexa."

"You don't understand." Rowan folds his arms over his chest. "She shouldn't be worrying about me right now."

I watch him carefully. "Why not?"

"No reason." He shakes his head. "Are we done here?"

I want to follow that thread of conversation, but if there's one thing I've observed about Rowan in the short time he's been staying with me, it's that he's got legendary stubbornness.

Rather than pushing it, I try to keep him in the lab with me. "Didn't you say you wanted to see my drawings? I've got a whole cabinet of them in here. You're free to check them out."

He turns slightly.

"They're over there." I point to the locker.

Rowan pauses as if he's trying to decide whether this is a trap or not. Finally, he traipses over to the cabinets. I guess he must have decided that seeing my drawings was worth the risk.

My phone rings.

It's my development team.

I keep an eye on Rowan, who's rummaging around in the cabinets, and answer the video call.

"Carmicheal, what's up?"

The lab tech shows me a close-up video of a singed memory board.

I frown at the burn marks. "What happened?"

"We hit a snag with the kinetic batteries. No matter what, we can't get a chip of this size to respond well to electromagnets."

"Walk me through it," I say firmly.

I listen to the issue.

After a few minutes, I've heard enough. "You can't solder the memory chip down or it'll damage the transmitters. Get someone who knows computer chip installation and let them handle it."

My tone is brusque and to the point. When it comes to running the company, Nova's got that locked down. But when it comes to engineering, I take control and I'm not afraid to be particular about what I expect.

"You need some help?" A voice mumbles from the background.

The camera swings and I see the guy who was flirting with Nova swaggering into the lab.

My hackles rise. I instantly dislike everything about him, from his big eyes to his lanky frame to his annoying, youthful confidence in pursuing his own boss.

"I'm on a video chat," the lab tech whispers.

"Turn the phone around," I demand.

"Sir?"

"Turn it around."

The technician does what I ask.

Henry peers into the phone and sees me. "You!" He points. "You're Adam Harrison, right?"

I lift my chin.

"Hey, man. I thought I recognized you. I'm a big fan."

"Thanks," I answer dryly. "What are you doing in the new development lab? We don't allow anyone without clearance."

“I have clearance.”

“From who?”

“Nova.” A goofy grin crosses his face.

“Nova?” I hiss. He calls her *Nova*? “Her name is Miss Delaney.” *Who gave this kid the right to call Nova by her first name?* “And I wasn’t informed about you joining the team.”

“Nova’s busy right now. I guess she forgot.”

I let out a puff of laughter. A snarky comment springs to the edge of my lips. It takes great effort to swallow it down.

Since I’m working in an official capacity, I have an obligation to keep my composure, but it’s getting kind of tough.

I ask tightly, “Why did Nova assign you to the kinetic battery team?”

“I major in computer engineering and minored in physics. She said my talents would be best served here.” He gets that goofy grin again.

Is he thinking about Nova *right now*?

My fingers close into fists.

How much time would I serve if I drove all the way to Vision Tech just to smack that smirk off his face?

Henry waves at the camera. “I’ll work on the memory chips, Mr. Harrison. Don’t worry. I won’t let you or Nova down.”

I grit my teeth.

Jail time is not worth it. Jail time is not worth it.

“We’ll keep you updated, sir,” the lab tech says.

The screen goes dead a moment later.

I take deep breaths to calm my anger. It’s fine. The kid is cocky because he has no idea how the world works. How *Nova* works. I have nothing to worry about.

Nova’s going to crush his dreams of getting with her. All I have to do is grab my popcorn and watch.

* * *

FEELING ASSURED, I pocket my phone and turn around. “Rowan, did you find the drawings... *what are you doing?*” I bark.

The kid is surrounded by my blueprints. There’s a pencil in his hand and he’s *sketching* on a sheet. I barrel over, my heart in my throat and my eyes

bulging.

Rowan recoils when I get close as if he expects me to hit him.

I find that mildly offensive. I haven't laid a hand on the kid, even when he had everyone stampeding out of Vision Tech like extras in a disaster movie as he totally destroyed a hundred-thousand-dollar lab.

"What's this?" I yank the blueprint from the ground, relieved to find that he didn't sketch on the side with the actual prototype design.

Then I look closer at the design and my anger shifts into awe.

"Rowan..." My voice cracks a bit. "Did you draw this?"

He shrugs and looks down at his sneakers.

I spin the blueprint around. It's one of my earliest inventions—a life raft in the shape of a cube. I was passionate about getting it into retail, but Nova took that idea behind the barn and shot it.

It was a good thing too. Listening to her made me way more money than I ever thought I'd earn in a lifetime, much less a few months.

I study the sketch closely. Rowan made a miniature version of the design. Not only that, he drew characters in the frame, so it's a lot more lively and visually appealing.

"You didn't tell me you could *draw*," I say, startled.

"I was just doodling," he replies, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Kid, if I could doodle like this, my first draft sketches wouldn't need to be reprogrammed on the computer." I let out a disbelieving laugh. "You're really talented."

His cheeks get ruddy. "It's whatever."

I'm going to assume that's adolescent speech for: thanks but I'm uncomfortable with receiving compliments.

Planting myself on the floor, I pull out another blueprint—the bacon alarm clock. It never got manufactured thanks to Nova, rightly, pointing out the fire hazard that it presented.

I hand it over to Rowan. "This one is tricky."

"Why is there bacon on it?"

"It's a bacon alarm clock."

He scrunches his nose. "A what?"

"Imagine you're a heavy sleeper and it's hard to get up in the morning. You've bought multiple alarm clocks, but they all scream into your ears while you're dead to the world. What's more effective than smelling frying meat in the morning when it's time to wake up?"

Rowan laughs.

I freeze in shock.

That's the first time he's ever laughed with me.

Okay, maybe he's laughing *at* me, but it still counts.

"Let me see." He takes the pencil, eyes my invention and then starts sketching on the back. As he works, his tongue darts out slightly and he seems to get lost in what he's doing.

I'm amazed at his confidence. When I'm sketching a prototype, I need to be totally alone for a few hours. I turn off my phone, seal all the windows and lock myself in a vacuum of my own thoughts. If someone interrupts me, even if it's Nova, I get thrown off.

But Rowan doesn't seem to mind that I'm peering over his shoulder. He completes the design and hands it to me.

This time, the timer is the one with the visual upgrade. The 'doodles' that Rowan printed on the machine all have a similar cartoonish style. I've never seen animations like that before.

"Did you come up with these characters?" I ask, comparing the two sketches.

He nods and then shows me his sneakers. I glance at the toe and notice the resemblance to the characters on the blueprint.

"Mom used to read me storybooks about fairytale animals. They all had this weird look to them. I kept sketching and sketching what I thought they'd look like in a cartoon and I started liking how they turned out."

It's the most he's ever said to me.

I want to ply him with more questions.

Don't overdo it, Adam. Play it cool.

I clear my throat and keep my expression neutral. "Is it just drawings or do you paint too?"

"I'm not as good at painting as I am at sketching," Rowan admits.

"Do you want to learn how to paint?"

He eyes me suspiciously. "*You* know how to paint?"

"Of course not." I snort. "As you can see by those blueprints, I'm barely good enough to get my point across."

He smirks.

"My friend Sazuki has his daughter enrolled in an art program for the summer. The school offers sketching, sculpting, and painting classes." I

chuck my chin at the blueprints. "I heard one of the teachers is a famous social media artist."

"Yeah, right. I bet they're not that famous."

"Let me check." I fish my phone out of my pocket and scroll to the flyer Dejonae sent me. "I'm not sure if you'd be interested, but this is the guy."

"*TenTwo?*" Rowan pounces on the phone. If he opens his eyes any wider, they're going to roll right out of their sockets.

"You know him?"

"I sub his channel and I'm signed up for his Discord."

What's a Discord? Refusing to look un-cool, I nod like I understand everything that's coming out of his mouth.

"So you'd be interested in going to the program?" I clarify.

"Yes!" Rowan's face beams with so much light he could power my kinetic battery.

I stare at him, shocked by that bright smile. For a while there, I thought his face was incapable of making such happy expressions.

"I'll sign you up tomorrow."

Rowan grins wider. "Do you want me to draw another one?"

"Yeah, kid." I ruffle his hair. "I'd like that."

* * *

"WHEN ARE you going to get a new truck, Adam?" Nova asks when I pop the front door open for her at six o'clock on the dot.

The rusted door creaks as if it wants to alert everyone in a five-mile radius that it's still alive. I've gotten used to it, but Nova cringes.

"This thing is falling apart at the seams." She shakes her head.

I offer my hand to her. "Don't talk about Lula like that. You'll hurt her feelings."

"I can't believe you named this pile of junk on wheels." Nova laughs. The sound is sweet and low and musical.

Now that I think about it, I haven't heard Nova laugh with me recently. I wonder when she stopped?

"Lula gets me from Point A to Point B. She does her job well. Why should I trade her for something fancy when she works perfectly fine?"

“Not perfectly,” Nova corrects me. “Remember that time your precious Lula shut down in the middle of traffic?”

“She was having a bad day. That’s all.”

Nova laughs and sets her heels on the runner. She wobbles a bit as she loses her balance.

I wrap an arm around her waist to steady her. She’s soft against me and I want to keep holding her. Unfortunately, she gains her balance way too fast and swings into the passenger seat.

Disappointment is all that’s left in my arms when she’s gone.

I shouldn’t have held her this morning. If I keep the door locked with Nova, then it’s easier to ignore the pull between us. But once I crack that door open, it taunts me with the promise of everything I can’t have.

Holding her in my lap today blew up my carefully-poised restraint and now I’m struggling not to grab her hand as I get in the car.

“Hey, Rowan.” Nova waves to him.

He waves back brightly.

“You look handsome,” Nova teases.

Rowan flashes her a shy smile.

My jealousy is quick, like a cobra going in for a poisonous bite. I grab a stick and beat that jealous snake back as best as I can. How pathetic would I be if I were envious of my own maybe-son?

“It’s not like he did anything fancy. He just showered,” I mumble.

Nova tilts her head back and groans. “I feel so grimy. A shower sounds *in-cred-ible* right now.”

Picturing her in the shower *feels* incredible too.

I squeeze my fingers on the wheel and grit my teeth.

Focus, Adam. Focus.

“Would you prefer not to go to the farmhouse today?” I ask Nova.

“Do you need me there?”

“That’s not an answer to the question, Nova,” I say with a hint of firmness in my tone.

“If you’re asking me to go as my boss, I’ll attend.”

“I’m not asking as your boss.”

“Then I’d prefer to go home and go to sleep early.”

“No problem. Whatever you want.” I flick the indicator. “Did you eat lunch?”

“Is that all you think about when you look at me? Food?”

I glance over and find her sitting with her eyes closed. There's a hint of a smile on her lips.

She looks... satisfied.

It's both a turn-on and slightly terrifying.

I've learned that Nova has a toxic love affair with crises. She *enjoys* challenges. She eats adversity for breakfast.

Whenever she's finished battling a dragon at Vision Tech, she wears this sheen of bliss on her skin, as if she just unlocked another power level.

It's impossible not to notice how gorgeous she looks right now.

But I also hate how tired she seems too.

When it comes to my investigation on why she wants to leave Vision Tech, I'm up to two conclusions.

The first is pure burn-out, which is easy enough to fix.

The second is her sister.

My gut feeling when I saw those two interact is that there's more to the story. Nova would rather jump into a sea of hungry sharks than tell me about it, so I'll have to get creative if I want to learn more.

"Rowan," I glance at the kid in the rear-view mirror, "tell Nova what you're doing tomorrow."

Nova pokes one eye open. "What is he doing? And should I be concerned?"

"No." I chuckle.

"I'm going to learn painting from TenTwo!" Rowan's voice is loud and energetic. It feels like the real Rowan is slowly coming out.

"Wow," Nova says with a hint of confusion, "that's... great?"

"He's a famous digital painter who takes videos of his creative process and posts them on the internet," I explain.

"They're not just videos. He makes his own background music too. And he does pranks sometimes," Rowan informs us.

"Well, he certainly sounds like someone who has a fan base," Nova says. "I wonder if he'd do a collab with Vision Tech?"

I laugh. "Is that all you think about? The company?"

She smiles a little sheepishly and hunkers lower in her chair.

I glance at her. "You still haven't told me if you ate lunch, Nova."

"What is *with* everyone today? You and Henry keep bothering me about food. I ate, okay?"

I frown. "Henry?"

This guy is sniffing around her at lunch too?

“Oh, speaking of Henry,” Nova’s eyes flutter open, “I’m going to offer him a permanent position at Vision Tech.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I don’t like him,” I mutter, gripping the steering wheel like it’s Henry’s head.

“Why not? He’s an excellent contributor, always goes to work on time and he—”

“Is brilliant enough to work somewhere else. Send him to Yoon Technologies. We have contacts there, right?”

“Why would we give one of our best workers to the competition?” Nova frowns. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“He sounds jealous to me,” Rowan says.

I whip around and give the kid a blistering stare. “Zip it or no TenTwo for you.”

He makes a face.

Nova studies me. “Are you jealous of Henry? Why?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not jealous.” I slow the car down in front of her apartment.

Nova doesn’t budge from her seat. “Do you really not want him at Vision Tech?”

I recognize the tone of her voice. She’s in full ‘executive assistant’ mode. Whatever I say next will be followed to a T.

Emotions roil in my gut and I struggle to separate my feelings from the business at hand.

Nova blinks, her expression unchanging.

I sigh. “If you like him then... I’ll trust your judgement.”

She breaks out into a smile and, even though I basically green-lit that kid bothering her for the foreseeable future, it feels worth it.

Just then, Nova’s phone rings.

She glances down and an annoyed look crosses her face. Tucking the phone toward herself, she reaches for the door. “Thanks for the ride. I’ll see you tomorrow. See you, Rowan!”

“Bye!”

“Hello?” A new voice blasts out while Nova springs the door open.

At first, I look outside my window thinking the voice is coming from the sidewalk. But Nova freezes and glances down.

I realize the voice is coming from her phone.

"Nova, can I come over tonight? I want to apologize."

My eyes widen.

Why is some guy asking to come over?

Nova looks guilty when she fumbles with the phone and taps the screen. It comes off speaker. Nervously, she puts the phone to her ear. "Jax, I told you. We're over..." She gives me an apologetic nod before stumbling out of the car and hurrying up the stairs.

I remain in place, feeling like a giant elephant's sitting on my chest.

Who's Jax?

Does Nova have a boyfriend?

"I think she has a boyfriend," Rowan says, as if he wants to pour salt in the open, pulsing, gaping wound that just tore apart my chest.

I frown. And then I grunt. And then I make more unintelligible noises while my brain spins.

"Adam, there's a vein bulging out of your neck," Rowan points out.

"Let's go," I growl. Hopefully, Lula can handle my need for speed because I plan on slamming my foot on the gas and ripping a hole down the road.

As I start the car and prepare to make my audition for the latest *Fast and Furious* movie, Nova calls my phone.

I cut the engine and pounce eagerly on the cell. "Hey."

"Adam, uh, I've changed my mind. I don't want to stay home tonight."

Is it because she's running from that guy?

I scowl.

"Do you mind waiting for me to shower and change? I'll be downstairs as soon as I can."

"Yeah, we'll wait." I glance at Rowan who shrugs and nods.

"Thanks."

The line goes dead.

I fold my arms over my chest and try to mentally page through all of the people I've seen around Nova. I don't remember a Jax. When did she meet him? How long were they together?

And why the hell aren't they together still?

Is it because he treated Nova badly?

I already hate this guy.

While I'm mentally MMA wrestling the mysterious Jax—complete with right hooks and sharp upper cuts, I notice someone slinking past my car and hustling toward Nova's apartment.

Her short haircut and body shape look familiar.

I squint into the darkness and the woman turns her head at the same time.

She sees me.

And I recognize her.

It's Lyra, Nova's sister.

* * *

I WATCH Lyra shuffle her feet. Her eyes are locked on her open-toed sandals. I look down too and notice that some of her nail polish is chipping off.

She pulls her toes back as if she's ashamed and I quickly avert my gaze.

The two sisters are as different as can be.

Nova is polished and elegant. Always put-together. Always composed. She favors business jackets and pencil skirts.

Lyra seems to be the more...artistic of the pair with her adventurous dyed hair, flair for animal print clothing, and... uh... casual form of speech.

"Don't let me keep you from going upstairs," I tell Lyra when she keeps staring at me without saying anything. "If you came to visit Nova—"

"Actually, I'm glad I ran into you."

"Me?" I stuff a finger in my chest, uneasy.

Everything about this meeting with Lyra feels shady—from the way she urged me out of the car, to slinking into the shadows near the garbage can, to whispering so we're not overheard despite no one being around. It feels like I'm betraying Nova, even if I'm not sure how.

Lyra stares up at me. "*You're* Nova's mysterious boss, aren't you? The one she can't tell anyone about?"

My cheeks get hot. "What makes you say that?"

"My sister don't listen to *nobody*, but I saw her with you that day. She was gonna listen to you if it was anybody but me in front of her." Lyra narrows her eyes like she's trying to see to my soul. "She respects you."

I don't know what she expects me to say to that, so I don't reply.

Lyra faces me fully and squares her shoulders. "My sister's got some issues. You probably know that. She don't trust nobody and she keeps to herself. That's my fault." Tears start sprouting in Lyra's eyes. "I made a lot of mistakes and Nova had to bail me out a couple times."

"Hey, don't cry." I touch her shoulder.

She sniffs harder.

I fish around in my pocket for a handkerchief.

Lyra takes it and blows her nose loudly. The elephant that had been sitting on my chest earlier would probably be jealous.

"Do you know about our mama?"

I shake my head. Nova doesn't mention anything about her family. At all. I only knew she'd taken the day off for her mother's funeral because I overheard someone talking about it.

To say I'd been hurt that she kept such an occasion from me would be an understatement. But Nova simply told me that she preferred to keep her work and her personal life separate.

"She was a seamstress. She worked long hours for little pay and never could make it out of the hood. When Nova started working at Vision Tech, the first thing she did was buy our mama a house. She's that kind of person. Always keeps her promises."

I nod, resonating with that.

"But then I had some trouble," Lyra clears her throat, "and mama had to sell the house to help me out. She went right back to the lousy neighborhood. Nova never forgave me or mama for that. It put a big dent in our family, ya know?"

I'm not sure why Lyra is telling me all this, but I'm gobbling up all the crumbs about Nova's past that I can get. Anything to understand her better.

"Now that we're older, I want to show Nova I've changed." Lyra pats her chest and it sounds like she's beating a drum. "And I have. I'm a completely new person, but Nova won't give me a chance to prove that."

"If you give her some time, I'm sure she'll come around."

"No." Lyra firms her bottom lip. "The only way I can convince her is to *show* her, but the only way to get close to her is by working with her."

That's an... interesting leap.

"Problem is she won't let me into Vision Tech. She says she wanna avoid a 'conflict of interest', but I know it's 'cuz she hates me."

I rub the back of my neck, sensing a request is about to be flung at me. And it's not going to be an easy one.

"I just want to be close to my sister," Lyra cries, dabbing at the tears falling from her eyes. "Is that such a bad thing?"

"It's not," I murmur.

Suddenly, Lyra grabs my hand and pulls it to her chest.

I squirm, trying to dislodge my arms, but she has a good grip.

Big brown eyes pointed at me, she begs. "You're gonna help me, right? You gon' help me make amends with my sista."

"Uh..."

"Nova's got nobody but me. Don't you think we should be working together instead of fighting?"

"I do..."

"Then you're gonna give me the job?" She grins brightly.

"I didn't say that."

"Thank you!" Lyra springs her arms around me and squishes me against her chest. "I'll wait for your call."

"But I didn't—"

"You promised." She points at me.

I watch her saunter down the sidewalk, feeling like I've just been bamboozled.

CHAPTER 9

THE SECRET REQUEST

NOVA

I AGREED to join Adam and Rowan for dinner entirely to avoid Jax, who was clearly drunk when he called asking for a second chance.

Why he'd even dare to demand such a thing given our last encounter?

I don't know.

But if Jax has one thing, it is the audacity.

Awful man.

Thanks to him, I was forced out of my own home on a day when all I wanted was to decompress in the bathtub with some tea, candles, and scented bubbles.

Instead of relaxing alone, I had to dress in something other than yoga pants, scrape my hair into an edges-snapping bun, and meet a bunch of new people.

Thankfully, the ladies at the farmhouse don't push me into conversations.

That distance alone endears them to me way more than if they'd tried to prick and pry at me like a patient getting a blood transfusion.

Plus, the food here is *amazing*.

I inhale the flour tortillas that Sunny Hastings, Darrel Hastings' wife, made. I try not to eat too much processed wheat in general, but I think I've found my Achilles heel.

Laughter breaks out from the kids. I stop inhaling the tortillas long enough to glance around the Hastings' sprawling backyard.

Rowan is standing in a circle of children. He's smiling and laughing, clearly having a great time. The other kids seem bright and engaged too.

There are three girls and two boys. One of the boys has glasses and the other has dark hair and a moody expression.

The girls have diverse skin tones, from the youngest—who's pale like a little cherub to the oldest—who's got intelligent hazel eyes and tawny-colored skin.

Sazuki's daughter, Niko, is among them. I found it fascinating to watch how the other kids interact with her. Niko signs, scribbles on her tablet and uses body language to communicate with her friends.

I was surprised to see the kids signing in return.

It made my cold heart thaw a little.

Another burst of laughter explodes from the kids and, at the center of it, is Rowan. He's telling them a joke. Or so I assume. The more he moves his mouth, the harder they laugh.

The iceberg in my heart turns to a puddle.

I thought he'd be shy and ducking behind his dad when he got to the farmhouse.

And I was very wrong.

Rowan marched into the Hastings' backyard with the confidence he had the day he barged into Adam's house. The moment he saw the other kids, he went right up to them and made a place for himself in their tribe.

I'm not surprised that he was accepted so easily. Rowan might have a hard exterior with Adam, but with other people, he has an easy affability. Something about him is magnetic and warm. It invites people to come just a little closer.

I bet Rowan was a heartbreaker back home.

Just like his dad.

"What are you looking at?" Adam whispers.

I almost choke on my tortilla when I realize my boss's face is close to mine.

I've been trying not to look directly at him. An absolutely impossible task given how charismatic and eye-catching he is.

"Rowan seems to be fitting in well," I mumble, nodding at the kids.

"Oh, yeah."

"He's way more friendly than I thought."

"He mentioned he had a lot of friends back home."

"I believe it," I murmur.

The conversation stalls. Mostly because Adam's eyes are burning into me. The intensity of which reminds me of the hot air that blasts me whenever I step out of his air-conditioned lab and into the summer sun.

I clear my throat, trying not to squirm too much. "The food is good."

"Yeah." His voice is subdued.

"Do you need anything else?"

"No."

I frown. The mood between us is strained.

I know it's because he wants to ask me about Jax, but he's holding back since we're in front of company.

Hopefully, I have a proper escape plan by the time he pops the question. At the moment, my only hope is that the car isn't moving when he demands info about my ex. I'm not sure I can survive launching out of Lula while Adam's pushing sixty-five on the highway.

"You want more chai?" he asks, motioning to the mug that Dejonae brewed.

She actually brought two mugs, but Vanya Beckford confiscated one for herself.

I shake my head.

Cheerful conversations are bouncing back and forth around us. I take a break from the painfully awkward exchange between me and Adam and study the people at the table.

The Alistairs.

The Hastings.

The Stintons.

The Mulliezs.

The Sazukis.

To say I'm breaking bread with the one percent of the one percent would be a crude understatement.

Vanya Beckford Mulliez is casually feeding her baby pieces of chicken next to me.

Max Stinton has his hands draped over his wife's shoulders as he sips a beer.

Darrel Hastings is rubbing his wife's thigh under the table while debating barbecue sauces with Dejonae.

It's all so... normal, even though their collective net-worth could buy a small country.

Talk about insane.

"Hey." Vanya gives me her mega-watt, supermodel smile and I feel like I should pay her for the privilege of being on the opposite end of it.

That baby in her arms is going to be *stunning*. Hadyn—Vanya's husband and the guy who's been refilling her cup before she even asks for more chai—is good-looking too with sultry eyes and an easy smile. Obviously, Vanya's a crazy beautiful plus-sized model with cheekbones that make me want to weep on behalf of knives everywhere.

Their kid won the genetic lottery.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?" she asks, bouncing her baby.

I blink. "Oh no. Of course not."

"Good." She gives me another magazine-worthy smile and turns to Dawn Stinton to continue their conversation.

I've only seen Dawn in passing at the events where both Stinton Auto and Vision Tech projects overlap, but rumors are that her ability to fix cars is on par with Adam's ability to create inventions.

In fact, all the ladies here are leaders in their respective industries. Movers and shakers. Big bosses.

Strangely enough, they all seem super soft with their husbands.

I watch Kenya Alistair lean her head on her husband's shoulder as he feeds her a brownie. She gives him an adoring look and he breaks his cold, billionaire expression to crack a besotted smile for her.

It's disgusting.

And sweet.

And it makes my heart ache.

My eyes move to Adam on instinct and I wonder...

Gah! No wondering.

I shake my head and scold myself. *Why are you looking at your boss, Nova? Yes, he's handsome. Yes, you work well together. But that's all it is. A work relationship. Stop giving him heart eyes.*

Adam sees me staring and slants me that attentive look of his that makes my pulse beat faster.

"You want something?" he asks.

You, the feral cat in my head purrs. *I want you, Adam.*

Now I know I'm exhausted because I hate cats and it turns out there's one inside me that wants to sink its claws into my boss.

I slide my chair back and it creaks. "The bathroom."

Sunny pins her almond-shaped brown eyes at me. "It's right inside."

"Thanks," I mumble.

Pushing away from the table, I pass Sazuki and Dejonae. Dejonae catches my eye and gives me a friendly smile.

I nod in return and head inside.

Everyone's so warm with each other, but they haven't been saying much to me. I'm grateful for it. I really am. But it's weird. They seem like a close-knit bunch with a habit of absorbing newcomers into their group.

I thought they'd be worse than frantic students cramming for an exam, trying to learn everything about me.

Why are they holding back?

I finish with the bathroom, wash my hands and walk slowly down the hall, anything to keep me away from Adam for a bit longer. There's movement in the kitchen and I peer that way.

An older woman is dancing as she bakes something. She's wearing two grey pigtails, an embroidered skirt and Belize-themed oven mitts. As she opens the oven, she peers inside and shakes her head.

The smell from the kitchen lures me closer. I don't have any room in my stomach, not even to cram in a mint, and yet I can't resist the fragrance of chocolate chip cookies.

"Hey there." Her eyes sparkle at me when I get closer. Deep wrinkles spread from the edges of her eyes. Her skin is a reddish-brown tone and reminds me of the clay my mother used in her garden.

"Hi." I nod politely.

"Would you like something, sweetie? Another tortilla? Or some wine?"

"I'm full." I touch my stomach. "But everything was delicious."

She grins. "It was nice watching you enjoy the food. I haven't seen anyone get that excited about tortillas."

"Oh." I self-consciously rub the back of my neck.

"If you'd like the recipe, I can give it to you. The way we make tortillas in Belize is a little different than in other parts of the world."

"I'm not great in the kitchen," I admit.

That's the polite version.

The real version goes something like: *All I can make is pasta. Anything more complicated is a disaster.*

"I heard that you're the CEO of Vision Tech. How did you manage that at such a young age?"

Flattered, I open my mouth.

The old woman covers her own and makes a shocked sound. "Oh, wait. I'm sorry. I forgot. You don't have to answer that."

My eyebrows cinch together.

She pins her lips shut and offers me a nervous smile.

Weird.

I fiddle with my watch and take a seat around the counter. My intuition is screaming at me that there's something I'm missing.

“Mama Moira, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Is... there some kind of rumor going around about me?”

She looks genuinely shocked. “What? What rumor?”

“It’s just that,” I gesture to the deck that we can see through the balcony doors, “everyone is acting strangely. They seem to be avoiding speaking to me.”

“Honey, isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Me?” I balk.

“Give me a minute.” She patters to the door. I watch the conversation stop and every eye turn attentively to her when she gets close.

She motions to her daughter.

Sunny Hastings leaves her husband’s side and follows her mother into the house.

Standing side-by-side, I can see the family resemblance. Although Sunny isn’t wearing her mother’s indigenous clothes and is much taller, she’s got a similar reddish-brown skin tone. Her hair is long, black and shiny and I could picture her rocking pig tails.

Sunny looks surprised to see me sitting in the kitchen. “What’s going on?”

“Nova wanted to know why everyone is being quiet around her.” Mama Moira plants a hand on her hip. “Sunny, didn’t you tell us our guest wanted to be left alone tonight?”

Sunny groans. “Mom.”

“Well? It’s the truth.”

“It’s okay.” I gesture to Darrel Hastings’ wife. “I’d like to know what happened. Who told you to leave me alone?”

Sunny chews on her bottom lip. “Adam said you’d been dealing with a lot today and that you were tired. He also said it was his idea to drag you here, even though you’d had a rough day. He asked if we could hold back on the usual interrogation.”

“Hold back?”

“I didn’t think anything strange of it when I saw you,” Mama Moira fills in. “You look like a quiet, private lady.”

I have no idea if that’s a compliment or not.

Fiddling with the salt container, I murmur, “So... Adam asked you to keep your distance from me?”

“Just for today,” Sunny rushes to clarify. “He wanted you to be comfortable and not get too overwhelmed.”

My head snaps up and I glance at Adam through the glass doors. The string lights are hanging low around the back deck. They cast a gentle glow on his head. He’s smiling at something Vanya is saying to him, his grin wide and endearing.

“Are you mad?” Sunny asks, cringing.

I can’t quite figure out my feelings.

“He shouldn’t have made you guys feel awkward around me,” I say finally. “Now you all think that I’m rude and unapproachable.”

“That’s not what we think at all,” Sunny says earnestly. “We understand that being around us for the first time can be... a lot. If we can’t offer you peace and quiet, the least we can offer you is space.”

She chews on her bottom lip and watches me with big brown eyes. I can tell that Sunny is truly distressed by the thought that I might be mad at them or mad at Adam.

Climbing to my feet, I offer my hand to her. “I apologize.”

“Nova.”

“I don’t make a habit of coming into people’s homes and making demands of them. Adam shouldn’t have done that either.”

“We’re a family here,” Sunny argues. “If you can’t ask family for what you need, then who can you ask?”

“I’ll speak to Adam,” I continue stiffly. “So he doesn’t do that again.”

“Sweetie, you’re overthinking this. I don’t believe your young man wanted to make you look bad. I think this was his way of protecting you.”

My stomach flutters. I fight Mama Moira’s words anyway. “He overdid it.”

“It’s better to over-do treating someone well than to be lackluster. Remember, relationships aren’t always cut and dry. It’s about understanding each other—”

“Mama, they’re not in a relationship,” Sunny hisses.

“They’re not?” Mama Moira gasps. “He’s doing all that for her and he hasn’t even asked her to be his girlfriend? What on earth?”

I smile at her exasperation.

Mama Moira whips her hand in the air. “Forget what I just said. Rake him through the coals, sweetie. He needs to learn.”

I laugh softly.

She winks at me.

“Mom, something smells like it’s burning,” Sunny points out.

“Oh, my cookies!”

While her mom flounders back to the oven, Sunny loops her arm through mine and steers me toward the deck.

She dips her head close. “We’re good, right?”

“We’re good,” I answer.

But me and Adam?

That’s another story.

* * *

WHEN IT’S time to leave, there are tears, hugs, and promises to meet again—all by the children. Rowan has to be torn away from his new friends, who wave at him like he’s going off to war.

I didn’t get to talk to Adam during the dinner and it looks like I won’t get a chance on the car ride home thanks to Rowan’s chattiness.

He’s riding on a high after that visit, which tells me he’s an extrovert. His batteries seem to have been charged after spending time with others, while I’m even more drained than before.

“Micheal’s cool,” Rowan says excitedly, referring to Sunny and Darrel’s oldest son. “He says we can go skateboarding at the park next week.”

“You know how to skate?” Adam asks. His muscles bulge as he turns the wheel. I can’t help but notice how casually sexy he looks driving in the dusk.

“No, but I can learn.”

I try to restrain the smile, but it’s hard. Rowan’s overconfidence is adorable.

“I saw you signing with Niko,” Adam says, glancing in the rear-view mirror. “Did she teach you something?”

“Yeah.” Rowan lifts his hands to make a gesture. “Poop.” And then he breaks out into loud guffaws.

I exchange a look with Adam.

Not only does Rowan seem more upbeat today, he seems like an entirely new kid. Something tells me that it’s not only because of his new friends. I bet Adam opening up to him caused a breakthrough.

“Plus, I found out a secret,” Rowan whispers.

“What?” I ask, intrigued by the lives of the kids.

“You can’t tell anybody, okay?” Rowan insists.

“We promise,” Adam says.

“I think Bailey likes Elizabeth.”

Adam gasps loudly. Then he smirks. “Who’s Bailey and who’s Elizabeth?”

“Bailey’s the little boy with the blue eyes and glasses. He’s Sunny’s youngest son.” I yawn and then cover my mouth to stifle it. “Elizabeth is Max and Dawn Stinton’s daughter. She’s the one with the hazel eyes and pigtails.”

“Ah.” A crease appears above Adam’s eyebrows. “How do you know all that?”

“I observed.” It’s one of my favorite things to do. Watch people and how they interact with each other. Humans show who they really are when they think no one’s looking. It’s led to many interesting revelations.

Adam bobs his head, impressed. “Which one is Alistair’s daughter?”

“The youngest. Belle. Pretty brown eyes. Gap-tooth smile.”

“You’re scary.”

“You have no idea,” I murmur.

Adam laughs and flicks the indicator.

I sit straight up. “Adam, that’s not the way to my apartment.”

“Do you want to go back home?” Adam arches an eyebrow. “What if *Jax* is still there waiting for you?”

Oh-ho.

I’m not touching that with a ten-foot pole.

Sinking back into my chair, I stare straight ahead. “It’s not what you think.”

“How do you know what I think? Did you invent a machine that can read minds while I wasn’t looking?”

“If I did, I’d slap a patent on it so fast, your head would spin.”

Adam doesn’t find it funny.

I think it’s hilarious, but I don’t laugh because it doesn’t feel like the time.

“I’m taking you to my house,” Adam says firmly. “I won’t be able to sleep a wink tonight thinking that guy might try to bother you when I leave.”

“He might try to bother me tomorrow. What are you going to do then?”
I point out.

“I don’t know, Nova. Maybe I’ll ask you to move in.”

I fumble for words, but they’re all jumbled up in my brain and I can’t think of anything smart to say in reply.

Adam glances at me and he looks so painfully handsome that my brain glitches even harder.

Dancing around this line is becoming exhausting. It’s hard being with Adam all day. Hard not wanting to curl up in his side and fall asleep. Hard maintaining the professional distance I *know* we need in order to work together.

Not that I’ll have to worry about it after a few weeks.

I stare straight ahead. “Once the month is up and I’ve handed my duties over to someone new, you won’t have to worry about me so much.”

Adam’s broad shoulders stiffen. He looks like a slab of perfectly chiseled stone as he stares straight ahead.

My eyes snap back to the highway. I hold my breath, waiting for him to respond.

But he doesn’t.

At least not to comment on what I’ve said about leaving.

“You’re staying over tonight. And about the rest...” He clenches his jaw. “We’ll figure out the rest when we get to it.”

* * *

ADAM’S SHIRT is way too big for me and, at the very same time, it’s way too short. The hem of his T-shirt cuts off at my upper thigh.

I peer at the sweatpants he lent me. They keep slipping down my hips, even when I pull the draw string tight. But there’s no way I’m going outside without any pants on.

Taking out the drawstring in the sweatpants, I use it as a belt and tie it securely so it won’t fall.

There.

I glance at the mirror and rub my head. I’ve been wearing a bun all day. Honestly, it’s starting to give me a headache, but I refuse to remove my

ponytail and let my hair roar out like a lion's mane. Even if I'm wearing an oversized T-shirt and too-big sweatpants, I still have an image to maintain.

Easing the bathroom door open, I tiptoe out.

"Adam?"

I don't see him in the living room. Shuffling down the hallway, I stop when I hear movement coming from the guestroom. Adam is putting Rowan to bed.

My lips curl up as I watch Adam tenderly set the blanket over Rowan and run a hand over his head.

"Night, bud."

Rowan snores in response.

Adam turns and sees me in the doorway. I freeze when his eyes darken at the sight of me. It reminds me of that heated moment in the hallway. Am I imagining the attraction in his gaze? Is it just a trick of the light?

When he comes closer, the expression is gone, replaced by a mischievous smirk. "I don't think I've ever seen you in casual clothes before. You look cute."

"Don't insult me."

"I'm not." His eyes slide over me again. "I mean it."

I nervously play with my 'belt', needing to do something with my hands other than grab Adam by his shirt and plant my mouth on him.

It's been an incredibly long day.

The longest day of my life, honestly.

I started it out waking up in Adam's couch and now I'm back here, about to do the same thing. It's like I'm stuck in a loop of bad decisions.

Maybe it's a sign. Maybe you should just go with what you're feeling.

The thought slams into me out of nowhere and I flick it away like Dejonae flicked the bug off Kenya's salad. *You're not welcome here, Bad Decision Nova.*

Adam gestures down the hall. "Are you ready to go to sleep?"

"Why are you pointing that way?"

"Because you're sleeping in my bed."

I stumble back. "What?"

"I'll take the couch." That mischievous smile of his rises just an inch more.

My eyes shoot away. "Oh."

I wait for him to tease me about the misunderstanding, but he doesn't.

“Goodnight, Nova.” Adam walks to the living room.

I stand there like an idiot for a second and then I go after him. “Adam, I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

“If it’s about work, you’re going to be in trouble.” Adam checks his watch. “You need to learn how to clock off, Nova.”

“It’s not about work. It’s about what you told everyone today at the barbecue.”

“What I told them?” His eyebrows cinch together.

“About leaving me alone and not asking me questions.”

“Oh that,” he says casually.

“Oh that?” I mock his tone and fold my arms over my chest.

“I asked them not to give you the third degree. Did you *want* to be pummeled with questions today?”

“No,” I sputter. “But still, you shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you made me look like an entitled, prissy brat.”

“Nova, you could *never* look like a brat.” He steps closer. “No one with your intelligence, kindness or big heart could pull it off. Besides, if Sunny and the rest of them didn’t like you, they wouldn’t have agreed. They’d have asked me not to come.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, I do know that. You think anyone can tell those women what to do?” Adam arches a brow.

He has a point.

Still, I’m not ready to let it go. “You can’t keep going behind my back and doing stuff for me.” I point a finger in his face. “It’s not right.”

“Then I’ll keep being wrong,” he says stubbornly.

“Adam.”

“Nova, when did you start dating Jax?”

I shut my mouth immediately. Throwing my arms over my head, I pretend to yawn. “It’s getting late. I should go to bed now.”

A strong hand grips my wrist and keeps me from running. “No,” Adam says, his eyes darkening. “I answered your question. You answer mine.”

I shudder at the firmness in his tone. “Why does it matter?”

“You’re so intimidated by this guy that you’d rather drag yourself to a social event than stay at home and risk dealing with him. That tells me a whole lot about him. And it’s nothing good.”

I point my gaze on the ground.

Adam's voice drops to a scary whisper. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. No, he didn't. He's just... persistent. And shrewd. I knew I wouldn't have the energy to deal with him tonight."

Adam's finger dips under my chin and I prepare myself for an instant wildfire. But he only tilts my head up and scours my eyes as if he's a human lie detector.

As we stand there, prickles of awareness froth in my stomach. My breath betrays me, catching like a thorn at my throat. The heat in Adam's gaze and the warmth of his touch isn't helping matters. The longer he stares at me, the harder my heart starts thumping.

Is it me or is this more than a boss being concerned about his employee? I'm so confused. For the past seven years, Adam has been nothing but professional.

Kind, yes.

Caring, yes.

But over-all, it's always been clear that I am nothing but a prized worker bee, filling his honeycomb to the brim.

Ever since I handed in my resignation, his gaze has started to change. So has his touch. The pressure is different. Firmer. Lingering. Even his voice, rather than simply teasing and mischievous, has a ring of heat. Like lava flowing just under the surface, erupting in every low whisper and with every smolder of those deep, brown eyes.

He steps a little closer.

Tilts my head back a little further.

His body heat envelops me, coiling tightly around me like a cobra, a trap, tempting me to come closer.

Kiss him. Kiss him.

My mind and body are *racing*.

I need space.

Forcing slow, deep breaths, I step back and resist the impulse. If it were just mere animal attraction between me and Adam, I could probably risk devouring those two extra steps between us and giving into the need that's throbbing in my core.

But I can't.

Adam knows me in ways that no one else does. There's something much deeper between us than I could ever express.

I don't want to go near that cliff because the moment I dive off...

Wiggling my arm out of his grip, I shoot Adam a narrow-eyed look and gesture between us. "Don't try to whammy me, Adam. It's not going to work."

"Whammy you?"

I can't escape his mesmerizing gaze nor can I escape his grip as he reaches for me to keep me in place. There's no hiding how I tremble when he gently strokes a circle in my wrist. Does he even realize he's doing it? Does he realize what he does to me? His touch is so light, but it's like fire. Every inch of my skin tingles.

"All I'm doing is asking a question, Nova."

No, all he's doing is confusing me. My gaze drops to his hands, big and broad. Manly. Veins slide up his arms before disappearing beneath the short sleeves of his T-shirt. I draw a line up to his eyes, fringed by thick lashes, dark as the night sky on a new moon. They highlight the sharp angles of his face, his square jaw.

Below that, the stubble on his jaw line and the strong muscles of his throat promise their own kind of delicious pleasure.

I can't stop looking at him.

Transfixed.

Held captive.

I'm helpless as his dark brown eyes probe mine again.

Snap out of it, Nova.

"I'm not going to give you any more information about Jax." I fire the words off my tongue, hoping to hide how my pulse is leaping. "You are not obligated to know about my dating life. *This*," I point between us, "is still an employer-employee relationship."

"Oh, definitely," he says.

I scrunch my nose at him. "Are you mocking me?"

"No, Nova. I just know that every time I get even a centimeter closer to you, you explode like a pufferfish and throw these little prickles at me."

"Are you calling me a pufferfish?"

"But here's the thing," the easy grin slides off Adam's face, replaced by something painfully swoon-worthy and sincere.

Oh crap. The effusive, playful Adam I can handle. The flirty, back-me-into-walls Adam is tricky yet manageable. But the tender, heart-throb version is seriously dangerous to my well-being.

Adam drags me closer until I bump into his chest. He draws one hand over my face, brushing my cheek. A soft, feathery caress that makes my breath hitch.

“I will never stop looking out for you,” he promises in a deep, dark voice. “Whether you’re in Vision Tech or in another company or on Mars. I will never *not* be there when you need me. I will *never* stop bothering you about eating on time and I’ll never stop complaining about how much of a workaholic you are. And if there’s ever a jerk who intimidates you and makes it so you can’t even relax in your own home, I will always be there to give you a place of refuge.”

Heat climbs up my skin, starting from my head and working its way down to my stomach. He’s pulling me in, reeling me like a fish thrashing on a hook. The more I fight, the further the hook sinks in.

Maybe I should have taken my chances with Jax.

Because standing here, with my boss being this gorgeous and caring, is a completely different kind of danger.

Adam’s deep brown eyes lock on mine.

My lungs start closing up. Desire makes my skin feel tight like I threw it in the wash and it shrank several sizes.

Adam runs his fingers up to my ear. “You ready to go to bed now or do you still want to stand here arguing with me?”

My heart explodes in my chest.

Is he asking me to go to bed with him?

Is that really happening?

I open my mouth, but only a croaked sound escapes.

Get it together, Nova!

Unfortunately, inside my brain is the equivalent of a disaster zone, complete with men running around in lab coats screaming about the end of the world.

My complicated feelings for Adam are oozing out of their restraints and with each soft touch of his thumb on my face, I feel like I’m about to combust and take the whole house down with me.

Gathering all my strength, I step back and pull at the ponytail holder keeping my bun together. The distance helps to cool me down so I can think without the molten shock of body heat that was there a moment ago. “Why do I feel like I completely lost that argument?”

He chuckles.

I slant him a glare.

“Is your head okay?” he asks. “I noticed you’ve been fussing with it since the farmhouse.”

“It’s fine. I just put the ponytail in tight.”

Adam squints at my bun. “Why don’t you let your hair down?”

The laughter that escapes me is a flustered sound. “See, that right there tells me you don’t understand curly hair. If I yank this ponytail out right now, my hair is not going to fall to my shoulders. It’s going to keep pointing right up at the ceiling.”

“At least it’ll feel better.”

“Looking appropriate is worth more than feeling better, Adam.”

He shakes his head. “Sit down, Nova.”

I watch as he walks over to the couch and takes a seat. When Adam sees that I haven’t moved, he gestures to the floor. “Sit.”

“In front of you?”

“Yes.”

“Between your legs?”

Unmistakeable heat passes through his eyes and then it’s gone, replaced by a tired smile. “Yes.”

“That’s not—”

“Appropriate. I know. But sleeping over at your boss’s house isn’t appropriate either,” he points out.

“That’s what I tried to tell you.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Sit.”

With a huff, I march over to him. “I’m going to sue you for misconduct.”

“Go ahead.” Adam sets a pillow on the floor and widens his legs so I can sit between them.

Settling between his thighs feels way too intimate and I hold myself stiffly.

When I sense Adam going for my hair clip, I immediately latch my hands around his wrist to stop him. “What are you doing?”

“Did you get a follow-up from the lawyers about the plagiarism case?” Adam asks.

I shift into work-mode on a snap. “The other company wants to settle out of court, but since they dragged our name through the mud, I’m thinking of playing dirty.”

Adam tugs on my clip, making the stretch bigger and swooping it over my bun until my hair is free. “Won’t a lawsuit be another thing on your plate to worry about? Why not just settle?”

“Settling won’t teach them a lesson,” I murmur. At least I hope I say those words. What actually left my mouth could be closer to gibberish. But can you blame me? The feeling of a tight ponytail coming out is akin to throwing off a wired bra after a long day.

As comfortable as it is, I can feel my hair expanding. I reach up to scoop it back into one piece when Adam’s hands slide over my scalp. The sound that escapes my lips would be embarrassing if the massage didn’t feel so damn *amazing*.

“Oh my g—do *not* stop.”

Adam presses his fingers harder. “Does that feel good?”

“Better than good.”

“Over here?”

“Please.”

He makes a choked sound. “Please?”

“And thank you.”

Forget being inappropriate. My scalp is screaming like a teenager at a BTS concert.

Adam slows his massage and I almost start crying.

“Why are you torturing me?” I garble.

He speaks softly, “Nova, all I want to do is make your life better. And if you can’t relax when you’re with me, then I haven’t done a good enough job.”

“Good...” I struggle to come up with a real sentence. “You’re doing a good job.”

“Then take a few steps back. You don’t have to be so on edge. When it comes to me and you, I won’t ever cross the line unless you want to.”

Unless I want to?

His words would have snapped me awake, but his massage is just too relaxing.

I fight to keep my eyes open. “Adam?”

“Mm?”

“What would happen if I said I want to?”

His massage stops abruptly.

But it's already unwound me enough that I close my eyes and give into sleep.

CHAPTER 10

THE FLYING CRUTCHES

ADAM

I AM NOT A MORNING PERSON, but I find my eyes bursting open at the crack of dawn for the second day in a row. Exhaustion tugs at me like a robot finger caught in my shirt, but there's a zero percent chance of going back to sleep, not with Nova down the hall in my bed.

I roll to a sitting position, groaning at the way my back pops. I don't know when it happened, but I woke up one morning and all my muscles suddenly decided they were done being spry.

I push my hand into the sofa. *How did Nova sleep on this thing?*

Running a palm over my cheek, I stumble to the kitchen and make a full pot of coffee. As I lean against the counter, sipping my brew, I think over what Nova said last night.

What would happen if I said I want to?

Was that an invitation to cross the line? Was she baiting me?

My relentless optimism is sliding the scale towards *she totally wants me*, but even on a good day I know that Nova would never be anything close to flirtatious. It makes more sense that she was drunk on exhaustion and endorphins.

I take another sip and then set the cup down.

Thinking about my puzzling executive assistant will only land me in trouble. The kind I can't afford to have. Especially since I went out of my way to assure Nova that I won't cross any lines.

That's a tall order, since I battle the unbearable urge to kiss her when she so much as opens her mouth. And I've come mighty close to doing so over the last few days.

I don't know what keeps coming over me to make me touch her like that. Last night, I was one moan away from carting her over my shoulder like a caveman. From the smoky, intoxicated look in her brown eyes, I got the feeling she would have *wanted* it.

But a promise is a promise.

Until she comes right out and admits that she's inclined to go there, I'll hold my peace. Pushing myself on her isn't just a sure way to scare her off, it's an invitation for a harassment suit.

Frowning, I return to the living room with my coffee. After rummaging around, I grab a pen and an index card. I'm not as organized as Nova, but I have picked up on her habit of writing lists.

Most Important Tasks This Week:

#1 Find Alexa.

#2 Hire Nova's sister.

#3 Convince Nova to stay.

I stare at the list. The third will definitely be the hardest, but it's the one I'm most determined to accomplish.

The first is more of a personal curiosity than a burning need, but I can't shake the thought that there's more to Rowan showing up on my doorstep than Alexa is letting on.

Yesterday, the kid let it slip that something might be wrong with his mom. I don't know what kind of trouble Alexa's gotten into, but I'm definitely going to find out.

Picking up my phone, I navigate to the number that Darrel Hastings gave me yesterday.

While the women were chatting and the kids were playing a near-violent game of *UNO*, I took Hastings aside to ask about recommendations for a PI. I figured his connections to the military would give me some great leads.

'This is one of my college buddies. He's former military and has his own successful security company. They do everything from personal bodyguards to cyber protection. You can call him any time.'

I check my watch. It's pretty early, but Darrel did assure me that I could call Clay Bolton 'any time'. I'd like to get this done before Nova wakes up. Although I have no romantic attachments to Alexa, I still feel uneasy asking Nova to be a liaison between me and my old girlfriend.

The line rings twice.

Then there's a click.

"Who is this?"

At Bolton's brusque voice, I immediately picture a bear in hibernation getting stabbed with a stick and waking up with a roar.

I'm a little intimidated, but I keep my voice steady. "Clay Bolton? I'm Adam Harrison. Darrel gave me your number."

The human-bear on the other end of the line calms a smidge. Not enough to make me any less intimidated, but at least it doesn't sound like he

wants to reach through the phone and choke me.

Bolton grunts. "Why'd he do that?"

"I need to find someone. Discreetly. Darrel assured me you were the best in the business."

"Darrel has a big mouth."

I blink in shock.

Out of all the guys yesterday, Darrel spoke the least. And that's saying something, because neither Alistair, Sazuki, or Stinton are conversationalists.

"Can you help me?" I prod.

Something rustles. It sounds like a mattress creaks and a door opens and shuts. "I don't normally handle cases personally, but since Darrel sent you, I'll make an exception. Tell me the details."

I share everything I know.

Which isn't a lot.

The information-sharing ends in less than a minute, but Bolton seems satisfied.

"Alright," he drawls, "give me five days and I'll get back to you with an address."

"Don't you think you're underestimating the task? I did a Google search and couldn't find any traces of Alexa online."

"I'm going to do a hell of a lot more than a Google search."

"That's a given, but—"

"Rest assured, Harrison. It won't take me more than a week."

He sounds confident, which makes me think that hiring him was the right choice.

I'm about to thank him when a door bangs on his end of the line.

"Daddy, I had a bad dream!"

"Alright, butterfly. Just a minute..."

"There was a flying dragon and it spit fire and it tried to barbecue me!"

I smile at the kid's imaginative descriptions.

Bolton sighs. "I told your brother to stop watching *Lord Of The Rings* with you."

"I'm scared."

"Just climb in there and I'll protect you."

"You have kids?" I say without really thinking it through. I've never seen Bolton before but, given the grumpiness in his voice and the shortness

of his answers, I imagined that he lived alone. Probably in some underground bunker. With a mahogany log for a bed and a carpet of nails that he walked on every morning.

The other end of the line goes deathly silent.

Then Bolton says warily, "I'll send the bill when I find her."

"Go ahead and send me the bill now."

"After." He insists. "I'm charging you by our platinum package. Since you want this to stay discreet, it comes with an extra cost."

"That's not a problem."

"Figured it wasn't. Darrel doesn't keep broke friends."

I don't know what to say to that.

Bolton proves he doesn't expect an answer because the line goes dead immediately.

Alright then.

I glance at the to-do list and pick up my pen. Now for the best part and, admittedly, the reason why Nova likes writing lists.

With great aplomb, I strike a line through the first task and grin.

Done.

Then I slide my gaze down to the other two tasks and my joy putters out like a cold winter wind snapping out a candle.

Hiring Lyra will put me in Nova's line of fire. I shudder at the thought of Nova's angry face and sharpening brown eyes when she finds out.

Maybe I can put that one off for a bit.

Tapping my pen against the coffee table, I consider my next steps until I hear the soft putter of footsteps.

My heart knows it's Nova before she enters the living room and blinks sleepily at me.

"Morning," I say, shoving the list into my back pocket. "Sleep well?"

She nods. "Uh... how did I get into your bed last night?"

"I carried you."

Having Nova Delaney in my arms felt like coming home and, I admit, I held her an extra beat before laying her gently on the bed.

Then I spent a long time doing push ups and trying not to think about how badly I wanted to be beside her.

Nova stares at her feet.

I slide my eyes over her outfit. Have I mentioned how much I love Nova wearing my clothes? After so many years of watching her in sharp,

professional outfits, there's something much softer about her in my oversized T-shirt and grey sweatpants.

It's like her armor's been stripped and the vulnerable side of her is peeping through.

"Are you hungry?"

She shakes her head.

"I can fix you a cup of coffee."

"It's okay." Her lips tremble in a strained smile.

I lean back and just... absorb the sight of her. In real life, I can never call her mine, but looking at her now, I can almost pretend that she's in my clothes because we spent the night together.

Together-together.

Not her in my bed and me in the couch.

Nova clears her throat and glances away from me. "Do you still have the change of clothes Dejonae brought yesterday?"

"It's in my closet."

She bobs her head. "I'll get ready and call Steve to pick me up."

"I can take you."

She lifts a hand. "No need. I, uh, I want to go straight to work to start planning the sports event."

"Sure," I say uneasily. Is she putting distance between us because of last night? "I'll make breakfast then."

But Nova doesn't eat my breakfast.

When Steve arrives, she bursts out of my bedroom, throws a rushed 'see you later' at me and bustles through the door.

* * *

IT'S BEEN two days and I'm certain now that Nova is avoiding me.

"She's out of the office again?" I ask Rochelle.

The OA blinks unsteadily. "There's a lot to do for the sports day."

I sigh and rub the bridge of my nose. I told Nova not to rush things, but she insisted on announcing the event sooner rather than later.

'We have to capitalize on this moment. Fifteen seconds of fame can turn into fifteen million if we time it right.'

“Would you like me to leave a message?” Rochelle asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

“No, that’s fine. Thanks.”

The office assistant gives me a pitiful look. I guess I must seem like a puppy left out in the rain.

So what?

I miss Nova.

Slipping a hand into my pocket, I walk listlessly to the elevator. I’ve been busy too. I had improvements to make on my kinetic batteries and shuttling Rowan to and from art school was like a second job. But two days without seeing Nova’s face? That’s a first.

Before, she would have stopped by the lab to talk things over with me. Lately, our communication has devolved into phone calls and nothing else.

Did I scare her off that night? Is that why she’s putting so much distance between us?

I head downstairs but, rather than leave, I hang around the cafeteria, hoping that Nova will return to the office while I’m here. I can pretend to bump into her or something. Make up an excuse.

Since when do I have to make up an excuse just to see her?

I sip my coffee, pull my hat lower and check the time on my phone.

Just then, Rochelle and a few others from HR waltz into the cafeteria.

“Did Mr. Harrison stop by the office again?”

“Yeah.” Rochelle tosses her hair. “He’s always hanging around the boss.”

“You think that’s how he got his director position? By kissing up to Nova?”

“It certainly looks that way to me,” Rochelle says.

“I heard Mr. Harrison’s, like, the pickiest inventor at Vision Tech. The guys in the lab are always complaining about how bossy he is. They say he acts like he owns the place.”

Rochelle laughs. “Do you see how he dresses? And have you seen his car? Would the owner of the company drive a pickup that’s about to bite the dust? It’s not him. I bet he’s just one of the guys who are in love with Nova.”

“She does have a lot of admirers. Mr. Roberts is always flirting with her.”

I pull my fingers into fists. That damn Mr. Roberts. I would have fired him long ago if he wasn't so good at his job.

"Mr. Harrison's a lot hotter than Mr. Roberts," Rochelle says.

I puff out my chest.

"But he's a lot more annoying too," she adds.

My chest deflates like one of those dying inflatable balloons.

"Every time he stops by, Nova has to drop everything and look after him," Rochelle complains. "He's so high maintenance."

The women twitter.

I scowl and take note of their faces. *Pay cuts for all of you.*

A moment later, the ladies receive their meals and retreat to a table across the room.

One of the perks of being an undercover boss is blending in and hearing how the employees really feel.

I turn over their words. On the one hand, my pride is shot from being called 'annoying'. On the other, I'm glad that Rochelle and the others hold Nova in such high regard. She might be their boss, but it's clear that she has their admiration and respect.

Adjusting my hat, I rise from the table and head to the exits.

Maybe they're right. Maybe Nova needs her space.

I'll let her get away with avoiding me for now.

But as soon as the sports event is over, I'm cornering her.

Nova can run all she wants.

As long as she knows I'll always be right behind her.

* * *

HENRY'S BEHIND HER.

Well, technically, Henry's *beside* Nova as they do a walk-hop-stumble combo down the track for the three-legged race.

I'm sitting on the bleachers high up in the VIP perch and glaring angrily, which isn't doing much other than giving me a headache.

Nova arranged for all the directors to have VIP seats at the sports event. Roberts, the financial director, is beside me, muttering about how Henry lacks hand-eye coordination and, for once, I totally agree with the man.

Roars break out from the crowd as Rochelle and another girl from the HR team pull ahead. I glance at the sea of familiar faces filling the benches and crowding the track.

I'm surprised by how much of the company showed up. Most of the games for the adult age ranges seem to be filled with Vision Tech employees. It's like everyone was chomping at the bit to do something different on a Friday morning rather than sit in their labs and cubicles.

I should have known this event would have been a PR stunt *and* an opportunity to raise morale. Nova has the ability to turn my regular old ideas into something bigger and better than I originally intended.

Sometimes, I can't decide if I'm more drawn to her face or her brilliance.

My eyes catch on Nova laughing as she and Henry try to keep up with Rochelle.

It's her face. Definitely her face.

I'm charmed by the curve of her smile, the bright flash of her brown eyes and the dark tones of her skin.

And I hate...

Abhor...

Despise...

The fact that another man has his arms around her.

My heart thuds at the way Henry closes his fingers over Nova's hip. I want to charge down there and bat him away like a fly swatter. *Hands off, man.*

Instead, I have to sit in my place and take my anger out on the chair I'm gripping while Roberts sits beside me, hurling curses at Henry and reminding me yet again that I am *not* the only man at Vision Tech with eyes on Nova Delaney.

The contestants are getting close to the finish line.

Everyone is cheering and waving their pompoms. The strings are blue and silver, Vision Tech colors.

It's annoying how Nova thinks of everything.

The teams on the track are running along with the two contenders, yelling encouragements.

I can see the sweat rolling down Nova's face from here. She hates losing with a passion and I don't think Henry was prepared for just how seriously she takes every competition.

Nova and Henry fall out of their rhythm and Rochelle gains more ground. Nova pulls on Henry's neck as if that'll get him to speed up, but it actually does the opposite.

I see the kid lose his balance almost in slow motion, his long arms sprawling out while his giraffe-like legs cave in.

Henry goes down like a kid without his training wheels.

Nova tumbles after him, hitting the pavement. Hard.

The crowd goes silent.

No one cheers for Rochelle when she and the other girl pass the finish line.

Every eye is stuck on Nova.

Including mine.

My heart surges to my throat when I see her groan of pain and then I'm on the move. I might have stepped on a few hands, soda cans and phones as I make a bee-line to the bottom of the track.

At one point, I might even have stepped on someone's head.

I'm not too sure and nothing else really infiltrates my focus. Not until I get on the track.

"Nova!" Henry yells. He's smart enough to quickly untie the binds holding their legs together.

Nova pushes herself to a sitting position, making a brave face despite the tremble of her bottom lip alerting me to her discomfort.

I push Henry out of the way and grab Nova's hand, hissing at the burn marks that shreds her dark brown skin.

"Adam, I'm fine," she says under her breath.

"Like hell you are," I grind out.

She tries to pull her hand back. "Everyone is watching."

Her words barely penetrate my mind. I'm scanning her for other injuries. I notice that there are scrapes on her legs too, long, painful-looking marks from the gravel.

Watching Nova while she's hurt feels like someone is skinning me alive. I smack my hand against my chest to bring relief, but it only makes the ache worse.

"Hey, man," Henry touches my shoulder, "let me—"

"*You* don't do anything," I growl and flash him a dark look.

He inches back, his eyes wide.

“Adam,” Nova scolds me in a weak voice. She presses on her scraped hand again and tries to stand up.

I wrap my fingers around her arm to help her and notice every wince and crease of her brow when she tries to put weight on her left foot.

Dropping to my haunches, I press on her ankle. “Does this hurt?”

“Ah.” She makes a pained sound and then clamps her lips shut. “No, it doesn’t hurt. I’m fine.”

“You’re such a bad liar, Nova.”

“And you’re making a scene,” she hisses.

Rochelle jogs up to us. “Hey, is she okay?”

“I’m—”

“She’s not.” I stop Nova before she can lie to more people. “Do we have an infirmary on the grounds?”

“It’s that way,” Rochelle says.

I scoop Nova into my arms. She lets out a yelp of surprise when I cradle her close to my chest.

Henry looks scandalized. Almost foaming at the mouth, he launches at me and tries to take Nova away.

Big mistake, buddy.

I snarl at him. “Back off.”

She’s mine.

Mine, mine, mine.

“Let me take her,” Henry insists. “I’m her partner.”

“If you were a good one, you wouldn’t have let her fall,” I snap.

“Adam, stop. It was an accident.”

I shut my mouth, but my jaw clenches. Tightening my grip on Nova, I stomp away. Thankfully, the kid chooses life and doesn’t follow me.

“Why are you acting like this?” Nova hisses, ducking her head into my neck to hide as we pass the crowd of Vision Tech onlookers.

“Like what?”

“All growly and over-possessive.”

“I’m not growly.”

“You’re acting like a caveman.”

“Cavemen aren’t as handsome as me.”

She snorts and then shakes her head. “Why are you so angry? It’s not like you’re the one with blood oozing down your arm.”

“I might as well be, Nova. It feels like I’m getting stabbed in the chest right now. So stop wiggling before you make your injuries worse.”

Her eyebrows slant over her eyes. “Why do you always switch personalities at the worst moment? I don’t need growly, over-protective Adam right now.”

“That’s the Adam you’re going to get.” I turn left and notice the tent with the giant red cross on it. “If you don’t want to meet this side of me, then don’t get hurt.”

She rolls her eyes. “I can’t believe this.”

I frown at her.

“You’re being dramatic. It’s just a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Should I put you down and test that?”

Her hands tighten around my neck. “We’re halfway there, you might as well take me the rest of the way.”

I shake my head. Nova knows good and well that her ankle is messed up. Why she’s fighting to stay strong and in control in front of me is a mystery. I know, more than anyone, that she’s not made of stone.

Rushing into the tent, I flag down the nurse who looks stunned to actually be receiving a patient.

“Can you help her?” I beg, setting Nova gently on the hospital cot. “She got hurt on the track. I think she might have twisted her ankle.”

The nurse takes off Nova’s sneakers and inspects her foot. She turns it around a bit and Nova hisses every time she so much as goes near it. My heart squeezes in my chest. I hover over Nova, trying to see how I can ease her pain.

“Sir, can you step back please?” the nurse asks.

I take a mini-step away.

The nurse wiggles past me in order to check Nova’s other ankle. Nova keeps quiet despite the prodding of her foot. At least that leg doesn’t seem to be injured.

“I don’t think it’s broken,” the nurse declares after inspecting her left ankle a second time.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“But it is swelling. I recommend she stay off that foot for at least forty-eight hours.”

“I have a wheelbarrow competition coming up,” Nova says, her eyes wide.

My scowl is dark and pointed right at her. *What the hell did she just say?* “You’re obviously not going to do that.”

She frowns in return.

I glance at the nurse. “I’ll make sure she stays off her foot.”

The nurse nods and then tends to Nova’s scrapes. When she’s all bandaged up, the nurse retreats to the front of the tent and pulls out a binder to start scribbling things down. It’s either a report or a prescription.

Either way, I’m alone with Nova now.

I fold my arms over my chest, staring her down.

“What?” She sounds annoyed.

“I told you not to partner with anyone else.”

She lets out a disbelieving laugh. “Really? You’re blaming me? Right now? While I’m injured?”

“I’m just saying. If you’d stayed away from Henry like I told you...”

“You’re ridiculous.” Nova places her hand down as if she’ll move off the bed. The moment her palm makes contact with the cot, she hisses.

I fly straight over to her. “Are you okay?”

“I keep forgetting that I left some of my skin on the track,” she mutters, wincing.

Concerned, I look for a clean cloth and then I sit beside her and wipe the dirt from her arm. She stops complaining and closes her eyes, so I assume that it feels calming.

Shaking the cloth out, I move my attention to her face. I lean forward, sliding the fabric over her smooth forehead and delicate cheekbones. She has her hair up in a wide, curly ponytail today, but some of the curls escaped from her clip when she fell.

My fingers graze her ear as I push the curls back. Her breath hitches and her eyelids crack open, revealing beautiful brown eyes.

I stare at her, caught in a current that I couldn’t resist if I tried.

She’s Nova.

The most important person in the world to me.

And she got hurt.

As much as she likes to pretend she’s a robot who can go days without stopping, she’s capable of getting hurt.

My thumb swirls over her cheek. “Nova.”

She turns her face toward me, not backing away as I thought she would.

My eyes lock on her lips. I lean forward slowly, inching closer to her face, watching for any hint of discomfort. But she doesn't recoil. She stays there, waiting for me as I move at an excruciatingly sluggish pace.

I'm aware of what it means if I kiss her.

I'm aware of how much is at stake.

And it's that thought, the thought that I might lose her for good, that has me freezing mere inches away from her glorious lips.

Nova inhales sharply and I almost groan in frustration when she pulls back.

I want her so much it makes me dizzy, but I know I can't have her.

I clear my throat. "Nova, I—"

A loud, brassy sound makes Nova jump and makes *me* whip my head around. We both face the track.

There's a disturbance in the distance.

On the field, it looks like...

A jazz band?

"Did you hire musical entertainment?"

"No," Nova says. Sliding off the cot, she balances on one leg and hops forward.

"What do you think you're doing?" I grab her arm.

"I have to check it out."

"Here." The nurse offers a pair of crutches. "Luckily, I had these just in case. You can use them to get around."

Nova clips the sticks under her arm pits and starts moving like a pro. It shouldn't surprise me at this point how excellent she is at everything.

We move out of the tent, me—staying close by Nova's side while she swings through the lawn like a grounded Tarzan.

"*Nova Delaney!*" A voice blares through what sounds like a bull horn.

Nova freezes. "Oh crap," she says under her breath.

"What?"

"I know that voice."

"*Nova Delaney, I'm just a boy... standing in front of a girl... asking her to forgive him!*"

"Is that from *Notting Hill*?" I gawk.

Nova forced me to watch the romantic movie once. Okay, she didn't *force* me, but she mentioned that it was one of her comfort flicks and I wanted to know what she liked.

I ended up secretly enjoying the cheesy flick.

Although I would never tell Nova that.

Screech. “Nova Delaney, I’m here for you.”

Who would be making such a loud fuss over Nova? And how would this faceless voice know Nova’s taste in comfort movies enough to quote it?

Unless...

My fingers curl into fists.

This can’t be the mysterious *Jax*, can it?

Nova and I arrive on the track. My eyes widen when I see a black guy in a suit standing along with a group of five men—each boasting their own wind instrument.

The guy starts grinning when he sees Nova and he gestures to the band. They play a smooth, sultry song that I don’t recognize but has way too much soul to belong to anyone of my complexion.

Jax saunters forward with a bouquet of flowers that probably cost a small fortune and holds it over to Nova.

I barely stop myself from taking the flowers, throwing it on the ground and stomping all over it.

Roberts.

Henry.

And now this ex-boyfriend.

Can men who are in love with Nova *stop* pouring through the cracks? Thanks!

Nova doesn’t reach for the flowers, which is always a good sign, but Jax doesn’t seem deterred. He notices her crutches and waves for the jazz players to stop.

“Nova, are you okay?” Jax launches forward.

I slide in front of him before he can touch Nova.

His eyes trip to me and then jump back to her.

“Jax, what are you doing here?” Nova demands.

“You weren’t answering my phone calls.”

“That generally means I don’t want to talk to you.” She gestures to the band. “What made you think I wanted a serenade?”

“Nova, I messed up. I can’t live without you.”

Her eyes dart to the crowd who are hanging on every word as if this is a live theatre performance or their favorite soap opera.

I wonder what this show would be called. *The Young and the Tactless?* This guy obviously has no idea who Nova is if he thinks public displays like this will please her.

“I’m sorry you wasted so much effort, Jax, but we’re over. I’m not interested in starting again with you.”

Jax motions to the band. “Play another one!”

The jazz band launches nervously into song. I recognize the tune as ‘*I Will Survive*’, arguably one of the greatest break-up songs. Ever.

“Please leave, Jax.” Nova motions with her head. “And take your jazz band with you.”

“Wait, Nova, let’s talk about this.” Jax reaches for her.

I grab his hand and shove it back. “She said she’s not interested, buddy. Step away.”

“Who the hell are you?” Jax fumes.

“I’m just the guy who takes out her trash,” I say simply.

His eyes bulge with anger. Then they widen in recognition.

He laughs humorlessly. “Wait. Are *you* Harrison?”

Nova looks nervous but, when she speaks, her words escape on a hiss, “I’m serious, Jax. I’m going to call security if you don’t leave now.”

“Oh, I see.” Jax looks me up and down with his beady eyes. “*This* is the reason you wouldn’t sleep with—”

I only see a blur of grey swooping in my peripheral vision. Then Nova’s crutches land a solid blow to Jax’s jaw. His head snaps to the left and I swear I can see cartoon stars dancing around his head.

The crowd makes an ‘ooh’ sound.

Someone behind me snickers.

The jazz band, in an ironic twist, starts playing Michael Jackson’s *Another One Bites The Dust*.

I drag my shocked gaze from Jax to Nova who’s down a crutch and looks like she wouldn’t mind the other meeting a similar fate.

“Don’t make me ask you again, Jax,” she hisses. “Get out of here. *Now*.”

CHAPTER 11

THE NEW INTERN

NOVA

“YOUR GRAPES, MY LADY.” A platter of green, seedless grapes appears on a golden tray before me.

“What’s with the accent?” I pluck one of the grapes from the stems.

Rowan shrugs. “Aren’t butlers always British?”

I snort. “I don’t think so.”

He tilts his head, thinking about it. “Alfred was British.”

“Who’s Alfred?”

“From Batman.”

“Should have known.” I pluck one of the grapes and pop it into my mouth. “My butler references are from *The Fresh Prince*.”

His eyebrows cinch together. “Is that a cartoon?”

I groan. “Rowan, you have so much to learn.” I reach for another grape. “Want one?”

He tilts his head back, opens his mouth and indicates that I should toss it in.

I end up smacking him in the forehead.

Gasping and trying not to laugh at the same time is difficult. I flutter my hands. “Rowan, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He giggles.

I love watching his brown eyes light up. Rowan’s really starting to loosen up and show more of his personality. Finding his ‘thing’ with digital painting obviously helped, but I sense that it goes deeper than that. It’s almost like there’s a burden off his back these days.

“Have you talked to your mom lately?” I ask, munching on a grape.

His laughter dies immediately. “Yeah.”

“How is she?”

“She’s okay.”

“Is she coming for a visit any time soon?”

“Why?” Rowan grows sullen. “Does Adam want to get rid of me?”

“What? No, of course not.”

Rowan scoots out of the chair and grabs the tray of grapes. “I’ll take these back.”

“Okay,” I croak, watching him. He’s got his head down and he’s shuffling like all the burdens he’d been freed from came barreling back.

What did I say?

There’s a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Rowan says.

“No, it’s okay. I’ve got it.” Feeling bad and not sure why, I push off the couch and limp to the door.

I check the peephole.

Adam’s on the other side and he’s got a whole bunch of groceries in his hands.

I open the door and he slants me a scolding look. “Nova, why are you on your feet?”

“Why did you buy the entire produce section?” I gesture to the leaves hanging out of the canvas bag.

Adam juts his chin at the couch.

I limp back to the sofa. After the sports event, Adam wanted me to move into his manor so he could take care of me. I rejected him because I have a great sense of self-preservation.

Since I almost kissed my boss in the medic tent like a crazy person, I was determined to keep my distance.

Unfortunately, Adam decided that he would take care of me at *my* place.

Hence my eleven year old babysitter.

And the Amazon jungle that’s currently growing out of Adam’s grocery bags.

“Rowan!” Adam yells. “You’re supposed to be watching the patient.”

“I *was* watching her!”

“So why did Nova open the door on her feet that she’s not supposed to be on for the next twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not a good answer, young man. I left you in charge.”

“You can’t leave an eleven year old in charge of an adult,” I argue.

Adam slants me a dark look. “Don’t defend him.” He sets the groceries down and points a finger at Rowan. “Remember our agreement. You take care of Nova in exchange for that TenTwo merch you keep begging for.”

“I fed her grapes,” Rowan defends himself, his voice climbing to a high pitch. He seems slightly panicked by the thought of getting ousted from the deal.

Why he would be so desperate for an overpriced T-shirt with some guy's logo on it? I don't know. But here we are.

Adam shakes his head. "You need to be her hands and feet. If she leaves that couch again, I'm docking your pay."

"That's child labor exploitation, Adam."

He opens his mouth, but before he can scold me, there's a knock on the door. Adam goes to see who it is and arrives a moment later with Dejonae in tow.

I'm stunned to see her. "Hey."

"Hi." She's carrying a mug in her hands. Her dark eyes go straight to my foot. "I heard from Niko that you got hurt."

"From Niko?" My jaw slackens.

"Yes, Rowan told her." Dejonae nods to the eleven year old.

I point a scolding look on him.

Rowan gives me a big, nervous smile. "Was this supposed to be a secret?"

I'll deal with you later, Rowan.

"I brought you chai latte." Dejonae winks. "It can't cure a swollen ankle, but it can pretty much do everything else."

My lips curl up and I leak a smile. "Thank you, but there was no need. I'm almost one hundred percent recovered."

There's another knock on the door.

"Who's that?" Adam murmurs.

Dejonae whirls around. "Oh, did I forget to mention? The other ladies wanted to stop by too."

"Other ladies?" I croak.

Adam glances at me before moving to the door.

When he opens it, Vanya, Sunny, Kenya and Dawn come pouring through. They're each holding something to present to me like powerful fairies at a coronation ball.

"We heard you weren't feeling well," Vanya says, pouting when she sees my foot that's wrapped in bandages. "How's the patient?"

"I'm fine."

"'I'm fine' is Nova's theme song," Adam says. "She's got a swollen ankle and a few lacerations. The doctor said she should stay off her foot until tomorrow. And no heels for another week."

"The doctor's a quack. I'm never giving up my heels," I fire back.

Dawn laughs. “I can’t relate to *that*, but I did bring you some chicken soup. Beth swears it’s the only dish of mine that she can actually consume.”

“You can put it in the kitchen,” Adam directs her like an airplane marshal waving a plane into position.

“I brought tortillas,” Sunny says, lifting an expertly wrapped cloth. I can smell the floury goodness from here and it makes my stomach grumble.

“Kitchen.” Adam points in that direction.

“I brought a few of our best-selling books,” Kenya says. “In case you get bored.”

“Let me get those.” Adam reaches for them and relieves her of the package. “They look heavy.”

“Thanks.” Kenya smiles at him.

Adam sets the books down on my coffee table.

“And *I*... brought breast milk,” Vanya says.

Everyone stops and stares at her.

She snorts. “Just kidding. I didn’t have time to cook or pick up books, so I brought some makeup from the brand I represent.”

My heart feels squishy and that makes me uncomfortable. “You guys really didn’t have to.”

“And yet, that’s the time when we really *should*,” Sunny says with a wink.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“No need to say anything.” Dawn waves me off.

“We’re not here to talk your ear off either. We just wanted to drop these off and check on you,” Dejonae adds.

Vanya nods. “Now that we’ve done both, we’ll let you get back to resting.”

“Take care of her, Rowan,” Dejonae warns, wiggling a dark finger. “You too, Adam.”

“Always.” Adam shows them to the door.

It feels like all the energy gets sucked out of the room when the women leave. Despite not staying long or saying much, they seemed to have filled the apartment—and my heart—with light.

The problem is that my heart’s made of ice and all that light and heat is melting it.

“Why would they do that?” I ask Adam when he comes back into the room.

“Do what?”

“Care about me.”

His eyebrows pull tight.

“I don’t know them. The only person I have a slight connection with is Dejonae and it’s only because of your work with Sazuki. The other women met me once. Why would they come all this way just to check on me?” I sit up straight. “You think they want to do business with Vision Tech?”

“No, Nova. I think they just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

I purse my lips. “There has to be another reason.”

“Other than the fact that they like you and want to be friends?”

“Aha.” I point at him. “So it’s because of you.”

He gives me an *are you serious* look. “Darlin’, what part of what I said made you jump to that conclusion?”

“You’re the *real* owner of Vision Tech. They think they can get to you through me.”

“No, Nova.” Adam frowns. “Is it so hard to believe that you’re lovable?”

“Me? Lovable?”

I know myself. And I know I’m not the giggly, overly-emotional type. I also know that when it comes to making friends, I tend to be awful at it. Like forget my best friend’s birthday awful. Like back out of all social gatherings at the last minute awful. Like stay in for days watching cheesy old rom coms rather than talk to another human being awful.

Me and other people? We don’t get along.

The only person who knows me well is Adam and that’s because he’s my boss and we have no choice but to spend all our time together. If it wasn’t for Vision Tech, I wouldn’t have gotten this close to Adam at all.

“Are you serious right now?”

“What?”

He sounds exasperated. “Someone hired a jazz band and came all the way over to the track just to beg for your forgiveness. And even after you pummeled them with crutches, they were still asking you to call them.”

“I think Jax asked me to call him so I could pay for his medical fees.”

“If it was just about medical fees, I wouldn’t have had to chase him out of Vision Tech yesterday.”

My eyes pop open. “Jax was at Vision Tech yesterday?”

“Minus the jazz band.” Adam scowls. “Even I wanted to wallop him with crutches by the time he was done.”

I know I shouldn’t laugh since I could have gotten charged with aggravated assault for that stunt at the sports day, but I do.

“The point is that you, Nova Delaney,” Adam touches my nose, “are incredible and brilliant and warm. And you shouldn’t discount how easy it is to fall in love with you.”

“Don’t say things like that,” I croak, my heart beating fast.

“Why not? It’s true,” Adam says, his voice low and chocolate-y.

I’m this close, *this* close, to throwing up a white flag of surrender and taking a hammer to the protective walls around my heart. Hell, by the time Adam’s done with me, all I might have to do is push a brick with my pinky and the whole thing will collapse.

I’m completely overwhelmed by the farmhouse ladies’ grand gesture and by Adam’s sweet words, that I don’t know if I have the necessary resolve to make rational decisions.

But I still have a tiny bit of Good Decision Nova bandwidth and I use it all trying to pull myself together.

Considering the fact that Adam backed off from the kiss in the medic tent, I’m not willing to risk that *this* is real. What if I totally butcher the signals? What if giving into what’s between us becomes an even tighter noose around my neck?

I’m leaving Vision Tech to be free.

Not to chain myself down harder.

Adam pulls my head in for a kiss to my temple and all the reasons why I shouldn’t be falling for my boss start wobbling like one-legged ponies.

“Relax, Nova. Just breathe.”

“I am breathing,” I mumble.

“I can see the wheels turning a million miles an hour in your head. Slow down.”

Heat swoops to life in my chest and I choke. If I hadn’t spent the past seven years building the walls between me and my boss, they probably would have blown over like the straw house with the Big Bad Wolf.

I inch back. “Where’s Rowan? Why’s he gone quiet?”

“I’m right here.” Rowan pops out from behind the couch.

“Were you hiding?” Adam has an astonished note in his voice.

“I thought you guys were going to start kissing or something.”

I cough loudly.

The tips of Adam's ears go red. "Come help me unpack these groceries, kid." He places an arm around his son's shoulders. "How was your art class today?"

Rowan dives into a retelling of the day's events as if he'd been waiting for the opportunity. Adam hangs on to every word while his son jabbers on about color palettes and shading.

I turn to watch them.

Having people in my house feels strange.

Having people take care of me feels strange.

But good strange.

Like a warm bath on a cold night.

"*You okay?*" Adam mouths when he sees me staring.

I nod.

He unleashes a gorgeous grin and I finally learn what it means to have my breath stolen. Because Adam flipping Harrison has me by the neck.

And I cannot breathe.

* * *

"MORNING, MISS DELANEY."

"Welcome back."

"Glad to see you on your feet, Miss Delaney."

I nod at everyone who acknowledges me as I limp into the lobby of Vision Tech.

Today, my hair's out and defying gravity. I'm wearing pants and the shortest heels in my closet because Adam doesn't know what personal boundaries are.

He hid all my stilettos and then he sent me a ransom notice, complete with a cardboard message on top of my stolen shoes.

The message said he'd continue to hold my heels captive if I don't follow the doctor's orders about wearing flats.

I'm cheating a little. These are one-inch heels.

They're not much but at least they lift me off the ground.

"Nova!" Henry rushes into view, skating past the people lining up in front of the elevator. His backpack bounces against his lab coat and his

sneakers almost skid on the ground when he stops in front of me.

“Henry, hi.”

“Are you okay?” He scans my body like a human X-ray. His eyes stop at my feet. “How’s your ankle?”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Are you sure two days is enough time to recover?” Henry asks urgently.

“It’s more than enough time. Besides, I have a lot to do.” The days until my resignation are counting down and I still don’t feel comfortable handing over my duties to anyone.

Adam said he’d take over, but we both know his strength is in the lab. He’s a genius engineer and if he gets distracted, Vision Tech would lose an incredible chief R&D director.

I want to find someone I feel confident would do a good job as CEO. I’ll work tirelessly to make the switch a smooth one.

Henry looks down at me with big, puppy dog eyes. “I am *so* sorry about the three-legged race. I wish I could have kept you from getting hurt.”

“It’s okay, Henry.”

“No, it’s not. I feel awful.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it.” I pat his shoulder. “Really. I’m fine.”

“I have to make it up to you,” he says earnestly.

The poor kid. “Just keep working hard and that’ll be enough for me.”

“Can I at least buy you dinner?”

I freeze.

He backtracks, rubbing his neck. “Not like a date or anything. Just to say sorry. I won’t be able to forgive myself if I don’t at least show you how much I regret what happened.”

I tilt my head, thinking about it. I’ve been meaning to speak to Henry about staying on permanently at Vision Tech. Rather than giving him a slot of my day and thus taking time away from another task, maybe I can slot him in at night.

Excited by the thought of maximizing my time, I smile. “Okay. I have something to discuss with you as well.”

“Really?” He gives me a hopeful look.

“It’s about work.”

“Oh.” His face falls. Then he seems to bounce back. “I’ll set it up.”

My phone rings.

Distractedly, I back away from him. “I should be finished at the office around six o’clock. How about we meet at six thirty to be safe?”

“Sure.”

I put the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

More morning greetings are flung at me as I step into the elevator. I acknowledge those with a wave of my hand and get an update from the lawyer about the patent case.

Since Adam suggested we settle, I changed my strategy. He was right. Not fighting this out is freeing up a lot more of my time.

I get to the top floor and Rochelle shoots to her feet. “Miss Delaney.”

“Morning, Rochelle.”

She opens her mouth and reaches toward me. Then she snaps her lips shut.

I stop my power-walk and face her. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry about what happened at the sports day.” Her eyes hit the ground.

“Are you referring to me falling or to the unfortunate jazz band incident?”

“Uh...”

“Thanks for the concern.” I start to leave and then change my mind and walk back to her table. “By the way, I saw the memes you put in the group chat. I didn’t know you had such a talent for video-editing. That little clip of me falling down over and over again was...” I kiss my fingers.

A horrified expression climbs over her face. Eyes wide and fearful, she starts trembling. “I’m sorry, Miss Delaney. I’ll take them down.”

“No need.” I wave her concern away. I found all the jokes that came out of the day’s events hilarious. Me and Rowan had a blast picking out our favorites from the Vision Tech group chat.

Rochelle rounds the desk and shuffles behind me. “I’m really sorry.”

I keep walking toward my office, done with the conversation. “Did you compile the financial data that I asked for?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Bring it to my office please.” I push my office door open and take a seat in my chair.

Rochelle knocks on the door a moment later and sets a file down in front of me, still not meeting my eyes.

I open the file and stop her before she leaves. “Rochelle, why is this table not organized by department?”

“It’s not?” She flies back to my side and peers down at the document. Then her face turns thunderous. “I told her to follow my template.”

“Told who? Didn’t you organize this file?”

“No. I asked our new intern to do it.”

“We have a new intern in HR?”

“Didn’t you know about it?”

“No.”

“Knock, knock.” Adam’s voice cuts through my interrogation.

At the sight of him, my heart starts beating double-time. Does he have a right to look so good with his hair all tousled and his big, muscular arms on display in that too-small T-shirt? And is it my imagination or does he flex his arms a little when he walks in?

I’m going to hyperventilate just watching him.

“What are you doing here?”

“I just dropped Rowan off at art camp.” He glances between me and Rochelle. “Am I interrupting a meeting?”

“Rochelle was just about to tell me about our new intern.” I spear him with a pointed look.

At once, his confident smile turns into a worried frown.

“Like I was saying, I thought you knew about it,” Rochelle tells me.

“Why would I?”

“Rochelle, let me handle this,” Adam says, his voice trembling.

“Handle what?” I frown. It feels like the proverbial boot is about to drop on my head and I just want to get it over with.

“Rochelle,” Adam insists.

“Rochelle,” I fasten my gaze on her, “*you* tell me.”

“Uh...” Rochelle looks like she’s seconds away from peeing her pants. “Uh...”

“Spit it out, Rochelle,” I insist.

“The new intern is your sister!” Rochelle blurts.

Adam cringes.

I stiffen, trying and failing to compute those words. No matter how much I turn them over in my mind, they still don’t make sense.

I flatten my hands on the table and wheeze, “*What?*”

Adam makes a choking sound.

I turn my head slowly and shoot daggers at him from my eyes.
He. Did. *Not*.

* * *

“DON’T BE UPSET? Don’t be *upset*? You went behind my back, gave my sister a job and you expect me to be happy about it?” I’m yelling at the top of my voice. Something I don’t usually do, but which I feel the occasion calls for.

My office door is closed and Rochelle is gone, having fled the moment she spilt the beans as if sensing that crap was about to hit the fan.

There is definitely something sputtering through the room.

And it doesn’t smell that great either.

“Lyra came to me the other night—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You *saw* her? And you didn’t tell me about it?”

“It didn’t come up.”

“I call bull, Adam.”

“She was outside your apartment the day we went to the farmhouse. It was a total coincidence.” His tone is level and stern, as if he’d prepared this speech beforehand. “She asked for a job and I couldn’t say no.”

“Why not? You say no to me all the time.”

“Only to things that aren’t good for you.”

“Lyra working at Vision Tech is at the top of the list of things that aren’t good for me!” My ability to be calm seems to have poofed out the window.

I’m *outraged*.

Mostly because I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.

I can’t believe Adam went behind my back when he *knows* how I feel about my sister. We talked about it and everything. I thought the matter was closed.

“She told me about your history,” Adam says.

I start hacking out a laugh that’s better suited for cheesy Disney villains and tuberculosis patients. “Yeah, I’m betting she left a lot of holes in that story.”

“I got the gist. Your sister didn’t make the best decisions and used to get in trouble—”

“Still doesn’t make the best decisions. Present tense. Happening as we speak.”

Adam prowls closer to the desk and I step back because his overly-gorgeous looks and sincere eyes will *not* move me.

“You had no right to go behind my back and hire Lyra,” I insist.

“Why not? I can hire her without it turning into a conflict of interest for you. You get a chance to make amends. Everybody wins.”

“I don’t *want* to make amends. At least not inside Vision Tech. Business is business. Personal stuff is personal stuff.”

“Why do you always have to draw the line?” Adam frowns.

I throw my hands up. “Why do you always fall for sob stories?”

“It’s not just any story. It’s your story.”

“Oh my gosh.” I roll my eyes to the ceiling.

Adam rounds the desk, standing much too close to my body. “Lyra’s your family whether you like it or not. That makes her my family too. If letting her into Vision Tech can help her out, I’m not against it. We can’t be all business all the time.”

Even when I’m sparking with anger, my body still hums in awareness of Adam’s nearness.

I feel like a pressure cooker with its lid about to blow off. “Vision Tech *is* a business, Adam. And the decisions you make on behalf of this company need to be rooted in the bottom line.”

“If the bottom line was all I thought about then we wouldn’t offer the medical and insurance benefits we do here at Vision Tech. We wouldn’t offer profit sharing. We wouldn’t have an in-building therapist.”

I roll my eyes at that last part. Adam and I fought to the death about that therapist, which I still believe we don’t need.

“Nova, the reason people stay at this company and believe in the vision isn’t because it’s a business. It’s because we look out for each other.”

“And as valiant and noble as your mission is, Adam, there will *always* be people who want to take advantage. Lyra is one of those people. I know her. She’s selfish and sneaky and unstable.”

Adam places both hands on my arms. “Just... give her a chance, okay? She’s on a three month probation and working only two days a week.”

“She’s also telling everyone she’s my sister. What if people talk?”

“You don’t have to worry about accusations of nepotism. Just say your boss hired her. Which is the truth. Besides, she’s the assistant to your

assistant. If she messes up, I'll fully support you in kicking her out."

I grit my teeth and shake him off.

Turning, I stare at the skyline.

I don't like this. I don't like it at *all*.

* * *

"LET'S MEET," I growl into the phone.

It's been an hour after Adam left to pick up Rowan from school and take him to the skating rink to meet Micheal.

I can't focus on work because I'm still stewing about what my boss did and I'm even more ticked off at Lyra. She's up to something and Adam is too soft-hearted to see it.

"Sure," Lyra says. "Meet me at the café."

Twenty minutes later, I stalk into the same diner I met Lyra at last time.

She's scooted down in the booth, a burger and fries in front of her once again. This time, she's sipping on a milkshake.

I fling my purse into the booth and follow the same trajectory.

Lyra grins at me. "Hello, *siiiis*."

"What do you want with Vision Tech, Lyra?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Cut the crap. Are you still hanging with that deadbeat boyfriend of yours? The drug dealer? Are you two setting something up?"

"No."

I scoff.

"I'm serious, Nova. I've cut ties with him. And I don't do drugs anymore."

I believe that as much as I believed Rowan when he told me I'm a natural at video games. The character I was playing tripped over a rock and 'died'. Twice. If 'good' in video game lingo means painfully terrible, then maybe he was right.

"I've changed, Nova." Lyra bats her thick lashes.

I let loose a bitter laugh. "Yeah, okay."

Lyra's voice cracks with hurt. "How is it that a *stranger* believes in me more than my own sister?"

At the mention of Adam, I surge forward.

Lyra jumps in her seat.

Pounding my fist on the table, I hiss, “You might think that Adam’s a sucker, but I’m not suffering from the same affliction. I know you, Lyra. And I know you have something up your sleeve. Whatever it is, I’m going to find out and then I’m going to kick you out of Vision Tech myself.”

“So testy.”

I growl at her.

“All I’m asking for is a chance.” Her eyes narrow. “You can’t even trust me once?”

“No.” I grab my purse.

“Are you leaving already? Come have a meal with me. I’ll even pay for it.”

“Cut the act, Lyra.”

She smirks.

“I’ll be watching you.”

“Go ahead, big sis.” Her shrug of disinterest makes my blood boil.

I crash through the doors of the café, take deep breaths and then march down the sidewalk to Steve.

“Miss Delaney, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I answer shortly. And then I feel bad and adjust my tone. “I’m okay. Thanks... it’s been a long day.”

“Are you going home now?” Steve asks as we both get in the car. His ears turn a little red. “Just a warning, Mr. Harrison requested that I report to him if you don’t.”

The stalker.

If Adam was so interested in my life and wellbeing, he wouldn’t have invited my biggest headache into Vision Tech.

I check my watch. It’s almost time for my meeting with Henry. “I’ve got one more task for the day, Steve. So no, I’m not going home.”

“Roger that.” Steve starts the car.

I lean my head back, close my eyes and let out a breath through my mouth.

Alarm bells are clanging in my ears. I have a strong feeling that if I don’t figure Lyra out soon, she’s going to do immeasurable damage to either me, Adam or the company we both want to protect.

* * *

MY KNIFE SINKS into my steak. It tastes a little dry. I expected more from such an expensive, pretentious restaurant.

This ambiance is...

Wow. Not the best for a business meeting.

To say I was surprised when Henry chose to meet at *Le Bleu* would be an understatement.

This place is known as ‘the engagement capital of the city’.

All around us, couples are sitting cozily together, nestled under low-hanging chandeliers, their grins broad in the light of flickering candles.

I outed the candle between Henry and I the moment I walked in.

If I wasn’t so irritated about Lyra, I would probably have asked us to move somewhere else. As it stands, I just want to get this job offer over with and go home.

“Would you like some wine?” Henry motions to me.

“I don’t drink during business meetings.”

A flash of hurt swirls in his eyes. “Right.”

I realize I’m pulling the mood down and cave. “I’m not a big drinker, but I can have one glass.”

He starts smiling.

Good. The happier Henry is, the more likely he’ll sign the contract without too much negotiation.

“Cheers,” Henry says, offering his glass.

“Cheers.” I clink my glass to his. Tilting the cup back, I drain the wine. It’s bitter, which fits my mood perfectly.

“Whoa.” Henry laughs.

I remove the contract from my purse and slide it over the table. “Henry, like I mentioned this morning, I wanted to discuss something with you.”

“So did I.”

“Me first,” I insist. “I know that there are many companies trying to snag you, including Yoon Technologies. But I believe that Vision Tech can truly foster your talent.” I push the folder toward him. “Here’s the contract we prepared for you. I hope you’ll consider Vision Tech your family and—”

“Nova.”

I stop abruptly and stare at him.

Henry places his elbow on the table, settles his chin on his fist and gives me an earnest look. “I’ve admired you since my first day at Vision Tech. I don’t know if you remember, but you handled our orientation. You were so

confident and in control. I immediately knew that I wanted to learn from you.”

“Thank you, Henry.” I pour another glass because the first one made my chest warm and loosened some of the knots in my stomach.

“But when I saw the way you handled the miracle goo incident, my admiration turned into something deeper.”

I choke on the wine.

Wait.

Is he...

Is this?

“Nova,” Henry picks up my hand and I’m so shocked that I let him, “the truth is that I—”

“There you are,” a low voice growls.

Henry and I both turn.

It’s Adam.

He’s panting up a storm at the head of our table. There’s sweat running down his temple, his hair is wind-torn and his eyes are two burning coals in his face.

It’s wrong the way my heart skips a beat when he flings an angry stare at Henry’s hand on mine. It’s especially wrong to smile when he takes that hand and lugs me from the table.

But damn if his possessiveness doesn’t make me tremble.

Adam’s here.

Adam’s jealous.

I don’t know what to do with those two pieces of information. I only know that I like them both, even if I’m angry with what he did today.

“What are you doing?” Henry bellows.

“Leaving.” Adam snatches my purse, swings it over his shoulder and takes my hand again. “Come on, Nova. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 12

THE EVOLUTION OF US

ADAM

TWO HOURS BEFORE...

THE PATERNITY TEST results arrive while I'm working on the kinetic batteries. I stare at the official lab results, my eyes locked on the bottom part.

99% Match.

Rowan is my son.

I wait for the crash of panic, the surge of adrenaline, the sensation that the world is crumbling around me.

It doesn't come.

The room remains steady.

So do my hands and feet.

But that doesn't mean anything. I'm standing in the eye of the hurricane.

Any moment now, the panic's going to smash into me.

Any minute...

Any...

I press a hand to my chest. My heart is only beating slightly faster than before.

I'm a father.

And I'm okay with it.

Bemused, I smile and shake my head. I think I've been slowly accepting the fact that Rowan's my son for a while now. It started when Nova scolded me about first impressions and kept going since then.

He's become a part of my life—having breakfast with him, dropping him off at art camp, listening to his word vomit every evening when he comes home. We've fallen into our own little routine.

This piece of paper means absolutely nothing. Deep down, I'd already found a way to accept my new, absolutely terrifying and oddly rewarding responsibility.

I fold the paternity test and slip it into my back pocket. Then I pick up my phone because the only person I want to call and talk to about this is Nova.

Her phone goes to voicemail.

I frown and then check the time. Nova always answers her phone. Like Rowan, the device is a biological limb. She only ignores calls when she's in a meeting, but it's six thirty. She should be finished with work by now.

I call Steve to check.

"I dropped her off around the Surros District," Steve informs me.

"The Surros District?" There are only fancy restaurants and tourist attractions there. "Did she say what she was doing?"

"She had a meeting with someone. Let me think. The name was... Henry, I believe."

I grip the phone tight. "HENRY?"

"Yes, sir."

Impossible. Nova never meets with employees of the opposite sex after work hours.

"Are you sure it was Henry?"

"Very sure. She called him and confirmed their dinner appointment right in front of me."

My heart starts beating the way I *thought* it would when I read the test results. Any second now and it's going to fly right out of my body and start seizing on top of my robot arm.

"Thank you, Steve."

At the thought of Nova with someone else, my anger hits a boiling point. I feel like I could punch a hole clear through a building. Unable to sit still, I grab my truck keys and drive like the bats of hell are on my tail.

Fractured images assault my mind. I picture Nova and Henry having a romantic candlelit dinner. I see them strolling down to the pier, hand-in-hand. I see Henry leaning in for a kiss—

"Dammit!" I slam my hand on the horn.

A little old lady is crossing the street. She jumps at the loud noise and then flips me the bird.

I wince in apology.

While I wait for the light to shift and the woman to finish walking across the street, I tap my fingers on the steering wheel and call Nova again.

Still no answer.

Green light.

I toss the phone and slam my foot on the gas. Lula lurches forward, responding to the panic tightening every muscle in my body.

The world outside blurs until I get to my destination.

The Surros District is a sprawling area with a bunch of lit-up buildings on either side of the street. Steve didn't drop Nova somewhere specific. It would be impossible to find her if not for one little clue—she's in one of the restaurants.

I shoot into the first restaurant.

No Nova.

I burst out of the doors and rush into the second.

No Nova.

I have no idea what I'm going to do or say when I find her, but I have this urgency in my chest, spurring me on. No matter what, I can't lose Nova.

Not to anyone.

In the third restaurant, the hostess unleashes the security guards on my tail. I race through the room like a maniac, confirm that Nova isn't there and then spring out, narrowly avoiding being caught.

By the time I get to the fourth restaurant, I'm sweating and panicking in equal measures.

What if Nova and Henry left already? What if they're already on their way back to Nova's apartment or a hotel?

My fingers close into fists and I run faster. I knew Nova had a soft spot for Henry, but I had no idea that affection had blossomed into more.

If I'd had any sort of clue that she was serious about him, I wouldn't have held back when she stayed the night at my place or that day in the medic tent. I wouldn't have wasted so much time tiptoeing over what I feel for her.

Where are you, Nova? I have something to tell you.

Two words in fact.

You're mine.

It's time I make that crystal freaking clear.

I swing my head back and forth, scowling at the romantic atmosphere and all the couples nestled in velvet booths.

If Nova's here, I might just explode.

As if I conjured her up, I spot my executive assistant.

Or at least, I spot the back of her voluminous, curly head.

She's sitting with Henry. The punk has his hand on hers and is looking intently into her eyes. I can tell from here that he's confessing his feelings and it makes my blood boil.

In giant steps, I arrive at their table.

Nova glances up and her eyes widen. I'm surprised when I see a flash of attraction skitter through her face. I thought she'd be annoyed or angry, but it's almost like she's glad to see me.

That look alone makes me want to start swinging punches at Henry's head for daring to touch her. Instead, I grab Nova's hand and drag her away from the table.

The punk tries to say something, but I cut him off and whisk us both out of the restaurant. My thoughts are pushing against the top of my head like buttery popcorn flowing out of a bucket.

I keep marching until we get to the sidewalk.

Nova, who'd been quietly stumbling behind me, suddenly wrenches her arm free. "Adam, what are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same thing."

"I'm having a business meeting," she says, swaying slightly on her feet.

"A business meeting?" I let loose a humorless laugh. Running a hand through my hair, I turn away from her and walk a couple steps to get rid of the restless energy. "Since when did you have business meetings over candlelight?"

"I blew out the candles," Nova says defensively.

My eyebrows pull together. I turn back around. There's a sheen of silver on her dark skin thanks to the lamppost. Her eyes are slightly unfocused.

"Did you drink?"

"So what if I did?" Her lips curl down into a frown as if I'm starting to irritate her. "How did you find me anyway?"

I ran into every restaurant in a five-mile radius.

Not that I'm going to admit that.

People slide past us on the sidewalk, giving us weird looks. We're going to draw a crowd if we keep standing here, screaming at each other.

I gesture to Nova, my voice hard. "Let's go. I'm taking you home."

"I'm not going home."

"Nova!"

She folds her arms over her chest and squints at me. “What gives you the right to be here, dragging me out of restaurants and acting like you own me?”

“I’m your boss.”

She snorts.

“And I don’t like seeing you with other guys.” I let the truth hang out. Let it spill into the dark night and over the brightly-lit street.

Nova’s jaw goes slack.

“I *especially* don’t like seeing you with Henry.”

She gulps. “I wanted him to sign to Vision Tech.”

“And he wanted to sign a marriage contract.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Dammit, Nova. We both know that kid is trying to get with you.”

“So?” She explodes. “What does that have to do with you?”

“I don’t know, Nova. It has everything to do with me.” I shake my head in frustration. “At least I want it to.”

She starts fidgeting with her curls. Her dark fingers are long and slender, but when they twirl like that, it reminds me that she’s not impenetrable. She’s soft and aggravating and stubborn as hell and I’m freaking *in love* with her.

Every bit of her.

The boss lady that can walk into a boardroom and have all the men peeing their pants.

And the emotional wreck who’d pin me with beautiful, tear-filled eyes and ask why someone would care about her.

Nova wipes her hands on her skirt. “I... I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

My temper spikes again. I let out a blustered laugh. “Nova, you’re the most brilliant woman I know and there’s not a part of me that buys that, but if you need me to break it down for you, I will.” My voice hardens. “With pleasure.”

Her eyelashes flutter.

I move toward Nova, an invisible rope tugging me forward. Keeping my voice low and steady, I tell her, “It bothered me when you and Henry were partners at the sports day. And Jax got on my nerves the moment he called your name through that stupid bull horn.” I step closer to her. “I don’t want anyone but me beside you.”

I feel the thudding of my heart like the boom of thunder.

She freezes for a beat and I wonder if I've managed to explode her brain.

Shaking her head, Nova comes alive again. "Are you really doing this?"

"I'm doing this." My fingers close around her arm when it looks like she's getting ready to bolt. I slide my hand down to her wrist, keeping her there but not pulling her to me. "I have never cared about *anyone*, the way I care about you."

Her eyelashes flutter.

I want to tell her in more clear terms.

I like you.

I love you.

I want to be with you.

But I promised I wouldn't cross any lines before she was ready and I feel like I've long-jumped over a few already.

"Adam—"

"That's why I can't stand the thought of you leaving Vision Tech," I barrel on before she can stop me. "That's why I need you beside me."

Nova freezes. The light disappears from her eyes.

"Vision Tech?" Her words are soft, bitter.

I feel like I've done something wrong, but I don't know what.

With a violent tug, Nova breaks free from me and whips her head up. "So this is about Vision Tech?"

Why does she keep doing that? I can rip my heart out of my chest, toss it—bloody and beating—in her hands and she'd still find a way to miss the point.

"I'm saying I need you as much as the company needs you," I explain. "I—"

Nova gives me a death glare. "You know why I have to resign, Adam? Do you know why I couldn't wait for a single day to get away, even if it meant telling you on your birthday?"

I brace myself, already knowing from her tone that her words are going to hurt worse than a whipping.

"There's a noose around my neck." She wraps dark hands around her throat and squeezes. "And I didn't realize it until some other guy's hand was between my thighs and all I could think about was you. And how

wrong it felt. And how I should apologize to *you* for letting someone else touch me.”

My chest heaves and my blood runs cold, picking through that information. The pounding in my head gets louder. My emotions are a chaotic storm swinging from wild anger at the thought of Nova being physical with someone else to mild awe at what I *think* she’s telling me.

It’s too much to hope that she feels the same way.

Too much and yet... not enough.

I want to inhale her. I want to wrap my arms around her and *devour* her.

But I’m afraid to move.

I’m afraid to even breathe because it might shatter this moment.

While I’m skating on an ice lake of hopeful disbelief, Nova seems to be unravelling. She paces back and forth like she’s in the depths of hell, her beautiful face screwed up in anger.

“Dammit!” Her words slur but they’re shouted with such confidence that I understand every sentence. “It was my own body—*my own body* and it didn’t belong to me. And it’s your fault!” She hoists a crooked finger at somewhere beyond my head. “You and your stupid concern for me. Always showing up when I need you and making me feel safe. You and that stupid grin that makes my heart beat fast and that stupid nickname... ‘darlin’. Do you know I’m the only one you call ‘darlin’?”

My smile inches up over my face. I watch her pace to the other end of the path, walking a jagged, drunken line.

She stumbles.

I hurry over to her, but she elbows me away when I try to help her up.

Her eyes flash. She’s trembling with anger. “You consume me. You control me. I... I come when you call. I wait for you when you leave. I breathe for you. I fight for you. My entire life revolves around you.”

“You consume *me*,” I cut in, almost melting from anguish and frustration. “You control *me*. I come when you call. I wait for you when *you* leave. If there’s a way to breathe without you I haven’t found it.” I step so close to her that I can see the lighter brown flecks in the galaxy of her eyes. “You think you’re the only one suffering here, Nova? You think you’re the only one who’s trapped? My whole *existence* is you. I don’t remember what my life was like before you were in it and I don’t ever want to imagine it with you gone.”

Her legs seem to lose their strength because she stumbles and then goes down. Gripping her upper arms, I hold her up and gather her as tight as I can to my chest.

She smells like flowers, like spring, like Nova.

Her head shifts. She looks up at me with fury, but beneath that I see an obvious hunger. Whether it's the wine or the argument, her defenses are down.

This is pure, unrestrained Nova in all her glory.

I swear the air leaves my chest quicker than a pair of flat tires. My eyes land on her lips and stay there.

I need to taste her.

I cup her cheek, sighing when my thumb hits her velvety dark skin. Slowly urging her face to mine, I prepare to taste her lips for the first time.

"You'll make it worse," Nova warns, her head tilted up to me as if she doesn't know how to heed her own warning. "If we do this and it falls apart..."

"It won't."

"It might."

"It's worth the risk," I answer. The electric spark in the air between us sizzles so loudly I can practically hear it.

"Because we have feelings for each other?"

"Because whether I kiss you or not, you are already mine."

Her eyes flutter closed just as I brush my lips over her mouth, sealing my devotion.

My Nova.

The woman is impossible. Stubborn. Bossy. Strict. Brusque.

Beautiful.

Overflowing with a thousand feminine charms that are a constant pull of distractions and a seven-year-long test of my restraint.

I should punish her but, instead, I capture her lips with gratitude, thanking her for ruling my thoughts and being my sole focus.

Her mouth softens beneath mine. I coax a low moan from her throat as I tease her, claim her, drag my tongue along the inner seam of her mouth and then nip on her bottom lip just to feel it shudder.

Mine, dammit.

We've always fit perfectly—my jagged pieces to hers. My belief in humanity to her jadedness. My imagination to her practicality. Even the

way she's tall enough to fit right in the pocket of my arms is like we were made for each other.

But I'm blown away by how perfectly her lips fall against mine.

I tilt her head back, ready to take the kiss deeper when I hear applause and cheers. Both our eyes pop open at the same time.

There's a crowd around us.

They've got cell phones pointed in our direction and grins on their faces.

I didn't even realize we were being watched.

Just then, Henry pushes through the crowd, a crest-fallen look on his face. He glances between me and Nova.

"What's going on between you two? Are you dating?" he demands.

I'm not sure who—between the crowd or Henry—have the worst timing. I did not want to be interrupted while kissing Nova for the first time. How dare they?

I open my mouth to take my frustration out on the kid when Nova makes a weird sound. I glance over and find her cheeks puffed out, her eyes wide and her hand covering her mouth.

"Nova." I set my hand on her back. Then I fling a hard look at Henry. "How many glasses of wine did she drink?"

"Two!"

I growl at him. "Two? She can't handle more than one glass."

"Ugh." Nova moans.

Henry steps forward. "Nova, are you okay?"

I stop him with a glare. "I'll handle this."

"I need to make sure she's okay."

"She's my woman," I answer darkly and repeat myself in a cold tone. "I'll handle this."

"Blegh!" Nova dry heaves.

Alarmed, I lead her off to the side and hold her hair while *my woman* coughs up all her lunch and dinner into the bushes.

* * *

"IS SHE GOING TO BE OKAY?" Rowan asks, walking beside me while I help a tipsy Nova out of the pick-up. He hurries along the path, his head turned

to me and his eyes full of concern. “She looks like she might vomit again.”

“Just get the door,” I tell him.

He takes the keys from me and opens the front door.

I half-drag, half-walk Nova inside.

She collapses on the couch, immediately curls into a ball and squeezes her eyes shut. “Adam.”

“Hm?” I kneel in front of her.

“Remind me to never drink ever again for the rest of my life.”

I chuckle. She’s a lightweight, which most people wouldn’t expect given how capable she is in every other area of her life.

“I’ll get you some water,” Rowan offers.

Nova peeks her eyes open to smile at him. “Bless you.”

Rowan smirks when he heads to the kitchen.

I smooth my hand over Nova’s forehead. “You feeling a little better?”

“I’m feeling embarrassed.”

My lips curl up. She has many things to feel self-conscious about—our fight on the street, the fact that we were recorded, the kiss, the upchucking incident. I could ask her which of these she’s referring to, but I’m smart enough not to go there.

Rowan returns with the water.

“Thanks, babe,” Nova says easily.

Rowan nods.

I notice their relationship has gotten a lot closer since Rowan spent the last two days taking care of Nova. It makes me smile harder.

“Why didn’t you take me home?” Nova asks me.

“In case you vomit again. I don’t want you to go through that alone.”

She scrunches her nose.

I check the time. “Rowan, go brush your teeth and get ready for bed.”

“Do I have to?” he grumbles.

I narrow my eyes.

He sighs as if his life would be ten times better without me in it. “*Fine.*”

“And make sure you shower too! You’ve got paint all over you!”

“Okay!”

Nova pokes one eye open and studies me. “You’re a natural.”

“At what? Nagging?” I ask, pushing the water at her so she can take another sip.

She sits up and allows me to set the glass at her lips. After a few swallows, she pulls back and I set the glass on the coffee table.

“At being a father,” she says.

“Maybe because I am one. Officially. Biologically. All the ‘lys’”

She goes still.

I fish the paternity test out of my back pocket and show it to her. “I got the results today.”

She rolls her eyes. “I knew a long time ago. He has your intelligence. And your good looks.” She ducks after admitting that.

I laugh and rub her leg. “Does he?”

“No, I take it back. He probably got his looks from his mom.”

I bark out another laugh.

Nova smiles sweetly. “I told you not to waste money on that thing. It would have been better spent on Rowan’s bedroom.”

“I do plan to renovate his room soon,” I assure her.

“Do you... feel any different?” Nova asks. “Now that you have proof that he’s yours?”

I rub circles on her leg. “No. Actually, I...” I notice a shadow in the mouth of the hallway. It looks suspiciously like a tall, gangly, eleven-year-old boy.

“You what?” Nova prods.

Aware that Rowan is eavesdropping, I speak from the heart, “He’s not as bad as I thought he’d be. I enjoy having him around. In fact, I’d be kind of bummed if he had to leave. Who else would blow up my kitchen with flour and banana peels?”

Nova laughs.

I hear a chuckle from the hallway too.

“So you’re happy?” Nova asks.

“I am.” I notice the shadow disappear. Turning to Nova again, I lean closer. “But you know what would make me even happier?”

“What?”

“Go out on a date with me tomorrow.”

She tugs her bottom lip into her mouth and chews nervously.

I wait for her, holding my breath until...

“Okay,” she agrees.

Finally.

“But no wine.”

I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss her wrist. “It’ll be a liquor free zone. I promise.”

* * *

BRIGHT SUNSHINE DUSTS the road ahead of us.

The scent of Nova’s flowery perfume is filling the truck.

Eyes on the road, Adam.

To my right, brightly-painted toes are tapping to the music coming from my busted radio. I don’t think I’ve seen anything sexier than Nova with red nail polish.

Focus on the road.

Fabric rustles as Nova adjusts her skirt. She’s wearing a sexy little green number that clings to her body and makes it hard to think.

Hands tighter on the steering wheel.

The sound of her light breathing has me pulling at my collar. She smells good. Really good. I feel hot all over and it’s only been ten minutes since she got into the car.

“Are you okay?” Nova asks. When I don’t respond, she punches the radio off and asks in a confused voice, “Adam.”

“You’re killing me, darlin’.”

“Me?”

“Forget it.”

She gives me a surveying look.

Nova Delaney is in my front seat. She’s looking at me like I’m a lunatic, but she’s here.

To prove I’m not dreaming, I lift her hand and kiss the back of it.

My mouth skates against warm, dark-brown skin.

I’m awake.

Holy crap.

Nova adjusts her sunglasses. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” I mutter, trying not to get distracted by her sexy mouth. Every little thing she’s doing is sending heat straight to my pants.

It feels like we’re stretching out the obvious.

Last night, I wanted to throw Nova into my bed and roll her under me. Instead, I got dungeoned to the couch while she took my room.

The next morning, I woke up early, but Nova was already gone. At first, I was disappointed. Until I saw that she left a note telling me to pick her up from home.

I was scared she was going to walk back what she said yesterday, call it drunken ramblings and try to draw the line again. It was a relief to see that she was still willing to go on the date.

Rowan's with Dejonae, Sazuki and Niko.

We've got the entire day to ourselves and I plan to make it a day to remember.

Twenty minutes later, I pull the truck in front of a colorful warehouse.

Nova frowns in confusion. "What is this place?"

"You'll see." I hurry around the car and open the door for her.

Nova steps on the runner. She's in heels again, something I noticed but didn't scold her about. If wearing stilettos makes her feel good then I'll let her ignore the doctor's orders. For now.

"So mysterious," Nova teases.

I smile. Rather than allow her to get down on her own, I hug her to me and let her down slowly.

Her body slides against mine, soft and tempting. When her front brushes my pants, I nearly moan. This wasn't supposed to be torturing me, but it turns out I'm the one who can't handle the heat. It burns like a damn bonfire.

I'm a pool of liquid silver and throbbing need by the time Nova's heels hit the ground.

Unable to resist, I bend down to kiss her, but my cap knocks into her forehead and jolts me back.

"You okay?" I ask, rubbing her skin in case she's hurt.

She leans toward me, her body lithe and supple. "Wait a second, Adam, I've thought a lot about how to solve this problem."

"Oh, have you?"

Rather than answer, she reaches up and turns the bill of my cap backward. "There. That should—"

I push her up by the waist to meet my hungry mouth. The distance between us is demolished with the fierceness of a nuclear explosion. I move her back a step and hear the faint thud of her body hitting the back door as I pin her against the truck.

She gasps but doesn't break the kiss.

I reward her by looting every inch of her mouth.

Her mouth.

Sweet mercy.

My Achilles heel.

My undoing.

I'm freaking *addicted*.

She tastes like strawberries drenched in honey, sweet and hot and alluring.

Nova slides her hands over the back of my neck and pulls me into her. The little whimper she releases when I plunge my tongue in her mouth is magic. Her breath is hot against my face, and I can't freaking stop.

I've been craving her for seven years.

Seven.

Long.

Years.

I can't keep my hands off her.

But if I'm a desperate monster, she's my partner in debauchery. Her fingers sail through my hair. Her tongue spars with my own like two Spartans in a ring. Each heady sound that escapes her makes me painfully aware of how close I am to tearing her clothes off in broad daylight.

Forget public indecency charges.

I either slip my hand up her skirt or die where I stand.

Control yourself, Adam.

Impossible.

Whatever fire's stirring inside me, she's fanning the flames like a deranged arsonist. Every sweep of her tongue, every movement of her lips, every arch of her body encourages me to burn all the way down to ashes.

Is this what loving Nova in the light is like?

Is this what it means to free my heart from the shadows and give it room to beat for her?

All this destruction?

All this heat?

All this wanting?

My pulse picks up.

I have to stop this if we plan on actually going on the date.

I have to reel myself in. I've done it for almost a decade, one more day can't hurt, right?

Snarling at my chaperone of a brain, I inch back while still keeping Nova pinned to the car. The pulse in my pants is screaming to abandon the schedule and just throw her in the backseat. Drag her knees up to her ears. Hold her in place while I make the car rock and squeal and protest.

I dig my fingers over her hips because her rubbing on me isn't helping to keep me on task.

Nova gives me a little smile when she kisses the corner of my mouth, like she knows what she does to me and finds it amusing.

Holy crap.

She's filleting me like a chef, nudging me open with those soft, sweet kisses on my face. But her eyes are anything but sweet. They're glowing, glazed, dilated and framed by all those gorgeous black curls—her own personal halo.

"Adam," she parts her swollen lips, her lipstick already smeared and fading, "you didn't have to bring me to an empty parking lot to touch me. We could have done all this at home."

"Uh, no. That's not..." I want to stay here, hugging and kissing Nova all day instead of going inside, but we're on a schedule. Taking a harsh breath, I tear away from her.

While I adjust myself, she pops out a little mirror and fixes her makeup.

"Come on." I reach back, grab her hand and lead her into the warehouse.

The doors slide apart automatically and then we're walking into an air-conditioned store. The inside is way more appealing than the outside. The walls are painted blue and purple. There are long shelves filled with every kind of stationary imaginable.

Nova snaps her sunglasses off and I see her eyes lighting up like a kid at Christmas.

"Adam..." she says in a warning voice.

"This is a stationary emporium. The biggest one in the state."

"What?" Her smile broadens. "I've wanted to come here forever, but I've never had time." She stops and glances around. "Where is everyone? I heard this place was always packed."

I clear my throat. "Today must be a slow day."

"It's Saturday."

I blink innocently.

She tilts her head up at me. “Adam, did you shut this place down for me?”

I shrug.

“That’s so excessive!” she gasps.

“I want you to have the best. You deserve that, Nova.”

Her face is unreadable for a second.

Then she moves toward me.

One step.

Two.

Her hand lands in the collar of my flannel jacket and then she’s pulling me down. I’m too impatient to wait for her lips, so I’m the one who dives in, my eager mouth claiming hers.

I slide my hand up her back, skating against fabric and warm skin and pushing her into me.

For several moments, Nova kisses me, breathes my air and makes my chest ache with happiness.

Then she breaks away and her excited smile nearly knocks me back a step.

“Grab a basket.”

I realize we’re going to need more than a basket in about one minute flat.

In two minutes, I realize I’ve unleashed a monster.

Nova darts around the store like a zombie butterfly in a flower garden. She finds the weirdest pieces of stationary interesting—pens, index cards, notebooks, pencil holders.

By the third row, I’m as bored as a child in the curtain aisle, but Nova moves like someone lit a fire under her.

We’ve got two attendants pushing shopping carts behind us by the time an hour is up.

“Are you sure we have to go?” Nova groans.

I check my watch. I hadn’t anticipated how much she’d like this surprise. We’ll be late if we don’t hurry. “Yes.”

We check out and I set my card on the counter before Nova can do something as foolish as try to pay.

The number that displays nearly breaks the cash register.

“I can’t believe I’m spending so much on stationary.” I shake my head as I shove the purchases in the backseat of my car.

“I’ll use all of it.”

“I know you will.” I shut the door and slide my hands around her waist.
“Should I just buy you the entire store?”

“Let’s not get carried away.” She laughs.

My phone alarm goes off.

As much as I want to kiss the life out of her, we really have to go.

My second surprise takes us to the airport for the private jet I rented.
Nova’s been traveling with me before, but this time is different.

We’re on a date.

We’re together.

After all the years I’ve been pining for her, it’s go big or go home.

I don’t tell her where we’re going, but she figures it out when she sees the Eiffel Tower.

We have lunch at the diner that we’d stumbled on during a business meeting. I clean Nova’s mouth with my thumb and she holds my hand as we stroll to find a gift for Rowan. We settle on an easel and paint set and take it back on the plane with us.

On the way, Nova rests her head on my shoulder and takes a nap. I press my lips to her temple, marveling at how different our last plane ride was from this one.

That time, we went with Dejonae and Sazuki. It was torture watching Sazuki and his girlfriend be all lovey-dovey when I couldn’t even touch Nova.

Now, I slide my fingers over her face and enjoy that I can touch her as much as I want.

In the pick-up truck later, Nova gives me a tired smile. “That was amazing.”

“Hold on. It’s not over yet.”

“Adam, what could you possibly do to top the stationary emporium?”

“And Paris?”

“And Paris,” she adds as an afterthought.

I laugh. Can this woman be any more endearing? I have no idea why people think Nova is ‘scary’. She’s a sweetheart and a cutie and my girl.

My woman.

Mine, mine, mine.

I stop the car in front of the manor and climb out in anticipation.

Just then, my phone buzzes.

I pluck it out of my pocket and check the screen.

It's a message from Clay Bolton.

My blood turns to ice when I scan the text.

It's an address.

And then three brutal words.

I found her.

CHAPTER 13

THE FINAL SURPRISE

NOVA

I NOTICE Adam stop to check his phone and a strange expression takes over his face. He quickly shoves the phone in his pocket and rounds the car with a somber frown.

My executive assistant senses are ringing off the hook.

After years of working beside Adam, I've learned how to read every muscle tick in his face. Right now, the muscles are all pulling taut and pointing to one thing—trouble.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, sliding out of the car by myself and touching his arm.

"No." He forces a grin.

It would be convincing to anyone else, but I know him too well. When Adam's really happy, like sunshine-bursting-in-his-soul happy, he gets a crinkle right above his nose.

Right now, his smile is sans-crinkle.

I want to believe him but, without the crinkle, there's no way I'm buying this.

"Adam..."

"Nova, really. Everything's fine." He checks his watch. "It's almost time. We need to hurry."

He takes my hand and leads me through the side gate. I gasp when I see the backyard has been transformed with string lights, star-gazing equipment, and a brand-new porch swing.

"Rowan helped set it up," Adam informs me, looking boyishly charming as he sinks both hands into his jeans. "He wanted to join us tonight. I had to promise him that we'd all go star-gazing another day before he stopped begging."

"Star-gazing? Is that what we're doing?"

"I figured since your name is Nova, it would be right to end the day with us taking a good, long look at the sky." He nods to the swing. "I made that. It's got cup-holders, cushions and a foot rest that rises at the touch of a button."

It takes a lot to restrain my smile.

I touch his arm and whisper for his ears only, “Thank you. I really, *really* like it.”

Adam’s effort today has not gone unnoticed. To be honest, the first two surprises he had were on a grand scale. But this tiny offering of quiet relaxation, the fact that he and Rowan set it up together, the fact that he built the swing Adam-style, it all tugs at my heart.

“My pleasure.” He stares intently down at me.

“Is it really? It looks like a lot of work.”

“Doesn’t feel like work if it’s for you.” He studies me. His voice is deathly serious. “As long as I’m alive and breathing, Nova Delaney, you will always be the most important woman to me. And if you asked me to pluck one of those stars from the sky, I’d tell you you’re crazy and then I’d find a way to build you your own galaxy.”

I chuckle and hold him tighter. “Did you come up with that yourself?”

“I pieced it together after watching a couple of your favorite movies.”

“A couple?”

“Okay, all of them,” he admits and then he slaps his chest twice. “I’m comfortable enough in my masculinity to say that romance movies are fun.”

Laughter shakes us both.

After a beat, I go quiet and stare at him.

I’m dating my boss. The chances of me regretting this later? They’re about a hundred percent. But I can’t think beyond how good it feels to finally give into these feelings.

My white flag is flapping in the wind. I’m Rapunzel who let down her hair—quite literally—and allowed the prince to climb up the tower and rescue her.

I’m not as scared as I thought I’d be, even though this is, quite literally, a war on my heart. Adam is stepping into the hidden parts I’ve kept locked away for years. He’s building shelves and making himself a room, making himself comfortable.

I should feel the loss of control more deeply.

But I don’t feel fear. It’s quite the opposite. I feel bolder, stronger for having found the courage to be honest. Even though I gave up my armor and broke down the walls, I don’t feel as if I’ve lost. Only that I’ve gained more than I could imagine.

Is that what love is?

I wrap my arms around Adam and give him a hug. He seems surprised by the embrace and I guess that's fair. I spent seven years pumping the brakes *hard* every time he so much as hinted at caring about me. Now, I'm like Lula tearing down the road, clunky and awkward but gunning at a hundred miles an hour.

I rise on my tiptoes, ready to latch onto his mouth and give him a proper kiss, when an explosion nearly rips my ears open. I yelp, cover my ears and look up. Brilliant colors are filling the sky.

"Oh, wow." The gorgeous display sends me skittering back. Bright pinks, blues, greens and yellows dash across the horizon. They splash over the faint clouds and brush against twinkling stars.

The colors go dim again before another explosion breaks out and sends more streaks across the velvet night. It looks like jewels lighting up the sky.

"Is that..." I step out of Adam's arms, my neck wound back and my chin up. "That's my name! How is it doing that?"

"I made a few adjustments to the typical fireworks powder."

Too afraid to whip my eyes off the sky, I yell at Adam, "Is this legal?"

"Ehem. Not exactly."

My mouth opens with laughter and then it fades into gasps of awe as I watch the sparkles light up in perfect shapes.

N-O-V-A

When it's over, I turn to Adam who looks uncharacteristically somber. I thought he'd be bursting with pride and teasing me about how awesome he is.

"Adam?"

He blinks and seems to come back to himself. A mischievous grin spreads across his face, replacing the previous expression.

"You like it?"

"When did you have time to make *fireworks*?"

"I did it a few years ago."

"Years?"

He shrugs. "I've been waiting a really long time for you, Nova."

Is there a way I can fuse my lips to his and still live my daily life? Maybe he can invent something that'll allow me to walk around, always holding onto his hand. Heck, I'd go to one of those magicians and get myself handcuffed to this man at this point.

"Today was amazing, Adam. And the fireworks were gorgeous."

He grazes his knuckles over my cheek. “How about the guy who did the fireworks?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see who you hired to set them off. Maybe he’s cute...?”

Adam attacks my stomach with his fingers.

I burst out laughing. “Adam!”

He keeps tickling. “You think you’re funny?”

I push at his hands, laughing and trying to squirm away. Eventually, Adam stops and slides his hands over my waist, hugging me from behind.

“Fine,” I admit. “You’re not so hard on the eyes.”

He lifts me off the ground and spins me toward the porch. “What do you think about the swing?”

“I love it.”

“You sure?”

“Yes?”

“Absolutely sure?”

I nod.

“Let’s just confirm that.”

He lifts me and carries me up the back steps. The chains holding the swing rattle when we both fall into it.

Adam settles me in his lap and traces a line down my shoulder. “Still like it?”

“Technically, I’m sitting on your lap. Not the swing.”

“Well, this is as close as you’re gonna get tonight, so...”

I laugh and then settle into a smile.

One tan finger rises and traces my mouth. Our gazes hook and latch. A thrill of something hot and dangerous moves through my body. It’s insane how he makes my gut twist with just a look.

Adam’s dark eyes go even darker. “I love your smile. It’s like pure sunshine, Nova.”

Kiss him, the deranged cat that seems to be in full control of my loins purrs, *kiss that man now!*

I don’t like cats, but that one has a point.

I tilt my head up.

Adam leans down and fuses his mouth to mine. The kiss is more explosive than the fireworks that stained the sky with colors. Like a fuse

that was lit many years before, burning slowly, slowly, and only now able to sparkle for the world to see, it crashes and shatters and destroys.

I cling to him, needing to hold on to *something* to stay upright. His mouth is hot and firm and everything I could ever dream of. I can feel his muscles beneath his T-shirt and, right below that, his wildly pounding heart. Mine is beating just as fast.

I've always considered myself to be a capable, powerful woman, but I never expected to feel even *more* powerful in the hands of such a giving, loving and honorable man.

"You taste like freaking *honey*," Adam whispers against my lips. When he opens his eyes and looks down at me, his gaze is fierce and so hot it almost burns my dress off. "I can't get enough of you, Nova."

Every ounce of my good sense disintegrates.

Our lips collide in another desperate kiss that digs a hole straight down to my chest, grabs my heart and squeezes until it stops beating.

Have mercy.

It's like diving into a vat of pure crystal water and finding Atlantis underneath.

Adam Harrison is inhumanely insatiable, taking my mouth with a ferocity that warns he has many years of cold showers and longing to make up for. And he doesn't plan on giving me a chance to catch my breath.

I moan softly when he tilts his head and pulls my bottom lip into his mouth. The loving he lays on me is single-minded and dirty enough to be illegal. There's no way a man should be this skilled at kissing. And yet, Adam could teach a class on it.

His mouth moves urgently over mine. He doesn't just kiss me. He *devours*, tasting the curve of my lips with his tongue as if it's the most exquisite meal he's ever had.

I feel singed, burnt to a crisp.

My fingernails scrape the back of his neck and sink into the hair beneath his cap. I knock the hat out of the way and it goes tumbling out of sight.

My adrenaline is pounding and every one of my senses dials to a hundred. His scent, metal and fresh sawdust and Adam. His beard, hot and burning as it scrapes my sensitive chin. His fingertips, firm as they slide over my hip and tangle in my skirt. His grunts, pleased and slightly unhinged.

This is dying.

This is living.

This is what I was so afraid of giving into, the full breadth of Adam Harrison unleashed upon me.

“You’re going to be the death of me. You have no idea, darlin’,” Adam breathes as if he can’t handle everything he’s feeling.

My lips brush his when I smile. I can feel my breath skittering in my chest. “Can we test out the footrest?”

Adam blinks as if dazed. Then he nods. Snaking out a strong hand, he presses a button on the side and a foot rest unfolds from the bottom of the swing.

“I, uh, looked it up. There aren’t any porch swings with an automatic foot rest on the market.”

“Mm-hm.” I rub my hands over the back of his neck and keep an eye on that foot rest.

Adam’s legs start lifting along with it. “It’s so easy. Why wouldn’t someone have come up with that yet?”

“A very good question.” I wait to hear the foot rest snap into place before pushing one palm against the back of the swing and throwing my foot over Adam’s hip. Straddling him now that I have room to do so without the fear of falling on my butt, I sink into his body.

He moans and I do too, loving the heat of him so close to where he needs to be.

My skirt bunches up so high that I’m practically flashing him. Adam’s groan of appreciation is worth it. His fingertips slide around my hips and he moves me back and forth, creating his own friction.

I can feel him, his hard body, his need—so desperate for me.

“I’ll definitely,” I kiss him slowly, our lips sliding against each other, “put that,” another slow, sensual kiss, “on the company docket.”

He seeks out my lips when I ease back, his face completely red and his eyelashes fluttering. “Have *mercy*.”

“No, I don’t think I will,” I whisper against his ear.

He kisses me again, his hands roaming my body, not bothering about being a gentleman. For all his kindness and easy-going nature, Adam is built like a machine—the kind that can fire shots all night without losing a beat. And right now, he’s not Easy-Going Adam. He’s something else. Part monster, part savage.

I pant violently as he caresses me with both of his hands while his mouth casts me into a deeper, flaming need. A heady sense of helplessness and wonder crashes into me.

How does he do that? His hands are everywhere, and yet his kiss ramps up with intensity. He's almost obsessive about my mouth—drinking from my lips until they tremble, nuzzling until they burn, driving his teeth down to mix pleasure with pain.

I'm shivering with all his promises of wicked delight, especially when his tongue invades my mouth, moving in and out with confidence, a daring preview of what's to come.

His stubble is a unique burn against my sensitive skin, the perfect sensation to pair with the exquisiteness of his kiss, adding so much friction that I want to scream.

It takes me a second to decide where to start undressing him first. My hands make the decision and get busy tugging on the flannel outside of his T-shirt.

My heart is beating violently, my body melting to nothing as his mouth sucks the soul right out of me.

Even the way he growls his desire into my ear takes my breath away.

Now. I need Adam now.

Each brutal stroke shakes the dust off my dirtiest fantasies and rips open every secret desire I've denied since I started having feelings for him.

The feral cat inside is screaming bloody murder.

My skin is on fire.

This kiss will leave bruises. I'm sure of it. My hands roam his pants with a possessive exploration, searching for the button that will unlock everything I want.

Something buzzes in the chaos.

It's Adam's phone.

"Ignore that," he growls, shrugging out of his flannel. As soon as he's shed that layer, his hands grab my waist again and he drags me down on him.

I hiss, feeling how much he wants me.

His hands push under my dress, grabbing, taking, molding me into the shape he wants. There's so much erupting desire that the porch swing can't take it. I slap my palm against the back of the wooden slats, trying to keep my balance as the chair rocks back and forth and the chain rattles.

Adam's phone buzzes more insistently.

I wrench my mouth away from his and he grips me under my dress, his hands wrapped around my thighs in a silent command.

But it's not one I can follow.

"Answer the phone, Adam. You have a son. You can't ignore phone calls anymore." When he still looks reluctant, I insist, "It could be an emergency."

His expression shutters. "It's not Rowan."

"What?" I ease back. The thin straps of my dress slide further down to my elbows. "How do you know?"

Adam sighs and gently sets me away from him. Then he takes out the phone and shows me the screen.

"It's the company I hired to find Alexa."

I jolt harder than if the entire swing had come crashing down. The desire and need that had been pulsing in my stomach is ripped away, replaced by a feeling of cold dread.

"Where is she?" I whisper with a hint of *please don't answer that* in my tone.

"The address he gave me..." Adam's eyes go dark, "was a hospital."

* * *

CLAY BOLTON IS BIG.

Bigger than Adam.

And since, only an hour ago, I was holding onto Adam's very broad shoulders while rubbing against him like some wild beast during mating season, I know how big and muscular my boss is.

Clay Bolton is built like a tank.

A really grumpy, really blond tank with a perpetual scowl and shocking blue eyes that would be beautiful if not for the jaded sheen in them.

I glance over at Adam, comparing the two men. Even somber and serious, Adam emits such positive energy. His belief and faith in the world is unshakeable. I'm glad I found someone like him, someone who would remind me of the sunshine when I get lost in my darkness.

"It took me a while to find her because she was living at the hospital." Clay Bolton slides a file over to Adam. "She sold her apartment, quit her

job and made zero financial transactions on the outside. It's like her life shrank to the size of that building."

"What does she have?" I ask tightly.

"Cancer."

I have to tell myself to blink.

I have to tell myself to breathe.

Clay Bolton's expression softens with a hint of humanity for the first time since we met in his fancy office. "It's terminal."

I recoil on the inside, but on the outside I'm perfectly calm. Adam, on the other hand, is visibly tense. His fingers close into fists and he stares at the files as if waiting for it to tell him something different.

"The timeline of her moving into the hospital aligns with the date that your son showed up on your doorstep," Clay Bolton says.

I shift in my chair as the pieces click into place.

I hadn't told Adam, or anyone really, but the more I got to know Rowan, the more I started judging Alexa. How could she send her own kid away? How could she not visit Rowan *once*? I'd only known him for a short time and I already knew that he was important to me. Why wouldn't the woman who'd given birth to him recognize that?

Turns out, I was wrong. Alexa hadn't abandoned Rowan. She'd been trying to give him the best chance at building a life without her.

Tears sting my eyes and my heart moves with compassion for a woman I've never met and yet had hated.

"How much time does she have to live?" Adam asks weakly.

"Not long," Clay responds, glancing away.

I place my hand on Adam's back and rub.

His throat bobs. He opens his mouth, but closes it tightly and says nothing.

I see him struggling and I immediately switch into fix-it mode. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Bolton. We'll discuss our next steps given the information that's come to light."

He nods, his eyes sweeping to the picture frame on his desk. It's of him and his family. He's got his arm around a woman and he's wearing a smile on his face—which is shocking enough—but next to a little blonde son who looks exactly like him is a dark-skinned little girl.

Clay Bolton speaks in a hoarse voice. "Losing a loved one is tough. I hope things work out for you."

“Thanks,” Adam responds.

I slide Bolton my card. “In the future, if you can’t reach Adam, you can contact me. I’ll get the message to him.”

“Sure.”

Adam stumbles out of Clay Bolton’s office, still looking dazed.

“Adam,” I call in a worried voice. “Are you okay enough to drive?”

“She’s not a loved one,” he says faintly.

“What?”

“I never loved Alexa.”

My eyebrows knit together.

“How am I supposed to explain this to Rowan?” Adam breathes hard. “How am I supposed to tell him his mom is dying? She’s the woman I knocked up eleven years ago, but she’s his mom. She’s all he’s ever known.”

“Hey, *hey*.” I cup his chin until he looks at me.

His brown eyes find mine. He looks like a drowning man and I wish I could take the burden off his shoulders and latch it squarely onto mine.

“I know how much your heart is hurting for Rowan. I know this isn’t the outcome you were hoping for, but we have a brilliant, talented eleven-year-old boy whose world is about to change. As much as it hurts, you have to make some decisions now.”

He sucks in a deep breath and lets it out. Taking my hand in his, he squeezes. “Have I mentioned how glad I am that you’re on my side?”

One half of my mouth lifts up and I want to kiss him, even if this is the absolute worst time to feel that urge—given he just found out that his old fling is dying and he has to either tell his son and risk breaking his heart or keep it a secret and risk Rowan’s anger.

“What do you want to do?” I prod.

“I think we should tell him.”

“Then we’ll do that.”

“Tonight.”

“Alright.” I agree.

He arches a brow and gives me a vulnerable look. “You’ll be there with me, right? You’re better with words.”

“And you’re better with people.” I bump his shoulder. “You have a big heart, Adam. Right now, I don’t think Rowan needs my version of the cold, hard truth. I think he needs your humanity.”

“We’ll see,” Adam says, a nervous tick in his jaw.

“Either way, I’ll be right beside you.” I check my watch. “We should pick up Rowan from Dejonae and Sazuki’s now.”

Adam stops me before I walk away. He cups my cheeks, turns my face to his and kisses me softly. It’s a light, gentle, *I love you* kiss. I feel it even though he hasn’t said the words.

“Alright,” he sets his face to the horizon, “*now* we can go.”

* * *

ROWAN HASN’T STOPPED TALKING since he got into the car.

“I showed Belle my drawing and she said it was the best she’d ever seen. She asked me to draw her a unicorn and I did. She showed everyone.” Rowan’s chest puffs up. With his chin tilted and his eyes shining with pride, he looks so much like Adam that it kills me. “And then everyone started asking me to draw something for them.”

“That’s great, bud.”

“Niko wrote on her tablet that she was jealous. No one asked her to draw anything.” Rowan grins. “I felt bad so I asked her to draw me a cool design for the skateboard Micheal gave me.” He shakes his head. “But she wasn’t that good. I think she should stick to playing piano.”

Adam’s fingers tighten on the steering wheel, but his voice has an artificial cheerfulness when he says, “Uh-huh.”

Rowan is too sharp and he picks up on the weird mood. “Are you two fighting or something?”

“No, we’re not.”

Rowan scoots to the edge of his seat. “Nova, did you like the swing?”

“I did.”

“Did you see the characters I painted on the foot rest?” Rowan asks in excitement.

My shoulders tighten on impact. I had *not* been looking that hard at the footrests as occupied as I was with hurling myself into Adam’s arms.

“Yeah,” I squeak out. “Yeah, it was nice.”

“You didn’t see it, did you?” Rowan asks flatly.

“It was too... dark at the time. But I’ll check it out in the sunlight.”

“Does that mean you’re sleeping over again?” Rowan asks innocently.

I blink and blink and blink. “Well...”

“That’s enough questions, Rowan,” Adam says. “You should be wearing your seatbelt.”

“Sor-rry.” Rowan breaks the word into two sharp syllables.

I place my hand on top of the one Adam has choking the stick shift. He relaxes slightly. Turning his palm over, he interlaces our fingers.

The car falls silent.

No one says anything more until we get into the house.

“Rowan,” Adam calls when his son tries to scamper into his room, “we need to have a family meeting.”

“That sounds scary,” Rowan mumbles.

I slant Adam a look. It’s not lost on me that he’s calling this a family meeting with me present.

He nods as if to tell me *I said what I said*.

I reserve my comments for later and take a seat in the sofa beside him. Adam pulls our joined hands over his knee. Despite his calm expression, he’s squeezing my hand almost painfully.

I take the pressure, willing to be his stress ball if he needs it.

“Rowan, I spoke to Nova,” Adam glances at me, making sure to include me in the conversation again, “and we felt we should bring this up with you.”

Rowan’s eyes start widening. He glances from my face to Adam’s. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, you’re not,” Adam says softly. “It’s about your mom.” He exhales. “We found out tonight that your mom...”

I let loose a little squeak of pain when Adam tightens his grip. He jumps in surprise, sees that he’s hurting me and releases his hand instantly.

“Nova, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’m—” the word ‘fine’ is on the tip of my tongue, but I know Adam doesn’t respect that term coming from me. “Just be a little more gentle,” I say, offering my hand again.

He nods seriously and takes the hand. Turning to his son again, he swallows hard. “Rowan, your mom is in the hospital. She’s not doing too well. We heard... we heard that she might not make it.”

Rowan’s youthful face freezes in shock. I watch his little chest rise and fall on a giant breath. He says nothing. The only indication that he even heard Adam is his skin becoming paler.

Adam scoots to the edge of his chair and leans forward. "Rowan, did you know your mom was sick when she sent you here?"

Tears pool in the little boy's eyes and it makes me want to fling myself at him and beg Adam to take back the words. I didn't know how much seeing Rowan's emotional distress would burn me.

"I knew she was hiding something from me," he says, lifting an arm over his face. I'm not sure if that arm is to hide his crying from us or to wipe his tears. "And I knew she wasn't feeling that good but... are you sure she's dying?"

Adam looks down.

Rowan sniffs. "She can't die." He shakes his head, his brown hair flopping. "She can't leave me."

Unable to hold it in any longer, I launch across the sofa and clutch Rowan. It's an uncharacteristic burst of maternal intuition, but I know it's the right move when Rowan dips his head in my neck.

Hot, salty tears fall against my collar bone.

My heart breaks with every wet plop on my skin.

Adam joins us in the couch and wraps his arms around us both. Keeping us steady, he becomes both the physical and figurative anchor for us.

"You're going to be okay, Rowan. I swear," Adam says.

"I want to see her," Rowan lifts his head and demands, "I want to see mom."

Adam glances at me.

I nod.

He sighs and promises, "I'll take you to her tomorrow."

* * *

HOSPITALS HAVE ALWAYS FRIGHTENED ME. So many deaths within these walls. So many families broken up. So many children scarred for life. So many partners losing their only reasons to smile.

I glance at Adam, who's walking determinedly beside me.

One of the reasons I kept my heart from him is because I knew I'd be one of those people who wouldn't move on after loving him. I'd be stuck in him forever, consumed by him, breathing for him even if he was no longer breathing with me.

It's not our blissful day of extravagant dates that convinced me of that.
It's the way we cling to each other in crisis.

Even in this tense moment, when he could so easily pull away and retreat into himself, Adam is holding me. He's looking out for me.

Yesterday, after Rowan went to bed in tears, I insisted on calling Steve and going home so Adam could focus on caring for his son.

The moment I got home, I got a text from Adam asking if I'd gotten in safely.

This morning, I got a call from Adam asking if I'd slept well.

Two hours later, Adam was at my door with a sullen Rowan, a downtrodden Lula and a lunch bag with wheat pancakes, turkey bacon and coffee. He made me eat every bite, insisting that he didn't want to see me fainting again.

I glance down at the third part of our trio. While Adam is holding tightly to my hand, Rowan is holding tightly to his. The little boy has dark circles under his eyes. His skin is so pale his freckles stand out.

I think Rowan hates hospitals as much as I do.

We turn the bend and enter the hospice ward. The smell of lemon-scented cleaner is extra heavy here, but even that can't purge the scent of death and despair. It clings to the hallways, rolling like dark smoke beneath our feet.

Adam doesn't seem scared at all. While both Rowan and I slow our pace, he finds the right room and marches straight in.

I'm surprised by how many beds are in here. I'm even more shocked by how all those beds are full. Patients in hospital gowns turn and stare at us. Rowan hides behind his dad, shuffling nervously.

The kid banged on a stranger's door and confidently served them a 'dad notice'.

He barged into Sunny Hastings' farmhouse and made friends with all the other children.

But at the thought of seeing his dying mom he's cowering.

The fact that he's fearful now tells me how overwhelmed he is by this moment.

Adam stops in front of a frail woman with a scarf on her head. Even in this state, clearly ravaged by sickness and hopelessness, she's a stunner. Her cheekbones are fine, her eyes a beguiling grey, and her lips full.

"Adam," she says his name like it's a holy prayer.

I slide my hand out of Adam's. He gives me a quick glance, but I nudge my chin at Alexa.

Adam frowns as he turns to the patient on the bed.

Alexa isn't looking at him anymore though. Her eyes are on her son. "Rowan." She extends both hands.

Rowan shuffles out from behind his dad, moves sluggishly towards his mother and then throws his arms around her.

The two hug and rock.

I feel my throat clogging up, but it's not from tears. It's because the chemical cleaners they use are so strong.

Yup.

That's why.

"I missed you so much," Alexa says, rubbing his back. She glances at me and smiles. "Hello."

"Hi."

"You must be Nova Delaney." Her eyes slide over me and jump back to my face. "You're prettier than all those pictures on the Vision Tech website."

I dip my head.

She waves at Adam and laughs. It's a bright sound. If I closed my eyes, I could picture a woman full of life, not the one who's barely clinging on in front of me.

"Come on, Adam. Stop frowning. You're not at my funeral yet."

Rowan flinches. "Mom."

"I know." Her smile wavers, but she pins it up bravely. "I know. I should have told you. Both of you. But can you blame me? This isn't exactly the place for a pseudo-family reunion."

Adam's jaw flexes. "I'm going to get you a private room."

"Adam, don't bother."

"Aren't you uncomfortable here?"

She shakes her head. "Don't waste your money."

He pretends not to have heard her. Facing me, he asks gently, "You're going to be okay if I leave?"

I smile and nod.

"I'll come with you," Rowan says. I'm not sure if he's running from the depressing state of the room or from his mom.

The father and son leave.

Then it's just me and Alexa.

"He's such a square, isn't he?" Alexa says with a wry grin.

"Who?"

She juts her chin at Adam's retreating back. "You know, when Rowan was growing up, I used to dream that I'd done things completely different. I imagined that Adam and I had gotten married, and then we'd had Rowan. We'd live in a little townhouse in the suburbs. I even picked out a dog for us."

"What kind of dog?"

"A chihuahua. They're small and loud. Like me."

I want to laugh, but my face can't seem to make the expression. I slide my hands in front of me and pin them together.

"I like you, Nova."

I blink in surprise.

"You look like a woman who has her crap together. Not a lot of insecurities. Not immature. Someone who'll treat Rowan well."

My throat bobs.

I fidget with my hands.

"How long have you and Adam been together?" Alexa asks in a weak voice.

My head whips up.

"Come on. Do you think anyone would miss those heart eyes he throws at you? Even if you weren't holding hands, I'd have seen it." Her smile is sad. "I know what Adam looks like when he's just messing around. This isn't it."

"We haven't been together long," I answer. "It's new."

She winces and leans back in her bed. "No, it's not. The way Adam looks at you, that's a mature kind of love. Unconditional. A love like that doesn't happen at first sight. It takes years. It takes being tried by fire. It takes commitment and sacrifice."

I say nothing.

Closing her eyes, she lets out another sigh. "I regret a lot of things now that I'm dying, but one of the biggest is that I never got to experience that." She opens her eyes and smirks at me. "You should know how lucky you are."

My bottom lip trembles. Why is it that I don't feel lucky at all? Why do I feel like I took something from someone who needs it more?

CHAPTER 14

THE ICE QUEEN RETURNS

ADAM

THE SMELL of burning metal fills my nose as I adjust the kinetic battery's memory board. I've got a magnifying glass in front of me. It's the strongest on the market and yet my eyes are still blurry.

Cursing, I whip my glasses off and rub my eyes with the heel of my hand. A sound drags my attention away from my work.

I see a small, slim shadow hovering in the doorway of my lab.

"Hey, bud. Can't sleep again?"

Rowan shakes his head.

I swivel my chair around and stare at him as he moves gingerly through the lab. Rowan's visited this messy room so many times that he could dance through the obstacles with his eyes closed.

"You should get some rest." I squeeze his shoulder when he stops in front of me. "It's been three days since you've gotten a full eight hours."

"You too," Rowan says.

I arch both eyebrows.

He rubs his bony elbow with a hand. "Every time I get up, you're always working."

"So what?"

"So you don't sleep either."

I rub the back of my neck. "I'm an adult."

"Adults need to sleep too." He shakes his head. "You don't know anything."

Smart mouth.

I nod to the sketch book that's got a permanent place on my work table. I cleared up the spot so that Rowan could draw next to me. "You can stay up for an hour."

He pumps his fist.

"*Only* an hour." I slant him a hard look. "And then you have to go back to sleep. Even if you just stare at the ceiling, you'll get sleepy eventually."

"No, I won't," Rowan mumbles. Reaching forward, he nabs a colored pencil from a sculpted pencil holder. The fancy monstrosity was a purchase from the emporium.

Why we spent so much for a fancy *pencil holder* when we could have just used a mug for free? I don't know.

But alas, Rowan's desk is full of them.

I found out later that some of Nova's purchases at the emporium had been for Rowan. Now, his side of the work table has a cork board, sketch books, paints, colored pencils and markers. I can clearly see where his side ends and mine begins.

"Take it or leave it. One hour here or you can go straight back to bed."

"I'll stay here," Rowan says quickly.

I smile and focus on my own side of the table. Since my eyes are tired from trying to work on the tiny microchip, I switch over to my laptop and monitor the specs.

For a while, we both work in peace.

"Adam," Rowan says quietly.

"Mm?"

He hesitates. "Is there any way we can keep mom from dying?"

I freeze, my heart in my throat. Most of the time, I don't grapple with topics as depressing as death. But with all that's going on lately, I feel like I can't run away from the darker sides of life.

"No, kid. The doctors have tried everything."

"Can't you invent something?" He looks beseechingly at me. "Something that'll make her feel better?"

"I'm sorry, Rowan."

His bottom lip trembles and his eyes get red, but he doesn't cry.

I place a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, I'll do everything in my power to be there for you, okay? And about Alexa," I clear my throat, "I'll use every cent in my bank account to make sure she's comfortable. Money can't buy health, but it can at least make a few of her dreams come true."

Rowan bobs his head.

"Did you know," I say gently, "that your grandparents were married for forty years?"

His eyes widen.

"After my mom passed," I smile sadly, "my dad died a few weeks later of heartbreak."

Rowan frowns. "Why did his heart break?"

"Because he loved her so much that, when she was gone, his heart stopped working." I clear my throat. "But that's not the lesson, Rowan. The

lesson is what he told me before he died.”

“What did he tell you?” Rowan is leaning forward, soaking in every word.

“He told me that he’d spent his life loving my mom as if she’d die tomorrow. He poured one hundred percent of his effort, time and attention on her so that the day she died, he wouldn’t have any regrets.”

“But his heart still broke,” Rowan reminds me.

“It did,” I agree. “But at least it didn’t break from regret.”

He nibbles his bottom lip. “How can I do that for mom?”

“You can start by making a list of things your mom always said she wanted. We’ll go over it and start scratching them off until we have no regrets.”

That earns me a tiny smile.

Bingo.

I go back to working.

Rowan’s pencil skates against the sketch paper. It’s all I hear... until he starts to sniff. My eyes jump back to my son. He’s got his head down and is trying valiantly to keep himself together.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I got something in my eye.”

“Sounds like you’re crying, bud.”

“I’m not crying. Crying is for babies and losers.”

Where did he learn that macho routine? I turn him to face me. “Rowan, crying is for anyone who feels pain. If you’re in pain, it’s gotta come out somehow. Some people let it out by being jerks and hurting other people. But if you can let it out with some tears and then get up and make things better, that’s the best option.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Rowan pulls his lips into his mouth. His eyelashes start fluttering. The tears slip down one after another.

I have no idea what to say, so I just grab him for a bear hug. “It’s gonna be okay, son.” I give him a squeeze. “You’re gonna be okay.”

That’s my promise to him.

As a man.

And as a father.

I'll do anything to make sure that Rowan doesn't feel like he's going through this darkness alone.

* * *

"ADAM, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" Nova pops out of her chair when I show up with breakfast and a smile. She rounds the desk quickly, revealing a pencil skirt designed to show off her legs. And she has legs. *For days.*

Her heels-ban is over and today, she's wearing a sexy little number with lots of straps.

When she gets close, I wrap my arms around her. The lunch bag swings wildly and lashes around her thighs. I slide my hand against her waist, drop my head and find the softness of her mouth.

Kissing Nova is like standing in the middle of a lightning storm. Flashes of light and pummeling rain and utter destruction that's so sweet it's almost painful.

Nova gives me a tiny push, sending a nervous look at the blinds outside her window. "Adam."

"Sorry. I got carried away." I reach behind her leg, untangle the lunch bag and hand it over. "I came to deliver this and get a new load of documents from the archives."

"Thanks for breakfast." She squeezes my hand. "And why are you going through the archives?"

"I'm taking the reins from you, remember? If I want to make your work load easier, I have to know what I'm dealing with."

Nova blinks at me. "Taking the reins?"

"You're teaching me how to run Vision Tech so I can step up in the managing department. That's weird. You don't usually forget things like that."

Nova frowns. "Adam, that's not a priority."

"Of course it is."

"You have enough on your plate as is."

"I'm fine, darlin'."

She slants me a *yeah right* look. "There are dark circles under your eyes and your fingers are jittery."

"Are they?" I hide my hands behind my back.

“Jittery fingers means you overdid it with the coffee. How many cups have you had since you woke up? Did you even sleep last night?”

I laugh. “Guess I can’t hide anything from you.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I don’t know, Nova. I haven’t been keeping a coffee count.”

“When did you go to sleep last night?”

I tilt my head and give her a flirty smile. “Do you know how sexy you look when you scowl at me?”

Her expression doesn’t change a bit.

I sigh. “You don’t have to worry.”

“We’ve established that I am incapable of doing anything else.” She folds her arms over her chest. “You’re preparing for the second round of the competition, while being a father, and trying to date me. Every day, you have to drop Rowan off at the hospital. Then you have to pick him up and take him to art camp. Then you pick him up and take him to the farmhouse. On top of all that, you bring me breakfast and eat lunch with me and then pick me up for dinner. *And* you’re studying work files trying to catch up on Vision Tech admin while handling your responsibilities as the R&D director.”

“Wow. I take it back. I’m tired just listening to you.” I pretend to wipe sweat from my brow.

“This isn’t funny.”

“Nova.”

“There’s only one of you, Adam. You can’t be everything to everybody.”

“Relax.”

“You first.”

I slide my hands over her shoulders. “It’s a hectic time. I admit that. But it won’t be hectic forever.”

“You’re going at a pace that will hurt you in the end.”

“I can handle it.”

“I know you can, but you’re still human. If you spin too many plates in the air at once, one of them has to go or they’ll all drop.” She slides my hands off her shoulders. Her eyes skitter away. “With everything going on with you and Rowan and Alexa, maybe... you and I should slow down.”

“Not a chance,” I growl.

She purses her lips, clearly displeased.

“If any of those spinning plates have to disappear, it’s not going to be you, Nova. Just being in the same room with you recharges my batteries. I need you. So letting you go is not an option. Don’t even ask me to.”

Her eyes lock on mine and it seems like she wants to argue.

I straighten my shoulders, ready to go.

If she wants to fight, let’s fight.

There’s a knock on the door.

Rochelle pokes her head in. “Miss Delaney, you have a call on line two.”

“Thanks, Rochelle.”

I back away when I hear Nova’s phone ringing. One of the things I’ve learned after working with her for seven years is that she likes to compartmentalize.

Work time is for work discussions and activities. Off-time is for everything else. She gets extremely uncomfortable when personal things slip into business hours.

Rather than push her further, I head for the door. “I’ll pick you up at six.”

“I have a meeting with the planning team at six,” she says brusquely.

“When will you be finished?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then I’ll wait for you until you are.”

“Adam.”

I turn and face her. “I’ll go over the files while I wait. It won’t be a waste.”

She pulls her lips in and nods.

* * *

MY DAYS ARE SO busy that they start to morph into one another. I wake up every morning feeling like I’m in a cosmic loop. It’s gotten so bad that I have to check the calendar just to find out what the date is.

Today, I’m trying not to doze off as I wait for Rowan outside the hospital.

“Aren’t you going in?” Rowan asks, slamming the door closed. It’s after five o’clock and the sky is a dusty grey. “Mom asked for you.”

“I’ll visit her later, bud.” I muster up a smile.

Rowan puts on his seatbelt and I drive away from the hospital.

At home, I instruct my son to wash up. After grabbing a beer, I move to the back deck. The swing sits in the darkness, forlorn and abandoned. Nova and I haven’t had time to sit in it again.

She seems to have amped up her work load these days. The only time she can fit me into her schedule is for meals and meetings about Vision Tech.

Is it just me or has she been getting distant lately?

I shake my head.

It’s a strained time for everyone. Maybe she’s trying to process everything with Alexa by working harder.

Just then, I get a text from Nova.

My meeting’s over early. I’ll ask Steve to bring me over.

A smile spreads over my face. It’s like someone flipped the switch from depressing melodrama to an upbeat romantic comedy.

I storm inside. “Rowan! Change of plans. Nova’s coming over. So no pizza!”

“What?” Pre-pubescent whining comes from the direction of Rowan’s room. “No fair!”

I throw the fridge door open, looking for something I can have hot and ready by the time Nova arrives. My eyes snag on a package of chicken breasts.

Perfect.

Urgent footsteps pound into the kitchen. I feel the force of Rowan’s scowl like laser beams.

I shut the fridge and he’s there, a pizza zombie out for blood. “You said we could have pizza tonight.”

“Nova doesn’t eat pizza. She needs real food.” I take out the garlic powder, black pepper, and season-all. I used to cook only with salt and black pepper before Nova. After she accused my food of being tasteless, I went back to the drawing board.

“Is Nova the only one you think about?”

I stop, squint into the distance and then nod. “Pretty much.”

He scoffs and storms off.

Five minutes later, I get a call from Nova.

“Hey,” I wipe my hands on my apron, “are you almost here?”

“I’m in the mood for pizza. Do you mind just ordering in tonight?”

“Pizza?” Taken aback, I flip the stove off. “Since when did you like fast-food?”

“Rowan would enjoy it more.”

At the mention of my son, my eyebrows pull taut. “The kid put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“He texted saying you were going back on a promise.”

“I didn’t promise him pizza today,” I defend myself. “I said we *might* if I don’t feel like cooking. And now I do feel like cooking.”

“I want pizza, Adam.” Her voice gets soft and coaxing. “Please? For me?”

The woman plays dirty.

“Fine.”

“Thank you. I’ll be there soon.”

I hang up, order the pizza and then glance up from my phone. Rowan wiggles his eyebrows at me, a mischievous smile on his face.

I point a finger. “Using Nova is below the belt.”

“If it works, it works.” He shrugs and then sticks his tongue out.

I pretend to chase him and he runs into his room, slamming the door shut. When he’s out of sight, I leak a satisfied grin. I’m glad to see him being more upbeat. After his crying session, I was afraid that he might be handling this worse than I thought. I was even prepared to call Darrel, hoping the therapist could help Rowan where I couldn’t.

Returning to the kitchen, I clean up and wait for Nova to arrive. The moment I hear an engine coming down the lane, I fly through the door.

Nova steps out of the SUV, looking tired but happy to see me.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey.”

I nod at Steve, who waves before driving off.

“Are you okay?”

She nods faintly.

I want to hug her, kiss her, sweep her into my bedroom—but she looks like she’ll crash into deep slumber if I dare set her down on a mattress.

Rather than give into my instincts, I press a kiss on her forehead. “Why did your meeting end early?”

“The promotion plans were all wrong, so I told them to do it again.”

“You’re being hard on them lately.”

“We need capable people to help you run the company. There’s no room for mistakes.”

“I’ll still have you to guide me.” I wrap an arm around her waist. “Even if you’re on vacation from Vision Tech, you’re not on vacation from me.”

She glances down. “Right.”

I take her hand and lead her up the porch stairs. “Pizza will be here any minute.”

“Okay. Where’s Rowan?”

I point to his room. “Probably plotting out more ways to use my relationship with you against me.”

She chuckles, but there’s something off about it. Something I can’t place.

Nova heads inside and I start to follow her when I hear the pizza guy’s motorcycle coming up the lane.

I collect the pizzas from the teenager, set the steaming pie on the counter and take out some plates.

“Rowan! Nova!”

No response.

“Rowan?” I thought for sure my son would be the first to come hurtling out when he smelled the food.

Curious, I tiptoe to Rowan’s room.

He and Nova are deep in conversation.

The eavesdropper in me comes alive and I quietly listen in.

“Adam asked me to make a list of the things that’ll make mom happy,” Rowan is saying.

I tilt my head back, my heart twisting. The way I left things with Alexa was the opposite of honorable. I’m glad I get this chance to make it up to her. Even if I don’t love her and I don’t feel the attraction I did when I was in college, she’s Rowan’s mother. I want her to have a good life, as short as that life may be.

“Wow,” Nova says. “These are a lot of interesting things.”

“If it’s too expensive, he doesn’t have to do it,” Rowan defends.

I chuckle silently. No matter what’s on the list, it’ll happen. I plan to hire someone whose job is exclusively to help us make those wishes come true.

“This is number one?” Nova asks, sounding astonished.

“Every time that scene comes up in movies, mom said she wanted that. She said she’d give anything to have it.”

Unable to hide my curiosity, I step into the room. “What are you guys talking about?”

Nova stiffens guiltily.

Rowan seems eager to rope me into the conversation. He shoves a paper at me.

“Is this the list?”

He nods.

My eyes skim the paper and then freeze on number one.

‘Wear a white dress and get married to a good guy.’

I glance nervously at Nova and then I look at Rowan. “Thanks for your help, bud.”

“You’re going to do it, right?” Rowan asks. “You’re going to help mom like you promised?”

Nova’s not looking at me.

The knots in my stomach get worse.

I choke. “Yeah, bud. Like I promised.”

* * *

LATER THAT NIGHT, after Rowan goes to sleep, I massage Nova’s feet while we watch a movie.

Honestly, it’s more like the movie’s watching us.

Neither of us seem to be paying much attention.

After it’s over, I turn and find Nova eyeing me studiously.

“Like what you see?” I tease, shifting my head and showing off my jawline.

Her smile barely sticks the landing. She drops her gaze to her hands. “Have you visited Alexa lately?”

“Not really.”

Tension lines her shoulders. “Have you at least gone *into* the hospital?”

“I don’t think I need to visit Alexa too much.”

Nova frowns. “Why not?”

I sigh heavily. This is one of the few moments I get to spend with Nova without Vision Tech or Rowan or something else distracting us. I just want

to enjoy my time with her.

Nova pulls her leg out of my lap and sits straight up. Given the fire in her eyes, I know this will not be a relaxing conversation.

“You can’t just put Alexa in a private room, pay for a personal nurse and then just... forget about her.”

“I haven’t forgotten about her, but I’m not going to act like there’s a relationship between us when there’s not.” My voice is rising with frustration. I don’t understand why Nova is so obsessed with this.

“She’s dying,” Nova hisses.

“You think I don’t know that? I’m doing everything I possibly can to help her.” A muscle in my jaw clenches. “But I won’t do it at the expense of us.”

She goes still.

“Alexa is Rowan’s mother. We had something of a relationship and now she’s in a bad place, but she’s not my priority. You are. And in all of this, I don’t want to give you a reason to feel insecure.”

Nova’s lips fall into a thin line. “So the reason you’re holding back on being there for her is because of me?”

“I didn’t say that.” I scrub the heel of my hand over my face.

“You just did, Adam,” she answers hotly. “Fine. Let’s say there was even a reason for concern. Let’s say I was such an insecure person. Why would I worry about you and Alexa? What could you possibly do with someone in such poor health? It would make more sense that I’d be jealous of you falling for one of the nurses than for her.”

“Dammit, Nova. What do you want me to do? I can’t share my heart. I only know how to love one person at a time. I only know how to focus on one. And that person isn’t Alexa.”

“Maybe she doesn’t mean anything to you, Adam. But she’s the most important person to your *son*.”

Nova starts putting her shoes on.

Groaning, I push off the couch. “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“I’ll take you.”

She looks like she’s about to argue, but I grab my keys and holler for Rowan.

Nova allows me to take her home, but we don’t say a word to each other on the entire ride.

* * *

I NEVER USED to fight so much with Nova when we were just boss and employee. It's inconceivable to me that we seem to be clashing so much now, and over my ex no less.

Last night, I went to bed frustrated, annoyed and promising myself that I wouldn't cave.

I'm right. Nova's wrong.

And that's that.

Then I woke up this morning and I realized that I'd rather be wrong than live without her.

Besides, it's a given that, between the two of us, I'll have to apologize first. Nova's cold shoulders are legendary. I've seen them unleashed on other people. She has sharp scissors that she uses to cut off anyone who needs to leave her life.

Snip. Snip.

They're gone.

To save myself from a similar fate, I swallow my pride and drive to Vision Tech to apologize.

Rochelle waves from her desk. She's been extremely helpful these days, always sliding me Nova's schedule and giving me a heads-up if Nova hasn't eaten for the day.

She seemed to dislike me before, so I appreciate the fact that she's mysteriously switched sides.

"Nova's in a meeting right now," Rochelle says the moment she sees me sauntering down the hallway. "But she'll be out soon."

"Thanks."

She smiles like she knows something I don't.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Okay then. I frown. "How has Lyra been doing?"

"Lyra?"

"Your assistant."

"Oh, er... she's doing fine."

I scowl. "What's wrong? Is she giving trouble?"

"She'd have to show up to give trouble," Rochelle mumbles under her breath.

“Lyra hasn’t been coming to work?” My eyebrows arch. With all the things I’ve had to deal with, checking up on Nova’s sister slipped my mind.

Rochelle shakes her head. “Miss Delaney told me to give her walking papers the next time she shows up.”

I cringe. I guess Nova was right about Lyra. She’s not dependable at all. Just then, Nova’s office door opens.

She walks out with the finance director, the PR director and the HR manager. Shaking their hands, she opens her mouth to say something when she sees me standing by Rochelle’s desk. Her dark skin turns blotchy and a guilty expression crawls over her face.

“Mr. Harrison!” Roberts waves. My jaw drops to the floor when he rushes over, grabs my hand and shakes it profusely.

I pull my arm out of his reach.

The other directors give me curious looks. I press a hand to the back of my head, wondering if I’ve suddenly sprouted antennas.

I haven’t. I’m still just a regular ole’ human.

“You can return to your desks now,” Nova tells them, not-so-subtly shooing them away.

“Sure. Sure.” Roberts pats me on the back and laughs. “Looking forward to working with you, Harrison.”

Working with me?

Don’t we work together now?

I follow Nova into the office and shut the door. Hooking a thumb over my shoulder, I ask, “What was that about? And since when do you meet the directors in your office instead of the conference room?”

She shuffles a bunch of files together and sweeps them into a folder. “They’re not mere directors anymore. They’re my replacements.”

The air in the room turns tense.

What the hell is she saying?

Nova meets my gaze and we share a private exchange of words without opening our mouths at all.

My heart thuds. Dread pours out in my voice. “Nova, what did you do?”

“I tried to be discreet. They know you’ve got more power than we originally let on, but I tried my best not to reveal that you were the owner. I think your secret is still safe, but it’s tenuous. We’ll need a better story about who the owner is and why he gave so much power to you.”

“Nova.”

“Not that it matters whether they know or not. Their job is to do one thing—assist you in all the day-to-day tasks. They’ll report all big decisions to you. Just like I do. You have the ultimate say. It’ll be a little awkward at first, but I believe you’ll find your own rhythm—”

“Nova, what the hell did you *do*,” I say more firmly.

“I told you I was leaving, Adam.”

Her words are softly-spoken, but they pierce me like a slap by a glove of nails.

I curl my fingers into fists.

“It took a while, but I’ve finally gotten all my task templates organized. I’ve also fragmented all my duties and matched them up according to the directors’ respective areas of work, strengths, and expertise.”

“No,” I bite out.

She glances up, an eyebrow arched in defiance. “No?”

“You’re not leaving.”

She tilts her head and studies me.

“You can’t leave. You... I thought we’d fixed that. I thought the reason you had to resign in the first place was because of—”

“Of what? My feelings for you?” She gives me a frigid look.

I don’t want to believe that’s my Nova.

It can’t be.

It has to be someone else.

“I thought that too.” She straightens and faces the window.

I don’t recognize her.

Not her.

Not this moment.

None of what’s happening—the conversation, the frostiness in the air—none of it makes sense.

I picture the night I held Nova in my arms and kissed her for the first time. That night, she said she was consumed by me. That she waited for me. That she needed me as much as I needed her.

Right now, it seems like whatever hold I had on her is gone.

Not just gone.

Decimated.

“I thought,” Nova speaks to the view of the city, “that being with you would make the noose go away.” She slides a hand over her neck. Her

fingers are slender. They move smoothly over her throat. “But it hasn’t, Adam. It’s only gotten tighter.”

“Nova.” I launch forward.

She holds up a hand, stopping me in my tracks. Her words are slow and measured. “You don’t just consume me. You *smother* me. You make it worse. I don’t want someone who’s always looking at me, who’s always there.”

My chest rises and falls in a panic. I suck in more and more breaths of air, but none of them seem to be hitting my lungs. It’s like the room is devoid of all oxygen and what little I have is running out.

“I want freedom. From Vision Tech.” Her eyes wander over to mine. “And from you.”

It hurts, but I keep fighting because that’s the only thing I know how to do. “Whatever you’re doing, whatever you’re trying to achieve with this stunt, it won’t work. I won’t let you go.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“Every choice I’ve ever made has been you. Only you, Nova. That’s not going to change because you’ve suddenly decided—”

“This wasn’t sudden, Adam. I gave you my resignation letter a long time ago.”

“Fine.” I shake my head, grasping at straws, struggling like a fish out of water but desperate to keep her close. “Fine. You don’t have to work at Vision Tech. You can... take a break. You deserve it. I’ll work with the directors. I’ve been training and studying to take more of the load anyway.”

Nova sashays behind the desk, her hips swaying lightly. Expression, calm. Voice, calm. Cold as an ice queen. “Didn’t you hear me, Adam? When I leave Vision Tech,” her eyes pierce mine, “I’m leaving you too.”

It feels like a punch to the gut.

“I hope you don’t make this difficult. We’re both adults and we’ve worked together for a very long time. I don’t want either our personal relationship or our business one to end on a sour note.”

I wince at her clinical evaluation.

“I’ve agreed to stay here for my full month, and that time is drawing to a close. However, now that we’ve found the replacements, I’m willing to stay a little longer to hand over my duties properly.”

“Nova—”

She lifts a hand, her voice sharp. “I could *easily* use my vacation time and leave early. Without any other systems in place. But if you agree to stay away from the main Vision Tech office while I’m still here, I’ll prepare the staff well.”

The silence is stiffer than dried mud on jeans.

My phone rings, shattering the tension.

It’s the hospital.

“Go ahead and take that,” Nova says. Moving smoothly behind her desk, she taps on her computer. “I have work to do anyway.”

Backing away from Nova feels like I’m ripping my skin off with cheap razors, but I leave Vision Tech, get into my truck and drive to the hospital.

I have no idea how I avoid getting into an accident because I’m barely paying attention to the road. By the time I stumble through the hospital doors, my head is reeling and I think I’ll be the one needing emergency care.

Alexa’s doctor is standing outside her room. He greets me somberly.

“How is she?” I ask, not as focused as I’d like to be.

“I’m afraid she’s not doing well. Even in the most optimistic case, she has less than a month left.”

I swallow hard. All I can think about is Rowan and how devastated he’ll be to hear this.

“Is there nothing you can do?”

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Please, just...” My fight with Nova is clouding my mind and this news feels like another blow. I can’t even think straight. “Can you make her more comfortable? Anything will help.”

“About that, Alexa has expressed that she’d like to leave hospice care and receive outpatient care, but—”

“No buts. If that’s what she wants, that’s what she’ll have.” I promised Rowan. I can’t go back on my word now.

“Unfortunately, we don’t allow patients in her state to leave unless it’s in the care of a family member. And we can’t let her go under the authority of an eleven year old.”

“I can do it.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re not considered family, Mr. Harrison. At least not in the legal sense.” He shakes his head.

My eyebrows sink. “But I’m Rowan’s father.”

“It still wouldn’t work. It must be a sibling, a cousin, an aunt, even a husband—”

“A husband?”

The doctor nods.

“Is that the only way?”

“Yes, it is.”

Alexa needs a husband.

The truth crashes into me and nearly knocks me off my feet. To fulfil her wish, I have to marry her.

It’s the only way to keep my promise to Rowan.

The only way to help Alexa in her last days.

And it’s the one way that will destroy any hope I have with the woman I love.

CHAPTER 15

THE FAMILIAR FACE

NOVA

“YOU DON’T HAVE to keep coming here.”

I set the fruit basket on the desk next to Alexa’s hospital cot and give her a strained smile. “It’s my last time.”

“Well that sounds ominous.”

I glance around, avoiding eye contact. “Where’s Rowan?”

“He’s watching TV outside. This one,” Alexa juts her chin at the flat screen on the wall, “only has documentaries and news channels, so he gets bored quickly. The nurses here spoil him and let him change the channels for the TV in the waiting room.”

He’s a cute kid and his mother is in hospice care. It’s totally believable that he’d have an entire hospital under his thumb.

“How are you feeling?” I ask Alexa.

“Like a million bucks.” She tries to pose, but her hands are so weak she can barely lift them. “Can’t you tell?”

My eyes skim her pale skin that’s nearly translucent. Her eyes are sunken in and her lips are chapped. It’s frightening how much older she looks now. It’s like someone’s pressing fast-forward on her life and has no intention of taking their hands off the button.

“You look nice,” I say politely.

She snorts. “Don’t lie to me. I’ve got one foot in the grave and the other is barely holding on. I look like death warmed over.”

I clear my throat. Alexa’s frankness keeps taking me by surprise.

She smiles and nods at me. “You’re the one who looks nice.”

I glance down at my green blouse and wrap-around pencil skirt.

“I really like your hair.” She eyes my curls. “Every time I see it, I just want to...” She makes a scrunching gesture.

My lips curl up. I haven’t allowed anyone but Adam and Island to touch my hair, but for a split-second, I consider letting Alexa have the honor.

Fortunately, that impulse passes when she asks, “Is Adam with you?” Her grey eyes slide past my shoulder to the door.

I shake my head. “No.”

Disappointment etches across her face. “He must be really busy.”

I try to smooth it over. "He's working on a new invention. He can easily go three or four days without coming up for air when he's tinkering."

She looks thoughtful. "That's natural for you, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Defending him." She laughs softly. "You're good at it. I think that impulse of yours would be dangerous if he wasn't such a good man. Defending a jerk is, well, sad. Thankfully, Adam doesn't fall into that category."

I feel myself getting defensive. "It's my job."

"Exactly. People tend to badmouth their bosses when they're not around. You do the opposite."

Heat burns my cheeks.

Just then, Alexa's personal nurse enters the hospital room. She gives me a nod, shuffles to Alexa and checks her vitals.

"Look at that," the nurse says, smiling at the results. "Talking to a friend does your body good."

Alexa's eyes sparkle a bit. "See, Nova? Your visits are good for me. You can't stop now."

I glance down. It hurts to swallow and I set a hand over my throat.

"I'll be back later," the nurse says. "I'll let you two chat."

"Thank you, Greta." Alexa beams. When the nurse leaves, she pins me with a frightened look. "Where did Adam get her?"

"Why? Is she not treating you well?"

"No, she's awesome. Better than awesome." Alexa struggles to sit up. "She knows everything and is good at everything. I get the feeling she's expensive and that makes me mildly uncomfortable."

"Adam can afford it." If he wanted to, he could buy ten Gretas.

"Do you think he's treating me so well because he feels guilty?"

My heart pangs. "I don't know."

"I don't buy that. You know him best." Alexa isn't able to push herself up.

"Let me help you." I set my purse aside. Together, we manage to get her into a ninety-degree angle.

"You know," Alexa says, while I'm fluffing her pillows, "you're really good at not answering my questions."

"I don't know what you mean."

"There you go. Doing it again. *Evading.*"

I let loose a small, guilty smile.

She shakes her head. “You’re sharp, Nova. You just pretend not to be when it suits you.”

“I, uh, I’m not good at making small talk.”

“That’s fine. I don’t have time for small talk anyway. Every second counts here.” Her lips curve up mischievously. “I’ve been curious about something. How did you and Adam meet?”

“The way all bosses and employees meet. I was looking for a job and he hired me.”

Alexa groans. “Come on. I need more detail than that.” When she pouts, it reminds me of Rowan. “Were you always this uber professional woman with a great sense of style? Did he see that and immediately go, ‘I need her’? Or was it more like an enemies to lovers thing? Like, he couldn’t stand you at first sight and then you proved your worth?” When I look slightly overwhelmed, Alexa explains, “I’ve been reading a lot of romance novels lately. They take me away from... well... everything.”

“Uh, no. We weren’t enemies to—we didn’t have that exciting of a start.”

“Bummer.” She edges forward. “So what happened?”

“I...”

It’s hard for me to talk about myself most of the time, but ending things with Adam left a fresh wound. Digging up our old memories makes my mask of indifference falter.

I clutch my purse tightly, fighting to keep my expression intact.

Alexa looks eagerly at me.

Although it’s uncomfortable, I share, “My sister had gotten into some trouble and I’d been let go from my job.”

Alexa doesn’t need to know that those two things are connected. If Lyra hadn’t come to my job, acting crazy and making a scene, I would still be there.

“I needed money, quick, but no one was hiring. The only options available were retail or fast food jobs, but then I wouldn’t make enough to help my family.”

Alexa makes a humming sound and I get the feeling that she’s been there.

“I was getting more and more desperate to find something suitable, but nothing was working out. By chance, I heard that an inventor was looking

for a personal assistant.”

“How did you find out? Did Adam put out an ad?” Alexa’s eyes widen.

“I overheard some girls when I was going through the newspaper classifieds at a café. They were talking about an inventor who’d sold his first invention for a million dollars. He’d been recruiting a PA from the tech college, but according to the girls, he kept rejecting everyone who showed up for the job.”

“So you just overheard a conversation? It was, like, *fate*?” Her eyes are shining even more.

“Coincidence.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh no. You’re one of those.”

That gets a laugh out of me. “One of what?”

“The jaded ones.” She makes a circular motion with her hands. “But I won’t hold it against you. Keep going.”

“Even though I had no background in tech and didn’t think I stood a good chance, I was determined to get him to hire me.”

“What happened next?” Alexa seems far too excited about a story where she already knows the ending.

“I walked inside—Adam’s lab was in an old warehouse at the time—and I overheard him on the phone, arguing with someone about how his invention was about helping humanity and he didn’t want the selling price so high. I kind of lingered in the background and, when I’d heard enough, I held my hand out for the phone.”

“You *didn’t*.” Alexa wheezes.

“After looking at me like I was insane, Adam gave me the phone.”

“That’s even more insane.”

“I negotiated with the buyer.”

“And did you get him to lower the price?”

“No.” I flinch. “I ended up losing that buyer for Adam.”

“Oh no.”

“I thought he’d be angry. I expected him to shout at me and throw me out.” My heart turns heavy even though the memory is sweet. “But he didn’t. He told me he wanted someone like me, someone bold and assertive by his side. He hired me on the spot and taught me everything he knew. Then, when he couldn’t teach me any further, he paid for courses and sent me on seminars to learn how to run the business better. He invested in me. He believed in me. It made me who I am today.”

“Wow.”

My throat tightens. Normally, I don’t skip down memory lane and even if I did, I wouldn’t get so teary-eyed at the view.

But after what I said to Adam yesterday...

I inhale deeply and cut the story short. “That’s how we started working together.”

“I love it.”

“I’m sure you have a story with Adam too,” I say gently.

She laughs. “We do have a story. But I guarantee you the thing Adam was admiring wasn’t my intelligence.”

I dig my fingers deeper into my skirt, not sure what to say.

The door slides open.

Rowan rushes in and grins when he sees me. “Nova.”

“Hey.” I jolt in surprise when he gives me a big hug.

He leans away. “Is Adam here?”

“Just me today.”

“Oh.” A flicker of disappointment passes over his face. Then he brightens and shows me a notebook. “Look. We already scratched a lot of things off the list.”

Alexa grins weakly. “Rowan sure has a big imagination.”

“Which one of these has been your favorite so far?” I nod to the notebook of wishes.

Alexa thinks about it. “The spa day. I never thought I’d get a spa treatment in the hospital. I have no idea how Adam made it happen.”

“It was a group effort,” I admit.

Money makes the world go ‘round—I fiercely believe that—but people tend to become more accommodating when they can make money *and* help someone else. Alexa’s plight softened a lot of hearts and allowed the hospital to bend many rules.

Well, all except one.

My heart burns and I rise steadily to my feet. “I’m glad. For both of you.”

Rowan blinks up at me with his big brown eyes. “Are you leaving already?”

“Yeah.” I caress his head. The tears are pricking at me and I don’t think I can hold my composure any longer. Not with Rowan here, reminding me that I’m losing more than just Adam.

I try to memorize his sweet smile and intelligent gaze.

I'm going to miss this kid so much.

"I'll see you at home later," Rowan says flippantly.

"At home?" Alexa arches an eyebrow.

"Nova sleeps over all the time."

I pull my lips into my mouth, horrified.

Alexa laughs. "I see."

"I should go." I fling my purse over my shoulder.

"Running away, are we?" Alexa teases. Despite her brave face, I can tell that the conversation took a lot out of her. She's slouching in her pillow and her breath is shallow.

Looking down, I say, "I truly wish you the best, Alexa."

"Thanks." She touches Rowan's head and gives him a loving smile. "It means the world to me that you'll be there for Rowan when I'm gone."

No, I won't be. Not after the way I tore Adam's heart out. He won't want anything to do with me.

But I don't tell her that.

Mustering another smile with the last of my strength, I leave the hospital room.

Alexa's doctor is walking past when I get to the lobby. He recognizes me on sight. "Miss Delaney."

"Doctor." I stop him with a hand on his sleeve. "Has Adam gotten back to you about Alexa's outpatient care? Will he..." My breath hitches. "Will he do what needs to be done to get her out of here?"

He gives me a solemn smile. "Miss Delaney, I can't discuss patient information with non-family members. That's confidential."

"Can you at least tell me if you've spoken to Adam about it?"

"I have," he says simply.

Lightning strikes my heart.

So it's begun.

The doctor looks intently at me. "Alexa mentioned that you and Adam were involved..." His words drift off to nothing, but the question in his eyes lingers.

"Doctor, I can't discuss my personal life with you. That's confidential."

He laughs sheepishly. "I guess I deserve that."

I mumble out a goodbye and shuffle past him.

Steve is in the parking lot, waiting for me.

“Miss Delaney,” he calls softly, his expression one of unmistakable concern.

“I’m fine,” I croak. Then I stumble.

Steve helps me up. “Miss Delaney, perhaps you should go back inside and find someone to check you.”

I shake my head.

Steve begrudgingly helps me into the car.

I press my face against the cool glass and curl my fingers into fists. I’m Adam’s executive assistant. I shield him from problems and the problems I can’t prevent, I fix.

He made a promise to his son and, to fulfil it, I have to be out of the way.

There’s no other option.

* * *

I’M AT HOME, my feet tucked under me and my eyes on my laptop when I get a call from Adam.

“Can I see you?”

“Adam...”

“Please.”

I press the cell phone closer to my cheek, my heart aching. “Okay.”

There’s a knock on my door.

I glance up in shock. “Are you outside right now?”

“I am.”

My feet hit the floor and I barrel across the room. My heart is torn. I want to see Adam, and yet each step feels like I’m marching straight to the gallows.

No matter what Adam says, it won’t change my mind.

It won’t stop the inevitable.

The end of us.

I throw the door open. Adam’s standing on the other side, looking painfully handsome even with his hair mussed, his jaw tight, and his coffee-brown eyes full of anguish.

Knots tighten in my stomach.

“Come in,” I say hoarsely.

“I can’t do that.” His eyes burn into me.

“Why not?”

He frowns.

“Adam, we can’t have this conversation in the hallway. My neighbors —”

“If I take one step toward you, Nova, I’ll keep going and I’ll never stop.”

My heart squeezes like it’s caught in a vise.

His eyes drill into mine. “Is that what you want?”

I dig my fingers into the knob.

Adam smiles bitterly. “Thought so.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “Why are you here, Adam?”

“Do you remember the day we first met? The day you tried to negotiate with the buyers and failed?”

I nod.

“That day, I was just about to give up on finding anyone I could trust with my vision. You stepped in and I just... I knew. You were perfect for me and for Vision Tech in every way. I have never regretted putting my work, my life, in your hands.”

I suck in a sharp breath and avert my gaze. It hurts too much to look at him.

“Nova.”

I turn slightly, unable to hide the tears.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to smother you.”

You didn’t.

“I didn’t mean to suffocate you.”

Oh, Adam, you didn’t.

“My whole life, I looked at problems and I solved them.” He scrubs the heel of his hand against his scruff.

He hasn’t shaved for days. It doesn’t matter. He’s still gorgeous. He’s still everything I could want and can’t have.

“It didn’t matter how impossible it seemed. I kept going after whatever was in my way until I solved it. That’s how I created my first invention. That’s what built Vision Tech—my inability to let something go.”

My chest rises and falls.

He stops and seems to gather himself. In a steadier, deeper voice, he says, “I’ll be different this time.” His eyes meet mine. “I won’t hold you

back.”

I blink rapidly.

He decided to marry her.

I can see the resolve all over his face because I know him. I know him better than anyone.

Sharp prickles of sorrow and loss snap against my skin. Rubber bands pulled back to their limits, now allowed to snap free. The pain builds and builds into a tsunami that threatens to rip the floor from under me.

It doesn't matter that I'm the one who set this plan into motion. It's still agony.

“My only request is that you be happy.” His throat bobs. “You deserve that, Nova.”

I tuck my chin against my chest, my hands folded and my eyes swelling with tears. Holding them back is near impossible.

Adam straightens his shoulders. “That's what I came to say.”

When he moves down the hallway, I find myself sprinting toward him. I have no recollection of giving my body that command, but I move fast. Faster. And then I'm behind Adam.

He senses my presence and faces me.

I tilt my head up. “Please take good care of A—” I stop. “Of yourself and Vision Tech and Rowan.”

Adam's eyes dart between my own.

I curl into myself, wishing I could touch him. I just want to feel his skin on mine and smell his metal and sandalwood scent. I want to bury my head in his chest and tell him the truth. That I love him. That I want to stay by his side.

But I don't.

“Nova,” Adam whispers my name with such emotion that it makes me groan. His hand comes up to my face.

I lift my chin, gravitating toward him. Something about this being the last time I'll see him as a single man, the last time it'll be okay to touch him and want him and long for him, makes it feel okay to cross the line.

At least once.

But Adam doesn't touch me. He stops his hand an inch away from my cheek and then backs off.

“Go back inside,” he says firmly. “Close the door. Lock it. And don't open it. Not even if I come back. Not even if I bang on your door and beg to

see you. Don't open up for me."

My bottom lip trembles.

With a determined look, Adam whirls around and leaves me standing alone in the hallway.

I reach for him, but my fingers rake through air and then fall limply at my side.

It's over.

Adam and I are done.

* * *

I WAKE up to eyelids caked together and a pounding headache.

Turns out, 'crying yourself to sleep' is a lot more painful than it sounds. Especially when you wake up the next morning to blaring sunlight and burning eyeballs.

I move through my morning routine like a ghost.

Brush my teeth.

Shower.

Comb my hair.

"It doesn't look right," I growl into the mirror after emptying two tubs of product and gel. My arms are aching and I hate everything my curls are doing.

In a fit of frustration, I grab the scissors.

Maybe I should cut it all off. Who cares if I have hair anyway? Wouldn't it be easier if I didn't have to worry about these stubborn, rebellious curls growing out of my head?

My phone rings at that moment.

It's Dejonae.

I replace the scissors with my cell and lean my hip against the sink.

"Hi, Nova," Dejonae says. "Sunny's hosting a cooking class at the farmhouse tonight. We're making tortillas—Mayan style. You interested?"

"No."

"Oh." Dejonae pauses. "But... I thought you loved tortillas?"

I'm not in the mood to socialize, no matter how much I adore Sunny and Mama Moira's traditional dish. "I'm sorry, Dejonae, I'm a little busy right now. If that's all, then I'll hang up first."

“Wait!”

“What?” I tilt my head.

“Um... ah...”

“Dejonae, I really don’t have time—”

“Kenya wants to invest in Vision Tech,” Dejonae blurts.

“Kenya Alistair?” I perk up.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there.”

If I’m going to leave Adam behind, I might as well leave him holding Kenya Alistair’s purse. The kinetic batteries aren’t cheap to produce. He’s going to need all the support he can get.

Dejonae mumbles something that sounds like ‘wow that was easy’.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing,” she sings. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I hang up and then look at my hair. Touching one of the limp curls, I sigh. If I continue like this, I’ll end up making a permanent decision based on temporary feelings.

Better to call for help.

Knowing it’s a long shot, I reach out to Island to see if she has any spots free.

“Girl, it’s a weekday. Shouldn’t you be chained to your desk like the workaholic you are?”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“Touchy. Touchy.” She pauses and I hear a phone ringing in the distance. “Come on down.”

Feeling like there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, I scoop my hair into a bun, grab my purse and drive to the salon.

Island looks different today. She traded her long, silver wig for a blow-out style. Her voluminous black hair is held back by a bandana made of daisies. Her lipstick is a dark brown and there are yellow highlights on her eyelids that match the daisies.

She looks stunned to see me. “I didn’t think you’d actually show.”

“I didn’t think you’d have a space available.”

“Lucky for you, my client just called and cancelled.” She throws an apron around me and ties it at my neck. “You liking your natural hair?”

I meet her eyes in the mirror. “I came to braid it again.”

“It hasn’t been that long since you let your hair down.”

I purse my lips. *Why is that any of your business?* “If you can’t do it today, I can come back when you have time.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She blinks. “Didn’t you say you’d always wanted to wear your natural hair out? You waited seven years for this.”

“I thought that was what I wanted.” I stare forlornly at the coils. “But natural hair takes longer to maintain. It frizzes all the time, and every wash-and-go comes out differently.”

“That’s life, baby.”

I eye Island hard for calling me ‘baby’ when I’m pretty sure she’s younger than me.

“When you let your hair out, you gotta be prepared for it to knot and tangle. You gotta accept that it’s going to do its own thing. That’s the beauty of letting something free.”

“I don’t want it to be free.” I jut my chin down sharply. “Braid it. I want it neat and contained again. I want every piece in its place.”

“You’re the boss.”

She starts clearing out my hair with conditioner and a big-toothed comb. “Have you resigned from Vision Tech yet?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. This is the absolute *last* thing I want to talk about.

“That looks like a yes,” Island mutters.

Pulling out my phone, I pretend to scroll through social media just so Island will get the hint.

But she doesn’t.

“How’s Adam holding up?”

I clamp my mouth shut.

“Well, how are you holding up then? Seven years is a long time. Some *marriages* don’t last that long.”

I sigh heavily. *She won’t stop if I don’t answer.* “I’m fine.”

“Is that why you suddenly want to braid your hair? Because you’re fine?”

My lips tighten. Before I can tell her to leave me alone, the bells above the door jangle.

A woman with pale skin, dark hair and a sturdy build roughly drags a little girl inside the salon. The child catches my eye. She’s small, not more than six years old. Her skin is cocoa-brown and her eyes are teary.

“Fine. Don’t tell me,” Island is saying, pushing up my chair by the foot handle. “I’ll just come to my own conclusions.”

My eyes follow the woman and the child as they march across the salon. Where have I seen this kid before? Something about her looks familiar, but for the life of me I can’t place it.

“I have an appointment under ‘Gardener’,” the woman says brusquely. She has a slight accent on the end of her words. It sounds Eastern European. Russian, maybe?

“Right this way.” One of the stylists points to a chair.

Island ties up half of my hair and starts working on the other half. “By the way, I saw Adam’s name trending last night. He won something. It was Inventor of the Year, I think? I clicked on the link, but I didn’t see a single picture of him in the articles.”

“Hm.” My eyes are still locked on the little girl. Her skin is as smooth as dark marble and her features are cute and dainty. She’d look like a little model if not for that strange hairstyle. It looks like her mom didn’t use any water when she tried to brush her hair.

The little girl glances up. A stronger sense of familiarity washes over me. I’m great with faces and it bothers me that I can’t figure out where I’ve seen her.

“That man is *foine*,” Island is saying in the background. “I don’t give a crap about technology, but I’d buy a copy of that boring engineering magazine just to look at his face.” Island smirks at me in the mirror. “Tell Adam to stop running from the camera. He should embrace his genetic gift and offer himself as eye candy. Tell him it’s for the good of mankind. Or *womankind*.”

“I’ll pass that along,” I mumble.

Island arches an eyebrow when she sees my distractedness. Glancing around, she mumbles, “What are you looking at?”

I say nothing.

The stylist across the room smiles kindly at the little girl. “Get in the chair, sweetie.”

It’s a high jump for the tiny toddler. She struggles to balance on the bottom rung in order to climb on. After a few failed attempts, the woman grabs the kid and sets her roughly into the chair.

I gasp.

Island stiffens.

The stylist looks mildly uncomfortable.

It's not as if the mother threw the kid like a baseball or held her to the point of leaving bruises, but it's obvious that she's handling the child out of frustration rather than patience.

Maybe it rubs me the wrong way because the mother and child are two different races. Or maybe I'm thinking too much. Either way, I can't take my eyes off them and now, neither can Island.

The little girl, oblivious to her audience of two, sits straight up in the chair. I notice that despite her questionable hairstyle, she's dripping in designer brands. Everything, from her shoes to her dress to her little necklace are recognizable as miniature versions of huge fashion lines.

"What did you want me to do with her hair?" the stylist asks, freeing the little girl's locks from a ponytail holder. Her dry brown hair springs right out, expanding swiftly, inch by inch, until it's fanning out on every side of her head.

"I don't know. *Something*." The mother throws her hands up. A line of frustration carves into her pale forehead. She slants a frigid look at the child's hair. "I can't do anything with it."

"Okay..." The stylist looks unsure. She glances at Island as if seeking some kind of guidance.

Island sets the comb down on the counter. It thuds against the marble. Slapping a hand on her hip, she cocks her head in frustration. Her hair skids over one shoulder, making one side look more voluminous than the other.

I lean forward in my chair. My heart is beating fast as if I sense danger.

And I'm not the only one having a reaction.

Everyone—from the woman under the hair dryer to the one with her head stuck in the sink, turns tense. And though no one can probably name why they feel uncomfortable, there's a shared sense of defensiveness mounting in the air.

The stylist, seeing that Island won't bail her out of this, tries to calm the mother down. "Ma'am, if you tell me what style you'd like, I can do it for you. I just need to know what you're thinking. Is it braids? Chunky twists? Cornrows?"

"Just make it less crazy." The woman waves her hands at the girl as if she's trying to shoo away a mosquito. "Because it's so tough and unmanageable, I can't even comb it."

The stylist looks shocked. "Have you bought the right hair products?"

“I bought a brush and a comb like everyone does,” the woman hisses. “But her hair is so nappy and course that she keeps breaking every brush.” The mother glares at her child as if she’s personally responsible for every broken tool. “And this one cries if I so much as touch her head.”

My fingers tighten on the chair handle. I know what a mother at the end of her rope sounds like because *my* mother used to complain about how thick or coarse our hair was. But this is different. Linger just beneath the mother’s frustration is an unmistakable distaste for the little girl’s hair texture. It causes something inside me to burn.

“Aw, hell no,” Island mutters under her breath. I see a blur and, when I glance up, Island is storming across the room. “Excuse me, who the hell are you to talk that way about her hair?”

The mother’s eyes get wide.

The child looks up, trembling and frightened.

Island notices the kid’s response and immediately switches tones. She crouches in front of the little girl’s chair. “Hi, baby. My friend here—” she nods at the other stylist—“is going to do your hair really pretty. In the meantime, I’m going to talk to your mom. Outside.”

“She’s not my mom,” the little girl says.

Island flinches.

“My mommy is in heaven.”

At her words, my mind snaps into focus and a light bulb goes off.

The picture in Clay Bolton’s office.

I stare at the kid with new eyes.

She’s Clay Bolton’s daughter.

CHAPTER 16

THE ART OF LETTING GO

ADAM

“DID SHE GET THERE SAFELY? Does she seem upset? Is she eating?”

“Which one of those do you want me to answer first?” Dejonae says through the phone. I hear the teasing note in her voice.

I shift the cell to my other ear, wondering what’s so funny. There is nothing remotely humorous about losing Nova. Since I left her apartment, a restless tension has been building in my body.

Maybe it’s Nova withdrawal. Like an addict trying to quit smoking cold turkey, I’m finding it harder than not to block her from my mind.

I promised I’d let her go.

Unfortunately, I’m not doing a great job.

“How is she?”

“She seems okay. Although I get the feeling that she’s not the type to ever lose her cool in public. She’s eating, although it’s not a lot, despite the *fabulous* brownies Dawn brought over. And she’s telling us about what happened when she got her hair braided today. Apparently, Clay Bolton’s nanny was making rude comments about his daughter’s hair. We’re discussing what we would have done in that situation.”

“So she’s okay?”

“She’s,” Dejonae sighs, “I don’t know what you want me to say, Adam. She doesn’t trust us yet. I barely got her over here.”

“Did you use the investment card?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Good. Tell Kenya I don’t expect anything.”

“Kenya’s not a liar. She’s going to invest in Vision Tech.”

“Then I’ll double whatever she gives me and invest the money right back in her publishing house. Tell her not to play those games with me because I’m insane.”

Dejonae chuckles. “Speaking of insane, you went viral on the internet.”

“It’s only the Inventor of the Year award. It’s not that big of—”

“*You consume me. You control me.*”

The blood in my veins goes cold. “How do you know about that? Did Nova tell you?”

“Someone posted a video of your dramatic love declarations. I thought I was watching an episode of *Scandal* for a minute.”

I faintly remember people recording us that night. Grabbing my phone, I look up the video. Once I find it, I’m going to watch it on repeat until my heart shatters.

“Adam?”

“Huh? You were saying something about *Scandal*? Is it a gossip site?”

“It’s a show about the president and—”

Someone calls her name in the background.

“Oops. I have to go, but Adam...”

“What?”

“How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.”

If the definition of fine has changed to ‘floating in a sea of utter despair’, then I’m better than fine. I’m *amazing*.

She sighs. “I told Sazuki to call you.”

“Why would you torture him like that?”

“He can’t stick his head in the sand when his friend’s life is imploding.”

“It’s not imploding. It’s more like a small pop.”

“Don’t make jokes to cover it up. Talk to someone. Nova isn’t the only one who needs support right now. If you spend all your time looking out for her and neglecting your own hurt—”

“I’ll handle myself. Don’t worry.”

Besides, I don’t have time to break down. Rowan needs me to be strong, to be there for him. He’s looking at me to have the answers about death and life and everything in between. I don’t have the luxury of falling apart, even if I just lost the only woman I ever loved.

“Thanks for doing this, Dejonae. I appreciate it.”

“Of course. I try to surround myself with women who are smarter than me. Nova definitely falls under that category. I’m glad for an excuse to get closer to her.”

“*Dejonae, where are you?*” That sounds suspiciously like Vanya calling.

“Take care of yourself, Adam.”

I set the phone down and catch my reflection in a shiny sheet of metal on the table. The bags under my eyes are big enough to hold an entire tool box. I haven’t found the energy to shave and the beard that’s growing in is much thicker than I usually keep it.

Without Nova, I look like a caveman.

I try to smile. Really. I give it my best shot. But my lips end up drooping into a frown.

The kinetic batteries are in front of me. I haven't touched them. I haven't been able to concentrate since Nova left.

My phone lights up, shredding the silence.

It's a call from Sazuki.

His gruff, heavily accented voice charges over the line. "Dejonaë told me you were being an idiot and I should talk some sense into you."

This guy never starts a conversation with a greeting. "You realize how rude you are whenever you open your mouth, don't you?"

He doesn't sound sorry. "I know a place that sells authentic *sake*. I'll treat you. As long as you promise not to cry."

"Sazuki, do me a favor, close your eyes and imagine me flipping you off."

"I'll meet you there in ten minutes."

"Screw off." I pause. "Better make it twenty."

* * *

SAZUKI LIFTS a hand from his perch around a long counter. He's sipping from a miniature bowl that looks like something Belle, Alistair's daughter, would use in her pretend kitchen.

Oriental music is playing from hidden speakers. Low lighting makes the room seem dim and full of shadows.

The front of the restaurant was crowded with customers, but this back room is empty except for a handful of people.

The VIP section.

Sazuki nods at me when I take the seat beside him. He flicks his fingers at someone and a miniature bowl appears in front of me.

He gestures to the drink with his long, musician fingers.

I lift the sake and sniff. "Is it strong?"

"Drink it and you'll see."

I take a sip and nearly cough through my nose. "Whoa, that's hard alcohol."

"It's sake mixed with wine. Drink responsibly."

“Cheers,” I croak out.

A Japanese chef slides behind the counter and bows to us. He pulls out an expensive-looking fish and starts cutting it like a ninja.

My eyes widen.

Sazuki, on the other hand, looks largely unimpressed.

“How is Rowan?” Sazuki asks when the chef is finished with the fish. He slides a pair of chopsticks over to me and picks up his own set. Expertly, he plucks one of the sashimi slices and eats it.

“He’s with his mom right now.” I eye the chopsticks warily. I’m more of a knife and fork guy.

Well, more of a fork and a tear-it-with-my-teeth guy.

On top of that, I’d take meat and potatoes over raw fish any day.

But Sazuki seems to have made an effort so I pick up the chopsticks, one in each hand. “Since Alexa isn’t doing too well, he’s sleeping in her hospital room to have as much time as he can with her.”

“Ehem.” Sazuki slides me a fork.

“Thanks.”

He nods brusquely. “Who is Alexa?”

“Rowan’s mom.”

Sazuki doesn’t blink. “And why is she in the hospital?”

“She’s...” Guilt pricks my chest. “She’s got terminal cancer.”

Sazuki’s blank expression shifts to one of concern. “I am sorry.”

I nod.

“So this is why your son showed up that day,” Sazuki says, wisely putting it together. “His mother wanted to see him safe and secure with you before she passed.”

“That’s what it turned out to be.” I put another piece of fish in my mouth. My past experience with sushi wasn’t a pleasant one, but this isn’t too bad. Maybe it’s because the fish melts in my mouth. Or maybe it’s because I haven’t eaten much lately and my stomach is chomping at anything I provide.

“What does this have to do with Nova?”

At the mention of her name, my stomach drops and the fork slips out of my grip.

Sazuki studies me carefully. “Is she unhappy that your ex-girlfriend has returned?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then?”

I keep quiet, which is a first for me.

Sazuki takes a napkin and wipes his mouth with it. “I understand how difficult it is to create a harmonious environment with your lover and your child’s mother. In my case, I did not see my ex-wife’s schemes or how it affected Dejonae until it was too late. I am very grateful that Dejonae was so mature and patient about Ashanti. She gave me another chance in the end. Perhaps you can talk to Nova and—”

“This isn’t something I can talk to Nova about.”

He arches an eyebrow as if to say *what do you mean?*

I tell him about the doctor’s warning, Alexa’s request to leave the hospice, and the requirement of marriage.

Sazuki is quiet when I’m done.

He takes another sip of the sake. “You know all this and yet you have not made a move to marry her.”

“Something deep inside won’t allow me to,” I admit. “I keep looking for another way out.”

“What if time runs out before you find one? Can you live with yourself if you let your child’s mother die unfulfilled and unhappy?”

The guilt pricks me again. It’s like a needle that keeps growing and surging in deeper.

“I love Nova. I have always loved Nova. I *will* always love Nova. But if I do this, if I marry someone else, there’s no coming back from that.”

“That is not true. I was married to someone early on in life. It was many years later before I met Dejonae. Being married to someone once does not mean you are no longer deserving of love.”

I shake my head miserably and drain my entire glass of sake. “You don’t understand how Nova thinks. We spent seven long years dancing around each other. I just barely got her and then I lost her. If I marry my old girlfriend right after we broke up, do you think she’ll forgive me?” I shake my head. “She’s not the type to give second chances. Especially when she’s cut someone off.”

“I cannot tell you what to do, Adam, not when it comes to your relationship with Nova. I can only speak to you as a father.”

The sake is stronger than I expected. I’m already starting to feel the buzz under my skin.

Sazuki slides his elbow across the counter and stares into the distance. “My relationship with Niko is different than my relationship with Dejonae. I would die for them both. I would live for them both. I love them both, but in different ways.”

I nod. Perhaps it’s the sake, but I feel Sazuki is talking a lot more than he usually would tonight.

“Your relationship with your son is different from your relationship with Nova, but it is not the same and therein lies the problem.”

I squint. “Make it make sense.”

“Does he feel your love as fiercely as Nova does? You make it quite obvious how you care for her. You defer to her. You put time and effort into making her life easier. You would cut your own heart out to make her happy. Is this not true?”

I drink again. “It is.”

Sazuki grabs a porcelain flask and pours more into my glass. “Would your son say the same?”

I frown.

Sazuki stares pointedly at me.

“Rowan knows I’ve got his back.”

“What would make him the happiest? Do you know?”

“If there was a cure for his mother’s illness, he’d probably explode with glee.”

“And apart from that?”

I lift a shoulder. “Anything to make Alexa happy would make him happy.”

“Then you know what your son needs. It is not what you need. Perhaps it is not what you want. But this is what being a parent is. This is your responsibility as a father. It is a heavy task.” His eyes are solemn. “It is the reason many would rather abandon their children than be involved in their lives. If it were easy, would there not be more fathers in the home?”

His words burn me.

I look away and reach for a drink.

These tiny bowls are too small. I take the sake flask and pour it myself.

Sazuki frowns at me. “If you are there for his mother, then when his mother can no longer be with him, your son will remember that, whether now or years from now.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you hesitate?”

“Because it’s not the answer I want to hear.” Giving up Nova is like giving up a kidney. I can’t imagine my life without her, and marrying someone else feels like I’m betraying her in the worst way.

Sazuki releases a worried sigh. “Perhaps your stubbornness is for the best. Choosing someone else over Nova is not what Dejonae wished for me to tell you.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “You did not follow the script.”

“If you blame anything on me, I will deny it to my grave.”

“Nice to know I can count on you in a pinch.”

“I would rather, what do the Americans say—throw you under the bus than risk Dejonae’s wrath.” He swirls his sake around. “Perhaps this is why the other ladies sent *all* the men to talk to me in the past. Sending only one means the outcome can swing wildly in a different direction.”

“All the men? You mean Alistair and the rest? They came to talk to you?”

“It was when I had issues with Dejonae...” Sazuki sighs. “A story for another day.”

I lift my sake glass.

He clinks his bowl against mine.

We drink deeply and I feel the burn go all the way down my chest.

Sazuki’s eyes meet mine. “Do you know what you are going to do now?”

“Yeah.” With dread and determination twining together in my stomach, I spit, “I’m getting married.”

* * *

ROWAN’S ruddy cheeks are a sign of his excitement. I fix his bowtie, twisting it until it looks balanced.

His brown eyes latch onto mine. “I saw mom’s dress. She looks really nice in it.”

“That’s great, bud.” I straighten and work on my tie next. I’m wearing a suit similar to Rowan’s—a navy tux and brown shoes.

“Look.” Rowan unfolds something from his pocket. It’s the list he made for Alexa. “We’ve scratched everything but two off.”

I skim what's left of the to-do list.

#1 Wear a white dress and get married to a good guy.

#5 Go on a trip to India.

"I wanted to do this together." Rowan runs to the table, grabs a pen and returns to me. Holding up the paper, he strikes a line through the first wish.

"Huh. Look at that," I say, my heart heavy.

"Mom's really happy."

So are you, bud. That's good. As long as you're happy.

"Are we going on a trip after this?"

"That's the plan." We don't have any time to waste. Alexa's condition is worsening. I rented a medic plane to take her out of the country, but even with the extra precautions, we're still playing a dangerous game.

"I can't wait to go to India." Rowan squeals. "Everyone was so jealous when I told them."

"You told the kids?"

"Yeah."

I reach for his shoulder. "Who exactly?"

"Niko, Micheal, Bailey and Belle." Rowan blinks innocently.

I restrain my groan.

Great.

If the kids know, then the adults definitely know. I shudder to think of what the farmhouse ladies will do to me if they hear about this.

"Have you been to India before?" Rowan asks.

"Not yet," I answer faintly.

"You don't look that excited." His smile flattens. "Is something wrong?"

"I am excited." I try to show him how excited I am by smiling, but I realize that was probably the wrong choice.

Rowan sees right through my teeth-baring imitation and the light dims in his eyes. "Are you angry?"

"No, kid. Why would I be angry?"

"Because Nova's not coming."

I swallow hard.

"I texted her," Rowan admits. "To tell her about the wedding."

Everything inside me freezes. "You WHAT?"

"She said she's too busy, but I get the feeling she just doesn't want to come."

I blink rapidly. "You told Nova?"

"Was I not supposed to?" Rowan shrinks back like a turtle retreating into its shell.

"N-no," I mumble.

Inside, frustration churns in my gut. Accepting that all the kids and their parents found out is a hard enough blow.

But Nova too?

I didn't want her to know. As impossible as it might have been, I wanted to keep this entire mess a secret from her.

"Guess the cat is out of the bag," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

Not only is it out of the bag, it's skittering around the room, raking its claws into the curtains and peeing all over the carpet.

Rowan keeps studying my face.

I shake my head. "I'm okay, bud. Why don't you head outside and check on your mom?"

Rowan darts out of the room.

I take a few calming breaths.

Remember why you're doing this. Stick to the plan.

There's a knock on the door.

Greta, Alexa's nurse, pokes her head in. "Is the groom ready?"

Not even close.

I lift my chin. "Yeah."

"I'll see you in the chapel then."

I wait a few minutes and then march through the hospital hallways. Nurses smile and whisper as I walk by. Doctors nod. A few slip me congratulatory handshakes. It's not every day a guy in a suit comes barreling through the hospital, ready to marry a patient. I'm sure the news has spread all over the building by now.

Can they tell that my heart is beating a million miles a minute? Can they tell I'm sweating enough to fill a lake?

Every step feels like I'm sinking deeper into mud.

But I keep going.

My hands press against the chapel doors.

I hesitate and then push.

Sunlight streams through the stained glass windows. The ends of the pews are decorated with white fabric and large, exaggerated bows. The officiant is standing at the front of the room, grinning broadly.

He welcomes me with a nod. "Mr. Harrison. Big day today."

"Thanks for doing this."

"No problem."

The doors open and Rowan comes walking down the aisle. He's balancing the pillow holding two rings. Alexa roped in one of the little patients in the hospital to be her flower girl. She and Rowan move together down the aisle.

I smile softly at my son. Sazuki's right. He's going to remember these moments with his mom for the rest of his life. This means more than a simple wedding ceremony. It means happiness. It means family. It means everything.

Rowan grins at me and moves to the side of the podium.

The doors open again and Alexa comes out. She's sitting in a wheelchair, wearing a white dress. Fabric is flowing out from behind the wheelchair, making her wedding veil look longer and fuller.

I told her to get the dress she wanted and, though it had to be altered to fit her deteriorating body, it still looks fashionable.

Greta wheels Alexa to the front and helps her to stand.

I notice what she's doing and offer my arm. "Hey, you don't have to get up."

"If we're going to do this, we'll do it right," Alexa says with a smile.

"Once you get tired, sit down again."

"Don't worry," the officiant says. "I won't make this long."

Alexa puts her hand in mine. It feels frail. Her skin is paper-thin.

My heart is moved with compassion for her, but that's it. It goes no further.

As the officiant drones on, I escape into my mind and picture what my wedding to Nova would have looked like.

Rowan would keep his gig as ring boy and one of Dejonae or Kenya or Dawn's children would have been the flower girl. Maybe all three. I can see Niko throwing flowers like gun shots at the ground. I can see Belle skipping with her basket, gap-toothed smile flashing at all the attendants. I can even see Beth calculating the ratio of flowers to aisle space and moving with sure, practiced steps.

And then Nova would have appeared in a white dress that's as sexy and sophisticated as she is. It would probably be something form-fitting, just like those pencil skirts she favors. Her hair would be out, wild and curly. Or

maybe she'd pin it back in an elegant style. Either way, she would have been glorious.

I would have fainted in shock at how stunning she was. And after Sazuki and the other guys resuscitated me, I'd probably leak a tear of joy and gratitude that the woman I loved had finally said yes.

Nova would have walked down the aisle to me, taking each step beat by beat. And her eyes would have been on mine the entire time.

Then she would have held my hands and recited vows about loving me for a lifetime.

In sickness and health.

For richer or poorer.

Till death do us part.

I would have said the same words and I would have meant them.

"Adam?" The officiant calls to me and shatters the image of Nova. I blink and it's not a tall, prim, dark-skinned woman in front of me.

It's Alexa.

She bats her eyelashes and I notice that they're a lot bigger than usual.

"You were saying your vows," the officiant gently prompts. "Till death do us part."

I stare at Alexa because this line, at least, is true. "Till death do us part."

She smiles at me, reminding me of the woman I once pursued. Our relationship was purely physical. I know absolutely nothing about her now except that she's the mother of my son.

But that much is enough for me.

She brought Rowan into this world and I owe her for that. I owe Rowan for missing out on so many years of his life. It's a debt I'm willing to pay. Even if it means sacrificing my own happiness.

"Then I now pronounce you husband and wife. You can kiss the bride."

Alexa leans toward me.

I don't turn away.

At the last moment, she groans and falls back.

"Alexa?" I call.

"Mom!" Rowan rushes over.

Greta barrels toward us with the wheelchair. Together, we get Alexa sitting again.

"I think she might have overdone it," Greta says, her eyebrows knotting in the middle of her forehead. "I told you not to stand."

Sweat is dotting Alexa's face. Her eyes are half-closed and her voice is a whisper. "It was... worth... it."

"I'm taking her back to her room to rest."

"But we have to go to the airport soon," Rowan says, his eyes wide.

I pat his shoulder. "Your mom's health is more important, kid. Let her recuperate first."

"I'm okay."

Greta looks down, her face stamped with displeasure.

Alexa puts on a brave smile. "Rowan was looking forward to this trip."

"If you push yourself too hard..."

Alexa shakes her head. "I'm... fine. Really." Her eyes swerve to me. "Adam, let's... go. Please? I want... to go."

"You should listen to Greta."

"I think I... know... my own body."

I cave. "Okay. But you're going to take it easy."

"I promise."

"Let's go, kid." I motion to Rowan.

"Yes!" Rowan jumps up and down and chants, "In-di-a! In-di-a! In-di-a!"

Steve brings the car around. He gives me a sympathetic look when I wheel Alexa out.

I pretend not to see and help Alexa out of the wheelchair. She's changed into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, but all her makeup is still on. Somehow, the contrast of her fancy makeup and normal clothes only makes her look more frail.

"You okay?" I ask, noticing her eyes squeezing shut in pain.

"Yeah," she answers.

But that's a lie.

Alexa is not okay, and it becomes abundantly clear when the medic plane crew refuses to fly with her.

"Her body can't handle a trip that length," the flying nurse says, her face strict.

I glance at Rowan's disappointed frown. "How about a shorter trip then?"

She shakes her head.

"In the country?"

“She can’t get on a plane. Period. And I wouldn’t suggest long road trips either. She should be in the hospital’s care. Not traveling the country.”

“I don’t want to be... in the hospital,” Alexa says weakly.

Rowan walks to his mother’s side and holds her hand. His eyes are starting to get teary again. “Come on, mom. There’s only one wish left. I really wanted to scratch that off for you.”

“We still can,” I say determinedly.

Rowan looks up at me with hope in his eyes.

I make a few calls and then take Rowan and Alexa to a Bollywood movie theatre. The inside smells of naan and curry. The decorations are all red, gold and cultural.

Rowan grins when someone comes out to greet us with garlands and puts a red dot on our forehead.

“See,” Alexa squeezes Rowan’s hand while I push her into the dark theatre, “this is... almost... like India.”

He nods enthusiastically.

“Bud, do me a favor and hold the wheelchair for me. I’ll take your mom out.”

Rowan holds the chair steady while I scoop Alexa into my arms. She weighs practically nothing.

“I booked out the entire theatre,” I say quietly, setting her down on a chair in the middle row. “There’s food.” I gesture to the tables set up for us. “And drinks. It’s not India, but it’s as close as I can get.”

“It’s... perfect. Really. Thank you... Adam.” She squeezes my hand, but it’s only a weak pressure on my fingers.

“Mom, try this out. It tastes *awesome*.” Rowan tries to feed Alexa a piece of naan.

She scrunches her nose and shakes her head. Rubbing the back of his neck, she says faintly, “You... eat. I’ll get full... just watching you.”

“Go wash your hands before you eat, Rowan.”

“I don’t want to miss the movie,” he argues.

“You won’t.” I check my watch. “You still have a few minutes.”

“Go,” Alexa tells him.

“I’ll be back super quick.” He darts off, his feet pattering on the stairs.

I loosen my tie and settle into the chair beside Alexa. I’m not hungry either, but it’s mostly because the wedding is starting to sink in.

My eyes catch on the wedding ring glinting on my left finger.

Alexa turns to me. "Adam."

"Hm?"

"Thank you," she says hoarsely. "And... I'm sorry. I know I could have gone... about things... a different way. I could have... told you... about Rowan... sooner. Or at least... shown up with him and... explained things... personally."

"Alexa, you don't have to—"

"Let me finish." Her voice is firm even though it sounds like it's painful to speak. Turning her head with great effort, she watches me through hooded eyes. "I didn't know... if you were still that... playful guy from college... who couldn't take care of... himself, much less anyone else. And I was scared... that you would love... your inventions... more than Rowan. But I'm glad... that I was wrong. I see... how capable... you are of love, Adam. Nova has... a good man... in you."

I squeeze her hand. She's taking shuddering breaths between each word and it's hard to watch. "You should stop talking and preserve your strength. After the movie, I'll take you home. Greta already texted me. All the medical equipment arrived at the manor."

"You think... of everything."

The door opens and light spills on the stairs.

Rowan's back.

Alexa squeezes my hand urgently when our son darts toward us. I glance down at her. The light from the movie screen throws her skin into shades of silver and white. Her lips are bright red and it only makes her skin seem more translucent.

"Take care... of our son, Adam."

"I will."

"Take care... of our son."

"I promise, I will," I whisper.

Rowan pops up in the aisle. "What are you two talking about?"

"How excited we are... to visit India through this movie." Alexa musters up a smile. "Why don't... you sit next to... me... while it starts?"

"Okay," Rowan says.

"Wait, let me move this arm for you." I fight with the cupholder so that Rowan doesn't have to be separated from Alexa. As soon as the obstacle is gone, he curls up under his mother's arm, eating and sipping on soda.

The movie starts.

I keep my eyes on the screen, getting sucked into the story. I'm surprised by how good it is. I honestly didn't think I'd enjoy it.

"Mom," Rowan whispers, "are you hungry now?"

I look to my left. Alexa's eyes are closed. Her head droops, but it's strange. It's almost as if her neck can't support the weight of her head anymore.

"Mom?" Rowan's voice is starting to rise in panic. It's jarring. Eerie. It's a sound I never want to hear in my life again.

On the screen, people are singing and dancing but, in real life, there's only the screams of my son and the still, lifeless body of his mother.

"Mom!" Rowan shakes Alexa. Tears are streaming down his face. "Mom! Mom!"

The truth hits me like a punch to the jaw. I shoot to my feet, launch over to Alexa and check her pulse. The moment I touch her hand, it's cold. The moment I touch her wrist...

Nothing.

"She's gone," I murmur.

At my words, Rowan wraps his arms around me and sobs into my neck. I hold my son while my heart breaks and then I call an ambulance to take Alexa's body away.

* * *

THE NIGHT IS STILL.

The house is quiet.

Rowan is in his room after crying himself to sleep.

There's a knock on the door.

I don't feel like getting up, but I push myself wearily to my feet and open the door.

My eyes widen.

I blink once. Twice.

Nova's chest rises and falls unsteadily. "I heard," she says. "My condolences about your wife."

I stare at her.

Damn, after the day I've had, I'm not sure if this is real or a dream. Maybe I fell asleep on the couch. Maybe I conked out while I was putting

Rowan's clothes in the wash. The clothes that he wore while he was hugging his mother's lifeless body. Maybe I'm in the laundry room, my head cracked open and blood spilling on the floor.

If I don't get up, Rowan will be without his mom and his dad.

Two parents gone.

In a flash.

In a day.

I have to wake up. Rowan needs me. Now more than ever.

Nova fidgets with one of her braids. She's got her hair braided again. See? This has to be a dream. Nova's not wearing her hair like that anymore. Am I remembering a version of her that used to be? A version that always showed up when I needed her and came before I called?

"Adam," she says softly.

What would I do if Nova were really in front of me?

My heart thunders.

My eyes get blurry.

I step forward.

Cautious.

Careful.

I can't risk waking up.

Not yet.

I need a little more time with her. One second isn't enough.

I'll have to wake up eventually. Return to a world where my son's heart is shattered into a million pieces. Return to a world where Nova isn't there to call. To come running to me.

I take another dazed step.

Nova doesn't move. Her head tips up so she can meet my eyes.

"Nova." Her name on my lips is a sound of relief. Of gratitude. Of longing.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my chest. She snakes her arms around my neck and lets me lean on her.

My Nova.

My everything.

She's here.

CHAPTER 17

THE DREAM CATCHER

NOVA

ADAM'S BREATH fans across my skin. His unruly hair tickles the underside of my jaw and brings the fragrance of his body wash.

I stroke the back of his neck, my arm encircling his shoulder as he rests on my chest. My body is sinking even deeper into the mattress thanks to half of Adam's weight pressing me down.

It's hot. I'm still wearing my long-sleeved sweater and jeans, and the fabric is sticking to my skin.

Even if I wanted to move, I'm trapped. Adam's hands are clasped around my waist like he's grasping for comfort.

I inhale a deep breath and release it through my mouth. Holding him like this sends my mind into overdrive.

I missed this.

His scent.

His presence.

We were only together romantically for a short time, but we were working together, supporting each other, looking out for each other for seven years.

Leaving him behind took more out of me than I'd been prepared to give up. I couldn't get myself to forget him, despite trying my very hardest to look to the future rather than the past.

All that effort and I still failed.

As someone who prides herself on excellence, effort and perfection, it's shameful. I'm more than capable of being alone. Why should one man consume me like this? Why should I give up control when I fought so hard to be independent?

I shake my head and pick at my sweater. It was a really bad idea to wear long-sleeves and then slip under the covers with Adam. The heat is almost unbearable. I'm going to sweat out of every pore.

Trying to find a little relief from my homemade sauna, I wiggle away from Adam so I can push the blanket off. But Adam, thinking I'm trying to leave, muscles an arm around my waist and drags me closer in his sleep.

I roll over the mattress and grunt a little as he flattens me against his body, almost crushing me.

“Adam,” I whisper, trying to pry his hands off.

He’s a steel band.

I nuzzle his ear, whispering softly, “I’m not going anywhere. I promise. Just relax.”

There’s a beat where neither of us move. Finally, Adam’s arms loosen a bit. I’m able to move around a little more and I succeed in kicking the blanket away.

Ah. Much better.

With Adam spooning me from behind, I relax and let my breath match the rhythm of his.

After a while, I hear him getting distressed in his sleep. I twist my neck and note the worried crease in the middle of his forehead. Alarmed, I touch his arm, assuring him that I won’t disappear yet, that I’m still here. And I feel him relax again.

Rain falls overhead, pattering against the roof.

I close my eyes.

Breathe in his scent.

Nuzzle closer to him.

Peace.

I’ve been feeling the absence of it for so long, but with Adam, it’s like I’m drowning in it.

How frightening to learn that I’m not as cold and unfeeling as I want to be. But how amazing is it to have someone I love?

Having someone to lean on, someone who can lean on me in return, is worth it. Even if it means losing control.

I take a moment to settle my nerves. It’s ironic that I’d stumble on such an important revelation in a season like this.

A season of death and darkness.

A season of loss.

And grief.

And pain.

This isn’t the right time to be with Adam. Not while he needs the space and time to focus on Rowan while he grieves.

A sad smile tilts my lips when Adam buries his nose in my neck. I graze my fingertips over his knuckles, my heart aching in the worst way. I can’t

even begin to imagine what he's feeling right now.

When I met him at the door, he looked like a zombie come alive. His skin had a grey palor and his eyes were so hopeless. For a second, I wondered if *he* was the one who should have been wheeled to the morgue today.

When he collapsed on me, I panicked. I'd never seen Adam, someone with such strength and positivity, so downtrodden.

"You're going to be okay, Adam," I breathe against his skin. "You've done so much for me. I'm going to return the favor if it kills me."

As if he heard my words, he tightens his grip on my waist. It's amazing that, even unconscious, Adam is still so in-tuned to me.

I slide my fingers up to his elbow. He's so strong. I can feel the cords of muscles bulging, ready to take on the world for the people he loves. He never takes a break from showing up. He doesn't believe he's entitled to.

Turning, I place a soft kiss on his forehead. It's a confession that doesn't need words. A promise that he probably understands even though he's fast asleep and can't hear me.

I'll be there for you.

I hold Adam until the shadows in his room creep away. Eventually, light blasts through the windows, falling over us while we lie tangled together.

My phone buzzing wakes me up. Sleep clears away from my eyes. I don't remember dozing off. In fact, the last thing I remember is telling myself *not* to fall asleep in case Adam wakes up and sees me clutching him like this.

If he asked why I stayed, why I went to bed with him, why I caressed him through the night, I won't have a good answer. At least not one I'm comfortable with sharing.

Adam's head is heavy on my shoulder. I ease away like a worm, wiggling and squirming until his head hits the pillow. The moment I'm free, I feel a dull ache in my arm. I rotate my shoulders. My body was *not* made to be the pillow of a man as tall and muscular as Adam Harrison.

Rolling to a sitting position, I check to make sure I haven't disturbed him. He's sleeping soundly, his mouth slightly open and his body relaxed.

It feels like I'm tearing velcro apart when I turn away. No, even worse than that. I'm something held together by glue that leaves behind bits and pieces when it's separated.

That's how I feel.

Like I've left bits and pieces of me in the room with Adam.

I walk down the hallway, dragging my heart—that's kicking and screaming to stay—behind me. I tiptoe to Rowan's room. The door is slightly ajar and I push it gently.

Rowan is on his bed. Rather than his usual position of arms and legs sprawled like a star fish, he's curled up in a fetal position. His pale fingers are entwined in the edge of his pillow.

I step into the room and caress Rowan's head, much as I did to his father. To have suffered a loss like that at such a young age must be unbearable.

His eyes look puffy. How much did he cry?

My heart falters and I promise myself that I'll be there for this little family in whatever capacity I can, even if the best position to be in is away from them.

As the Harrison boys sleep soundly, I drive to my apartment. The huge, minimalist space looks empty and cavernous in comparison to Adam's cozy manor. Each room is silent. Cold. My steps echo like I'm walking through a mausoleum.

When I sit on my bed, it feels too big. Too wide.

Too Adam-less.

I check my phone. Should I have made breakfast before I left? Will Rowan even want to eat? And what will they do about the funeral?

Stay out of it, Nova.

Itching to do something that will help Adam, even slightly, I get dressed and head to Vision Tech. I've removed my hands from the operation, but I've still been watching everything closely. So far, I have no complaints. The team leaders have stepped up and are managing things well.

I sit in a meeting and observe the discussion. When it's over, I applaud them.

"Not bad."

Roberts grins at me. "It's good to have you back, Nova."

"I'm not back." I unfold myself from the chair. "I'm just checking in."

"When are we going to meet this mysterious owner?" The PR director asks, looking eagerly at me. "Is he related to Harrison?"

"It's not up to me to decide. And that's classified."

I check the time.

Adam and Rowan have been on my mind for hours. I'll go crazy if I don't get an update on them.

I dial a number and put the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" A soft, feminine voice sounds.

"Dejonaë," I stalk out of the conference room, "do you have a minute? I'd like to talk."

* * *

I Toss the tiny umbrella from my liqueur-less mimosa and sip straight from the glass. Dejonaë watches me with a bemused grin.

Today, the college graduate is wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Her curls are honey-blond at the ends and held back by a beautiful clip that's shaped like Japanese cherry blossoms. It looks expensive. I bet it's a gift from Sazuki.

"Thanks for meeting me," I say.

"You're welcome." Her eyes sparkle. I used to chalk it up to her youth, but now I think that's pure Dejonaë. She brims with vitality and passion. Everything, from the vivacious way she speaks to her enthusiasm for life draws you in. It's no wonder someone as cold and aloof as Sazuki would be intrigued by her.

"I'm a little surprised that you called me first," Dejonaë adds. She hasn't touched her drink yet.

"I wanted to thank you. It's because of you that I heard of Alexa passing so soon."

The sparkle leaves her eyes for a second. "Sazuki took the call. He said Adam was surprisingly calm about it."

"He does that." I fold the napkin in front of me into a perfect square. "He can tackle any obstacle in front of him. He doesn't get ruffled. Not in the moment. But when he crashes..."

"Hm." Her lips curl up. "So... Adam called Sazuki today."

My eyes stray to my drink. I pick it up with trembling hands and take a sip. "What did he say?"

"That he had a dream about you last night."

I choke on my drink.

"According to Adam, you showed up at his door unexpectedly and you held him all night."

“We didn’t do anything more,” I blurt. “I just comforted him while he slept. That’s it.”

“Why is that it?” Dejonae frowns.

I gawk at her.

She laughs softly. “I didn’t mean it like *that*. It’s just that there’s nothing in your way if you wanted to go there.”

“Of course there is. He has a wife.”

Dejonae releases a harsh breath. “Nova, I know you’re not that clueless. You’re aware that Adam wouldn’t have married Alexa because he loved her. I may not know the details, but I’m sure there’s more to the story.”

“You’re right. There is, but...”

“But what?” Dejonae prods.

“I can’t stop thinking about Rowan,” I admit, remembering his puffy eyes. “He’s breaking down. He needs *all* his dad’s attention and coddling right now. He doesn’t need to see Adam jumping from marriage to his mom and then being all over me before Alexa’s body even hits the ground.”

Her nose scrunches. “Why are you blaming Rowan? He’s a big boy. Even more than that, he’s a smart boy. And he’s very observant. Isn’t he the one who found out that Bailey has a crush on Beth?”

“That’s yet to be proven.”

“It’s obvious now that he’s pointed it out.”

I press the perfectly folded napkin against my mouth.

“Are you still confused about your feelings?” Dejonae demands. “Or are you that scared of not being in control of everything?”

I stay silent.

“You went to him last night because you love him, right? Isn’t that why you stayed?”

“I...” Squaring my shoulders, I lay my cards on the table. “I stayed because he needed me. Being there when he needs me is a habit.”

“Oh, come on, Nova. That’s bull. If you don’t even know your own feelings, just admit that.”

“I do know my own feelings,” I answer defensively. “I always have. I was never confused about my devotion to Adam.”

“Then why did you break up with him?”

I drain the rest of my mimosa rather than answer.

“Fine. I guess that’s a conversation you should have with Adam instead of me.” She leans forward. “Why did you want to meet today?”

“Adam is the closest to you and Sazuki.”

She nods.

“Do you know if he needs help with anything? Planning the funeral? Cleaning the house? Anything in the company?”

“I don’t think so. He mentioned that he was hiring a funeral director to plan everything. Right now, he’s more worried about how Rowan is taking all this.”

“Rowan just lost his mom.” I think about the moment I had to say goodbye to my own mom. “There are no words to describe that kind of pain.”

“I don’t even want to *think* of losing my mom, so I can kind of understand.” Dejonae nods.

I check my watch. Since my question has been answered, I don’t need to linger. “I’ll pay for the bill.”

“Let me.”

I freeze.

“You saved Adam last night. It’s the least I can do.”

“Saved him? You’re exaggerating.”

“Adam said so himself.” Dejonae pats my hand. “Alexa’s death shook him to the core and that ‘dream’ of you? That grounded him again.” She sighs. “I have to admit, I feel like Rowan’s my nephew. He’s been spending so much time with Niko at art camp lately. By being there for Adam, you’re being there for Rowan. It’s not an exaggeration to say you saved them both.”

I can’t accept her praise. If I did such a good deed, then why do I feel so miserable? Why does it not feel like enough?

“Thanks for the drinks. If you need anything, call me. And if Adam needs anything—”

“Call you?” She leaks a small smirk.

“Please.”

She nods. “I’m rooting for you and Adam to work this out.”

Well, that makes two of us.

* * *

THE SUN IS SHINING BRIGHTLY as they lower Alexa's casket in the ground. It's the end of a life. Shouldn't it be raining? Shouldn't the skies be weeping? Or am I getting too sentimental?

Adam's eyes sweep over the crowd and land on me. I feel the pull between us like an electric shock.

Even from this distance, I can tell how weary he is. His hair is carefully brushed, unlike its usual messy style. His black suit hugs his shoulders and tapers down his long legs. His solemn nod lets me know that he's seen me.

Rowan snakes his fingers around his dad's arm. Adam glances away and it's only then that I can breathe.

I've tried to keep out of sight during the service and the burial. It wasn't hard to blend in. The service was packed. Everyone from the farmhouse came, along with all of the kids. Some Vision Tech employees also showed up. I was most surprised when I saw Henry walking into the church.

I stayed in the very last row. The last thing I wanted was for Adam to meet my eyes. I knew that if he did, I'd run to him. In front of all these people. In front of Rowan. In front of Alexa's lifeless body.

So I kept my distance.

But not even time and space could shield me from him.

It's like his eyes are always watching for me and now I've been caught.

I inhale deeply and wait for the crowd to clear before I approach Adam.

Rowan sees me before Adam does. He brightens and waves. "Nova."

"Hi, sweetie." I wrap my arms around him and drop a kiss to the top of his head.

Adam walks up to me next. His eyes devour my body, starting at my black heels, going up to my black dress and finally my braids held back by a thick bandana. The assessment feels mildly inappropriate for a funeral. Much less, a funeral for his late wife.

"My condolences, Adam," I say.

"Thanks."

I glance down and note that he's not wearing his ring.

Removing my attention from Adam, I touch Rowan's shoulder. "Did you get to scratch everything off your mom's list?"

He nods.

"Even India?"

"Adam took us to a Bollywood theatre. Mom said it looked just like India." His eyes glisten over with tears, but he doesn't let them loose. "We

were watching the movie when she... when, um..."

"I understand."

Rowan blinks rapidly.

I give him a hug because he's too precious and I can see that he's struggling. He hugs me back and wiggles away. "Are you coming over later?"

"Uh..." My eyes shoot to Adam.

He arches an eyebrow at me.

"Please." Rowan pouts. "I want to show you my worktable in the lab."

"*Your* worktable?" Adam asks, hooking a hand around Rowan's neck.

The little boy laughs. "Okay. *Our* table."

"It might as well be yours the way you're taking over." Adam looks up to explain. "There are nothing but sketchbooks and pencil holders next to my equipment."

I smile at the easy camaraderie between father and son. It's incredible to think that just a few weeks ago, Rowan was a stranger on Adam's doorstep and an inconvenience in his life. Now, the two share a clear bond.

It's what Alexa probably hoped for.

Out of all the wishes Rowan put on that list, I'm sure this was Alexa's biggest one. It must have done her heart good for this wish to come true.

"Rowan." Beth primly picks her way through the cemetery and stops in front of us. "I asked my mom if I could come over later. Niko and Micheal want to come too."

"Come over to my house?" Rowan's eyes widen.

Beth nods smartly. "I heard my mom say that people shouldn't be alone after a funeral."

"Oh."

"So can we come over?"

"I have to ask my d—"

I realize what he was about to say and my heart expands like a balloon going up to space.

Cheeks staining red, Rowan glances away. "I mean..."

"I don't have a problem," Adam says, making it easier on his son. "Your friends can come over anytime. As long as they have their parents' permission."

"Yes." Rowan pumps his fist.

Beth gives Adam a pretty smile. Her enchanting hazel eyes sparkle with approval. There are hints of her mom's dainty beauty in her face, but it goes deeper than that. She carries herself like a little princess—intelligent, composed and straight-laced. It's no wonder Bailey's got a crush on her.

"Thanks, Mr. Harrison."

"No problem, Beth."

"Can I..." Rowan gestures to where the other kids are gathered amongst the farmhouse ladies.

Adam nods. "Don't go too far."

When Rowan runs off, it's just me and Adam left. I dig my fingers into my purse strap and shuffle nervously to keep from getting awkward.

Adam doesn't say anything.

Should I say something first?

I point my gaze toward his shoulders. Were they always so broad? Is it the jacket?

Don't think about that. You're at his wife's funeral. Whether it was a real marriage or not, you should still have respect.

Adam runs his fingers through his hair and it breaks the mousse or gel or whatever he'd used to keep it away from his face. Immediately, chocolate brown locks unfurl in all their unruly glory. One of them falls against his forehead.

Stop looking, Nova.

His eyes are deep and penetrating. I get lost in them before I've given myself permission to do so.

Ugh. Since when did I lose my cool around Adam? I've spent seven years containing myself, drawing lines and keeping a healthy, professional distance.

Now is the absolute *worst* time to falter in my self-restraint.

Adam shifts toward me, the muscles under his shirt bunching and rippling like it knows I'm watching and wants to put on a show.

Mentally, I throw my hands up.

Outwardly, I cringe.

That's it. I'm going home and I'm taking a long, cold shower. Then I'm going to light a few candles at church because lusting after a man at his wife's funeral is the definition of being a heathen.

But if I need a candle, then Adam needs three.

Because he's looking at me like a starving man looking at food.

“I should go.” I swallow hard. “But if you need anything—”

“Was it you?”

I turn around. “What are you talking about?”

He takes a step toward me and the hair on the back of my neck stands to attention.

“It felt so real,” he reasons.

Adam moves in close and my pulse beats double time.

“The way you touched me. The way you felt in my arms. But when I woke up, you were gone.”

My chest rises and falls with each desperate breath.

What should I say? Should I admit it?

Sweat breaks out on my forehead.

My stomach flutters. My heart stops.

I open my mouth and then I shut it because I don’t trust what will come out.

The hesitation is unlike me. I’ve never been the type of woman to obsess about my next move. I study my environment, make the best calculation I can and then throw the dice.

Life is simpler that way.

But all of a sudden, life is a giant, complicated web. A tangled mess that I can never unravel. Every step feels like I could potentially dance on top of a landmine.

“No,” I lie. “It wasn’t me.”

Adam stares me down until I grip the hem of my dress with trembling fingers.

Then, slowly, his lips arch up in a knowing smirk. “So it was you.”

Dammit.

My brain is sending out ‘run away’ signals that I think I should heed. Turning, I make a break for it. Unfortunately, my heels were not made for graveyard grass. My stiletto sinks right into the ground and nearly twists my ankle for a second time.

I flail, going down.

“Whoa.” Adam launches forward.

I grab onto his shoulders, digging my nails in. He catches me mid-fall, his body bent toward mine in a sort of tango dip. Our faces are close together. He’s right there, mere inches from my lips, breath skittering over my face, mouth open slightly.

My heart is beating fast from adrenaline and from being in Adam's arms again. I want him to be mine so badly it hurts.

His chocolate-brown eyes are searing into me. I should push away but, this close to his handsome face, my mind goes blank.

"Are you okay?" Adam rumbles. I feel the vibration of his voice all the way down to my toes.

"Yes." I pull my leg from the grass's clutches and try to steady myself on my own. Adam's arms hover around my waist, poised to catch me if I fall again.

I tip my chin down. "Thanks."

When I try to step away, Adam catches my hand. His fingers close over mine, warm and strong.

"We need to talk."

"About what?" I ask hoarsely.

At that moment, Kenya, Sunny, Dawn and Vanya approach Adam to offer their condolences. While the women occupy his attention, I quietly sneak away.

* * *

"SHOULD I go in or should I not?" I whisper to the empty caverns of my car. Since the funeral this afternoon, I've been wrestling with myself, plucking petals from a figurative daisy.

But instead of the typical 'he loves me, he loves me not' debacle.

It's 'should I give Adam space, should I not'.

Then, when I got into my car and started driving it was 'should I go back home, should I not'.

Now, I'm in front of Adam's fancy manor. The porch lights are on and it gives the house a warm, inviting glow.

I go back and forth like a child on a see-saw, high one minute and plummeting the next.

I face him; I avoid him; face him; avoid him; face him...

A little boy's shadow appears behind the screen door.

I've been busted.

"Nova!" Rowan bursts out the door and rushes down the stairs.

Adam's behind him. His warm brown eyes meet mine and my body—along with all the imaginary flower petals—burst into flames.

I step out of my car and meet Rowan on the walkway.

He grins up at me. "I was wondering when you'd get here."

"Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay. My friends just went home and I had nothing to do." Rowan tugs me around the yard. "Let me show you the lab."

I step past Adam and feel the electric charge in the air between us. Thankfully, he doesn't do anything except follow us from a distance.

"Wow," I say when Rowan shows me his half of the work table. "It's nice."

I mean that sincerely. I've always loved stationary and I adore how Rowan's put it to use, but it's the cartoon sketches all over the desk that takes my breath away.

Rowan walks me through his drawings and I listen intently, almost forgetting Adam's in the room.

Until he clears his throat and places both hands on his son's shoulders. "Alright, bud. Give her some breathing room." Adam juts his chin at the door. "Go inside for a minute. I have something to discuss with Nova."

Rowan nods obediently. "Can I have some more fry jacks?"

"Not too much. You get stomach-aches when you eat too late at night."

"I'll be careful."

Adam sends him off and then turns to me.

I'm sweating and my eyes are darting around as I look for an excuse to not be alone with him. "Do you trust him not to overeat? We should probably supervise—"

"Nova." Adam stops me with his voice alone.

I feel the flutters in my belly. Adam's tone is serious and I know that there will be no getting around this.

"Adam, before you say anything you regret," I lift a hand, "I apologize for what I did that morning."

He tilts his head, a confused look on his face.

Heat creeps over my chest and neck, but I keep my voice steady and my head held high. "You were in a weird headspace and I... I took advantage of that. I'm sorry."

Adam laughs humorlessly.

I whip my head up, shocked.

"I can't do this, Nova." His eyes darken like infinite galaxies, sucking me into a world beyond the one I've always known.

"Can't... do what?"

"I can't live like this anymore. I can't live without you."

I have no idea what's happening right now, but I'm electrified. It's like someone plugged me right up to a live wire and turned the switch on.

More Adam.

No Adam.

Rowan needs him. If he comes back to me, will his son—the little boy who captured my heart—feel abandoned and alone while his dad and another woman skip off into the sunset?

"Don't." He points at me. "I know that face. You're rationalizing, but I need you to hear me. *Really* hear me, Nova, because this is important." He gestures to his chest. "Every day without you is a day I'm destroyed inside. I told myself I'd give you space, but I can't hold back anymore."

"Can't you try?" I hiss, overwhelmed and spinning out. My emotions are all over the place. "You and Rowan need more time to mourn, to grieve. Besides, you were married. Whatever the reasons, that's—"

"I never married Rowan's mom," Adam says firmly.

I freeze.

The world tilts on its axis.

Then I shake my head. "Don't be ridiculous. I saw the pictures. Rowan sent them to me. I saw you in your tux. And she was in her wedding dress. I..."

"It was a fake wedding."

"WHAT?"

"I made an agreement with Alexa before she died. I told her that I'm in love with someone else and if I get married, I'm only going to marry once."

My eyes widen. My mind crashes. My entire body jolts like I've been hit with a bolt of lightning.

"You know me, Nova." Adam cradles my cheeks. "I solve problems for a living. But I won't let a crisis force me to make an unreal commitment."

"But the hospital wouldn't let her leave if you didn't, if you weren't..."

His voice turns quiet. "You knew about the hospital's policy?"

"They told me a few days before. That's why I..." I lick my lips. "I mean, the only way for you to become a family member was to marry her."

"That's not true."

I can't even draw a whole breath. "What do you mean?"

"I called the lawyers. Had them apply for emergency guardianship. That's how we got her out of the hospital."

The floor shifts under my feet. I feel like I'm getting slammed with a canon. Why didn't I think of that? I was so focused on helping Adam that I missed a solution that would have kept us together.

"But," my eyebrows knit, "you still had a wedding."

He nods. "Alexa was excited to get out of the hospital and go traveling, but when we told Rowan, he insisted that we had to do something on the list before then."

"The wedding," I breathe.

"Even if it wasn't real, he wanted to see his mom walking down the aisle like she always dreamed of. Alexa and I agreed to the ceremony for Rowan's sake. We all knew it was just pretend, but it made Rowan really happy to scratch that off the checklist."

"I don't know what to say." My heart trembles at his confession and the pure whiplash of guilt mixed with relief. Tears fill my eyes. "You're still mine?"

"Always." Adam pulls my face to his. "There's no one else in this world for me, Nova. Until the day I die, it will only be you."

My heart is roaring with too many emotions to sort out. It's like being battered by wave after wave in the middle of a storm.

Adam catches a tear with the pad of his thumb. "Darlin', don't cry."

Unfortunately, my tear ducts have sprung a leak. There is no stopping the emotions from pouring out.

Adam's lips settle on me as if he's desperate to offer more comfort than mere words would allow.

I hold his wrist, rubbing my thumb against the back of his hand as his excruciatingly gentle caress soothes the strain of our brutal separation.

"You could have told me it wasn't a real wedding," I say, my mouth moving against his as I scold him.

"I wanted you to come back to me on your own," he admits. "How could I chase you when you were feeling smothered?"

"I wasn't, Adam," I tell him urgently, my head tipped back to meet his eyes. "I just wanted you to have the space to do what you needed to do." My heart squeezes painfully. I hate that I hurt him. I hate that I made him think, even for a second, that he's not the most amazing, kind and patient

man in the world. “Adam, you don’t smother me. You uplift me. You make me a better person. You allow me to see the humanity in people. You ground me. You balance me. You push me higher and support me when I fall. You were the one who made me believe I could be the CEO of a company like Vision Tech. You were the one who stood up for me when people tried to shame you for your choice. I have never, for a day in my life, felt anything but grateful to you. The more you gave me, the more I wanted to give back.” I glance away. “It’s why I take it too far when it comes to clearing a path for you.”

He clips my chin gently and turns my face to his. “You’re always trying to fix things, Nova, but you don’t have to anymore. I’ll fix everything. All you have to do is stand there and watch while I conquer the world for you.”

I stare up at Adam, feeling this deranged pull stretching between us. My usual restraint and good sense are lacking. With all my emotions lying on the surface, raw and exposed, upturned by Adam’s startling revelations, I’ve got no defense against my devastating attraction for him.

I am not a woman who gives in to impulse.

But it’s like I’ve never even *heard* the term self-control when I lunge at him.

Adam catches me around the waist as I descend on his mouth, kissing him so furiously that it snaps his head back.

My fingers scale into his hair, scraping and caressing and pulling. I’m all lust. All animal. All wild beast. It’s my fault for starving myself from him, stumbling around on crumbs and pain and miscommunication.

My own fault.

It’s been too long. So naturally, I should adjust myself slowly. Anyone who’s been starving for a while knows that stuffing their face after not eating is a bad move. And yet I can’t heed that advice. I melt against him, gasp against him, take all the sustenance I need in one big bite.

Adam’s kiss is just as unhinged and dangerous. He moves over me like he’s trying to consume me, greedy and demanding of every flutter of my lips. Every sigh. Every moan. Every whimper.

His lips are pure wickedness against mine, totally domineering, reminding me that even if I try my worst, he can still be even dirtier.

Challenge accepted.

I rise on my tiptoes and open my mouth over his. He accepts my invitation, sweeping his tongue in like the police rushing in on a drug bust.

Pressure builds and builds between my legs and I tremble.

Every grunt, every sweep of his tongue, every nip of his teeth makes me even hungrier. Was I supposed to be filled? Was this supposed to satisfy me? It's only driven me mad with need.

As frantic as the kiss is, it also calms the restlessness that was a constant shadow since I spit those evil words at him in my office.

I'm sorry, Adam.

I'm grateful.

I missed you.

Each stroke of his mouth over mine whispers that I wasn't the only one longing for the pain to end. I wasn't the only one missing him, missing us.

My fingers slide down the cords of Adam's powerful neck as he pulls me closer, his breath fanning against my cheeks. I feel myself being lifted and then roughly shoved on top of his work table, right next to the kinetic batteries that are sprawling open with all the sensitive mechanisms exposed to the heat we're creating.

Adam slides his hands up my thighs and slows the kiss down, inhaling me as if I'm a limited-edition candy he's been craving.

Caught between his rock hard body and the desk, I'm still not satisfied. My knees are pressing against Adam's belt, creating a distance, preventing me from having him where I really want him. Eager for a different position, I spread my thighs and nudge him between them by locking my ankles at his waist.

His eyes pop open and he flashes me a look so feral, I briefly wonder if that was a mistake. But the thought dies a fiery death when Adam thrusts so hard that I rock back on the desk, nearly sweeping his expensive invention to the floor.

I should care.

And there's some part of me that does.

But I'm too busy burning.

Burning like a radioactive volcano.

Too busy melting from every touch, every caress. I arch under Adam, his body pinned against mine, his desire a lashing, attacking monster. My chest feels like it's about to crack into pieces, but he shows no mercy.

An absolute criminal.

Stealing my heart.

Stealing my breath.

Stealing my mind.

The kinetic batteries would not have survived the night if not for the ringing of a cell phone.

Adam and I break apart harshly, our breaths shallow and skittering. I realize where I am as if I'm coming out of a dream. My back is against the table, a dull tool is pushing into my shoulder, my hair's a mess and I can feel my lips swelling as they hit the cool air.

The phone rings again.

We both groan at the same time.

"Ignore it," I tell him, wrapping my fingers in his shirt.

He nibbles my ear, the evidence of his carnage revealed in dilated brown eyes. I can see him considering it and then he sighs. "I have a son. I can't ignore phone calls. Weren't you the one who told me that?"

I grunt. "Did I?"

He laughs at my disappointment.

"I hate when you use my own words against me," I mutter. Sitting up fully, I concede defeat and focus on getting my heart rate back to normal.

Adam's phone keeps ringing.

My phone starts ringing at the same time.

Something dark unfurls in my gut. My internal alarm bells are going off.

Adam maintains eye contact as he reaches for his phone.

I check mine.

Lyra?

I press ignore and the screen goes black.

In the cell phone's reflection, I see a freshly ravaged woman with tousled hair and ruined makeup.

I should wash my face before we go back to Rowan.

"What?" Adam bellows into his cell. Then he turns to me.

My heart is beating fast, but it's for an entirely different reason this time.

"That was the police," Adam says, hanging up. "Someone tried to steal from Vision Tech."

"Who?"

My throat tightens and I have a feeling about what he's going to say before he opens his mouth.

"It's Lyra." He pauses. "And she's been arrested."

CHAPTER 18

THE HEART THIEF

ADAM

“WHY IS she still on the premises? Take her away.” Nova waves a hand and, without breaking her stride, approaches another officer. Her words are clipped but measured. “I’ll compile a list of our assets. We’ll need to comb through the building to make sure nothing was taken. Did you catch any of her cohorts?”

The police officer looks stunned.

“Really?” Lyra screams from where she’s sitting between two cops. Her dark hands are handcuffed and her eyes are bulging.

“Miss Delaney,” another officer approaches us and looks mildly concerned, “this woman insists that she’s your sister and she had permission to move the items.”

Nova stops abruptly. “Is that why you didn’t take her to the station?”

The officer shuffles his feet.

Nova tips her chin up. Blue and red lights from the police cars outside are flashing on her face. She’s wearing that cold, ice queen expression. The one that causes her cheekbones to stand out and her lips to pucker.

“She’s lying. I don’t know her.”

Lyra curses. “You *witch!*”

“Nova.” I lengthen my stride and grip her arm urgently.

She turns to face me. Gone is the tender smile and the dreamy look she was giving me in the lab. Gone is the pliant woman who melted in my arms as my body throbbed like a wild animal against her soft heat. Now, she’s all hard edges and prickles. Sharp. Dangerous.

The Nova that comes out to destroy.

“Just wait a minute,” I say quietly.

“Wait for what, Adam? Is it not *clear* to you by now? Lyra approached you for a job because she had a bigger job in mind. This was all a set-up so she could steal from Vision Tech.”

“Nova—”

“I warned you not to keep her around.”

“She’s your sister,” I say gently, rubbing my thumb over her arm to calm her.

Nova shifts her head, her jaw tight and unrelenting.

"She's your family," I add. "She messed up, but ending her with your own hands is a different kind of weight. I don't want that burden on you."

Nova's nostrils flare. She stares into the distance as if she won't heed my words.

I remain quiet, giving her the space to work things out in her own mind.

Whatever she chooses, I'm going to support her. I'm going to stand with her. But I want her to make a choice she can live with. One that won't leave her plagued with guilt or discontent.

Nova fastens her hard gaze on the police officers beside Lyra. "Take her to the station."

"What?" Lyra shrieks.

"I'm not going to save you, but I'll hire a lawyer on your behalf," she says. "That's the most I can do."

"Girl, I'm your *blood*. You gonna do me dirty like this?"

Nova's eyes brighten with rage. I cringe, wishing Lyra had just shut her mouth.

"You're lucky you even have a *chance* at seeing the light of day after this." Her voice slashes through the air like a sword. "You don't deserve this much grace after all the crap you've pulled through the years. You and I both know it. It's only because of this man," she flings an arm at me, "that I'm showing some humanity. Without him, I'd bury you so deep you wouldn't be able to come up for air."

Lyra's chest heaves and she lets loose a blood-curdling scream.

Nova doesn't even blink.

"You think you're better than me! You've always thought that!"

"No, Lyra. I'm not better than you. I just make better choices."

Face twisted and teeth bared, Lyra launches at Nova. Impulsively, I drag Nova behind me and whip an arm out to keep her back and away from danger.

The police grip Lyra's shoulders and wrestle her around before she can get to us.

"Take her away," I bark.

The cops shove Lyra out of the lobby. She's kicking, squirming and screaming bloody-murder, but the sound soon fades. I watch as they shove her head into a police car and drive away.

The adrenaline shooting through my body recedes.

“Are you okay?” I squeeze Nova’s hand.

A flash of weariness crosses her face. It disappears in an instant, replaced by that practiced shell of apathy. “Of course.”

The words sound so dark and cold that I want to wrap my arms around her until the stiffness leaves her shoulders. Nova might be business-minded, careful and decisive, but she’s not ruthless. Being cold and in control all the time takes its pound of flesh. I’ve seen her stumble under the weight of it and I just want to protect her.

“Do you want to go home now? I can call Hall to take care of Lyra’s situation. And I can find someone else to compile the list of missing items.”

“I’m fine,” she insists, her voice quiet.

“Nova.”

“Stop, Adam. You’re only making it worse.”

“Making what worse?”

She avoids my gaze. Her frame shudders on a sigh. “I’m embarrassed and sorry to you. I can’t handle you being sweet right now.”

“Sorry? For what?” I slip my fingers under her chin and lift her head. “This is not your fault. I’m the one who didn’t heed your words and brought her into Vision Tech. All of this is on me.”

Nova shakes her head. “Let’s just calculate the damage. We can play the blame game later.”

I flash a smile.

Her lips twitch in return. It’s not a full-blown grin, but it’s better than nothing.

One of the remaining officers approaches us. “Are you the owner of this place?”

“I’m the CEO.” Nova blinks and then frowns. “Or I was.”

“She is.” I nod.

Nova gives me a stunned look.

I jut my chin at the officer because reinstating Nova to her position at Vision Tech is a conversation for another time.

“What happened here tonight?” Nova asks, her eyelashes moving up and down slowly. She sounds tired. “We weren’t told any details over the phone.”

I slip a hand around her waist just in case the adrenaline rush fades and she starts feeling light-headed. She allows the touch and doesn’t seem at all worried about other people noticing us being affectionate.

“A crew of five entered the premises with a moving truck, backed it up to the garage and proceeded to loot anything they could find,” the officer says.

I frown. “Lyra wouldn’t have planned a job like this alone. What about the rest of her cronies?”

“Her crew had warrants out for their arrests, so we took them to the station first.”

“What about the damage to the building?” Nova asks.

“As far as we can tell, there’s minimal damage. Most of the destruction centered around jimmying the locks to the labs. The front door wasn’t damaged at all. We figured the thieves had an access pass. From what I’ve skimmed of the security footage, they seemed to know exactly where to go.”

“Lyra got the front door access pass when she joined the company.” Nova turns to me, her eyebrows cinched. “That’s probably why she didn’t come to work after getting her ID. It was all she needed to complete the last piece of her plan.”

My jaw clenches. Lyra and her crew must have thought this out well.

“How were they captured?” Nova asks.

“They tripped a silent alarm,” the officer explains. “And the security guard called us.”

Nova absorbs all the information and nods. “I’ll compile that list now.”

“We’d appreciate that.”

My phone rings.

It’s Dejonae. I dropped Rowan off at her place before I drove Nova here.

“Who is it?” Nova whispers, her face tense. It’s like she’s bracing herself for more bad news.

“It’s Dejonae.”

Nova lets out a relieved exhale.

I put the call on speaker while I follow Nova to the elevator.

“What’s the update?” Dejonae asks. “What did the police say?”

I press the button to the top floor. “The culprits were caught and no one was hurt. We’re just about to do an evaluation.”

“That’s good, right?”

“The police got here in time, but that doesn’t mean our labs and research weren’t affected. Some of those inventions are highly sensitive and

shouldn't be moved around. Nova and I will make the rounds now."

"Hope everything works out. And don't worry about Rowan. He and Niko are playing video games in the living room. If needed, we'll prepare the guest bedroom so he can sleep over."

"We really appreciate your help," I say, my eyes meeting Nova's.

She nods in agreement.

I think about the funeral and add, "Please keep an eye on him. He's been holding it together all day, but when reality starts sinking in..."

"I will. Don't worry, Adam. We'll take care of your son like he's our own."

I know they will. She and Sazuki put a lot of importance on family and I'm grateful I have people like them to bail me out in times of crisis.

When it came to the company, I easily relied on Nova. But when it came to personal matters, I preferred to do things myself rather than inconvenience someone else.

Sazuki and Dejonae are teaching me a new lesson—that being a part of something bigger than just me, my lab and my company means having the option to ask for help with my most precious matters.

I hang up and check my watch. Hopefully, we can finish up here before it gets too late so I can tuck Rowan in tonight. I think he'll need that.

The elevator doors spread apart.

Nova steps off.

I start to follow her when she lifts a hand to stop me.

My eyebrows arch. "What are you doing?"

"I'll take care of this. You should pick up Rowan from Sazuki's house and take him to the manor."

"We just got an update. Rowan's safe with Dejonae for now," I argue.

"Of course he is. I'm not denying that. But you should still go."

"No way," I say, my lips tightening. Nova's days of carrying the weight of the company on her small shoulders are over. I may not be as good at managing a business, but I plan to step it up so she can rely on me more.

"Adam."

"Nova."

We stare at each other, sharing a battle of words all without opening our mouths.

Nova breaks first. "Lyra's my sister. This is my mess to clean up. Not yours."

“That’s bull, Nova. This is our mess.”

“I can handle it alone.” She tilts her head, her braids skittering over her shoulders.

“Just because you *can*, doesn’t mean you should.” Why the hell does she have to be so stubborn all the time? “I’m not letting you shoulder this by yourself.”

“Fine. I’ll call the other directors to help out. Heck, I could call Rochelle and the other HR people. Anyone can do this job. But not anyone can be a father to Rowan. There’s only one Adam and right now, the one who needs you most is your son.”

“Dejonae said he’s fine.”

She rolls her eyes. “Even if he’s sad, he’s not going to show it in front of Niko. He’ll wear a mask all night if he has to.”

Nova has a point, but I’m still apprehensive about leaving her here alone. “What if the crew Lyra worked with is a part of a larger gang? What if they hear about the foiled plan and try to storm this place?”

“Okay, let’s turn down the wild, inventor imagination and look at this logically.” Nova smirks, but not even her gorgeous smile can calm me. “If I know Lyra, she chose people who were just as selfish and short-sighted as her. I doubt anyone is coming for me or Vision Tech. Besides, the police are here and all the security guards are on alert too. Who would be stupid enough to storm this place?” When I still look unconvinced, she adds, “I’m probably safer here than I am anywhere else.”

I’m still reluctant and it must show on my face because Nova steps toward me. She stops right on top of the elevator threshold so the doors don’t close.

“I know you’re worried about me. I know you think I’m pretending to be strong, but I’m okay.”

“I hate those words.”

She falters and then sighs. “You’re right. I’m not okay. I’m angry and I need something to distract my mind. Your presence is not required for me to do that. But Rowan’s grieving. He just buried his mom. His world will never be the same. Between the two of us, Rowan needs you more right now.”

I glance away.

Nova ducks her head to maintain eye contact. “You know that. You just feel guilty about leaving me to tackle this myself.”

“I want to be there for you both. I hate that I can’t be in two places at once.”

“You are.” She gestures to the ceiling. “When I’m here, Adam, you’re all around me. Everything you’ve built, everything you value and believe in, I can see it. I can feel it. You *are* Vision Tech. Every time I step inside this building, it’s like I’m getting a hug from you.”

I put a hand on her forehead.

She lifts her lips slightly. “What are you doing?”

“Checking if you have a fever. The Nova I love isn’t so articulate with her feelings.” I freeze when I realize I let the ‘L’ word slip so casually.

Stupid. I’d meant to say that in a more romantic setting. Preferably with candles and roses and a hired orchestra. And a stack of stationary to offer as a bribe.

Not like this.

The day of Alexa’s funeral.

The day Nova’s sister broke into Vision Tech.

The possible worst day of all days.

“Uh...” I rub the back of my neck.

To my surprise, Nova steps forward and closes her arms around me. Her fingers skate over the fabric of my shirt, the warmth of it touching my skin. I feel lightning course through me like a storm.

“If you take it back, I’m going to revolt.”

My lips curl up in a lopsided smirk.

Her eyes are shining at me. “You know what I realized when we were apart?”

“What?”

“I’m your darlin’, but you’re mine too. My sweet darlin’.”

I squeeze her tighter, torn between utter shock and massive pleasure. Who *is* this Nova? How can she swing from brutally cold and calculative to this purring, feminine goddess?

I close my eyes to keep from drowning in a sea of warmth.

“I love you, Adam.”

My eyes burst open.

I nearly stumble from the unexpectedness of it.

“I don’t know how it happened or when the exact moment was, but I do.” Nova eases away just a fraction, enough to smile up at me. “You’re a good man. A way better man than someone as prickly as me deserves. I

love how patient you are with me. How you're always taking care of me and others. I love the way you get lost in your inventions and how casual you are about your genius brain. I love that you're a good dad to Rowan. I love you. Do you hear me?"

The elevator doors close.

Nova turns in my arms and slaps the button to open it again.

I hug her from behind and kiss her ear. "I love you more."

"Not possible." She faces me.

As my fingers graze her cheek, she raises her eyes to mine. I see the truth there and it makes my head spin.

My Nova.

My beautiful, stubborn, intelligent, bossy *dream*.

Her gaze shifts from my eyes to my mouth. "We do *not* have time to make out right now."

"Just a small one?"

She laughs and presses a kiss to my cheek. "I." Another kiss to my jaw. "Love." The corner of my lips. "You. Now go."

I tug her to me and claim her mouth. She kisses me back with a sweetness that nearly burns me to the ground. My hand slides against her back. I taste her tongue and close my eyes, memorizing the feel of her in my arms and the sensation of her mouth submitting to mine.

She pulls away and it takes all my control to let her go.

"We'll continue that conversation later," I say scratchily, pressing the button for the lobby.

One corner of her lips arches up. "I'll think about it."

I release a full grin.

As the doors close, I flop against the metal bar and press a hand over my chest. My heart is stampeding like a horse out of the gate. I'm so happy I could pass out.

I step outside and take a deep whiff. Is it just me or is the air sweeter? Are the stars brighter? Am I floating or walking right now? I look down, surprised my feet are even touching the ground.

I love you, her words return to me, crystal clear.

Nova freaking Delaney.

I can always count on her to totally scramble my brain and leave me smiling in the aftermath.

* * *

SWITCHING into dad-mode when I pick up Rowan is easier than I thought.

Mostly because Rowan doesn't seem to be all that disheartened. He's a little quieter than usual—I'm used to him chatting up a storm whenever he enters my general orbit—but he's not outwardly distressed.

I keep a close eye on him when we get home, but he doesn't do anything out of the ordinary. Whenever I pass his room, he's on his phone and laughing at videos.

Rowan calls my name on what I think is my fourth pass down the hallway. Or is it my sixth? I've lost count.

"Yeah, bud?" I poke my head eagerly into his room, ready to do some grade-A parenting and grief counseling. I'm a novice in both, but I'm confident I can do a good job.

Besides, Rowan's an eleven year old. How hard can it be?

"How many times are you going to march up and down? It's distracting." He frowns.

I step into the room. "You noticed?"

"You'd make a terrible spy." Rowan draws his knees up and then pulls the blanket over his chin.

He's using the same sandstone comforter as he did when he first arrived. It takes me by surprise. Why haven't I fixed up the guest room for him yet? I've been so busy that I haven't prioritized it. I make a mental note to do that within the week.

"Mind if I sit, bud?"

He shrugs.

I sink into the edge of the bed. "If you want to talk or anything, I'm here."

He snorts.

I glare at him. Here I am, trying to be World's Best Dad and he's laughing? "What's so funny?"

"You could have just texted."

I scowl. "It wouldn't have the same effect."

"I'm okay."

"Now you sound like Nova."

"Maybe Nova's really okay too. You're the one who never believes that."

I scrub my chin and think it over. "You have a point." Something clicks into place. It feels like my son just tore a band-aid off a wound I didn't even know I had. "I think it's because... if I'm not constantly looking for a problem to fix, I feel a little empty."

"Maybe you should see a therapist."

"Maybe I should, smart mouth." I smirk.

He smiles back. Then his eyes grow thoughtful. "I'm going to miss my mom," Rowan admits quietly. "And I'm sad that she's gone. But I talked to Micheal and Bailey about it. Micheal said he didn't have much time to talk to his dad before... you know."

Sympathy washes over me. "That's too bad, bud."

"I had a lot of time with mom," Rowan says. I can see him reasoning through his pain even as his voice cracks. "I got to make her smile a bunch of times. I got to scratch off all her wishes."

I nod. "You did, bud. You did good."

He sniffs, his eyes tearing up. "I never forgot what you told me that night in the lab. That thing your dad said, about pouring everything into one person, I did that. I dropped out of art camp and stopped hanging out with my friends and I gave everything to mom. I did everything I wanted to do and thought of other things too. I tried my hardest. I really did."

"Come here, bud." I wrap an arm around my son.

He sniffs. "But Adam, I don't want to die of a broken heart."

"You won't." I lean back and tap his nose. "I'll make sure of it."

"You and Nova?"

"Yeah. Me and Nova." I help fluff his pillow and then point down. "It's late, bud. You should get some sleep."

"Okay."

I pat his shoulder. "Night."

"Adam?"

"Mm." I stop just before pressing off the light.

"Mom had one more wish."

I freeze.

Rowan's eyes glisten in the shadows. "She wanted me to add it to the wish list, and then she changed her mind. But I remember it."

"What was it?"

"That you and Nova would marry each other," Rowan says simply.

My eyebrows hike.

“You promised to make all her wishes come true.” Rowan turns on his side and closes his eyes. “Can you do that one?”

I grin to myself. “I’ll give it my best shot, bud. I swear.”

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I’m surprised to be woken by a call from Nova.

We spoke last night and she informed me that none of our research had been stolen or broken after the attempted burglary. She also asked about how Rowan was doing.

Unfortunately, it was only a short conversation. I got the sense that she was feeling slightly awkward about what she said in the elevator. She seemed to be overcompensating by being incredibly poised and clinical when she spoke to me.

There were no shared I love yous at the end. Only a business-like ‘I’ll keep you updated, Adam’ before she hung up the phone.

It was my intention to go after her today, even if it meant kidnapping her for a date.

But my plans are dashed when I answer Nova’s call and hear her angry tone.

“She’s refusing to see the lawyer, Adam.”

“Who?” I sit up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“Lyra,” Nova hisses. “I got a call from Hall today. He says Lyra won’t say a word. The only time she opened her mouth was to ask for me.”

I swing my legs over the bed, alert and ready to go. “I only need five minutes to brush my teeth and take a quick shower. I can pick you up,” I check the clock on my nightstand, “in thirty minutes.”

“I’m not seeing her,” Nova snaps.

I freeze. “Why not?”

“This isn’t the first time Lyra’s landed in jail. She’s been in and out of trouble since she was a teenager.”

I grip the phone tightly, listening to every word. This is the first time Nova’s voluntarily opening up about her past and her family. It feels like a sign that we’ve really reached the next level, even though she’s not as gushy and romantic as she was yesterday.

“My mom died because she kept following Lyra up and down and all over the place. I won’t let her manipulate my life like that.”

“She’s your sister.”

“And I’m supposed to excuse every bad decision she makes because we share blood? That doesn’t make sense.”

I choose my words carefully because I know Nova means that with all her heart. If something doesn’t make sense, she cuts it. If something isn’t necessary, she abandons it. It’s very easy for her to put things into careful boxes and set them aside.

It’s a great skill to have when running the company. She can step back from emotions and take a long, objective look at the picture. When she’s done, whatever her decision, it’s the best one for Vision Tech. And if it hurts someone’s feelings, well... too bad.

But though it might work for Vision Tech, that skill of hers is a weakness when it comes to family and friends.

I have the opposite problem. It’s yet another example where our strengths and weaknesses line up to support each other.

“Darlin’,” I hesitate, “I love how decisive you are. And I think your point about Lyra not being worth the effort is valid.”

She sighs over the phone. I can almost feel her breath rushing into my ear. “Go ahead. Spring the ‘but’ on me.”

I smile because she’s the most lovable woman in the world and I have no idea what I did to deserve her. “But,” I grin harder, “giving your sister a chance isn’t for her. It’s for you.”

“That’s a very big leap, Adam.”

“Hear me out.” I press my hand into the bed and push myself to my feet. “The more bitter and angry you are at Lyra, the more control she has over you. If just the thought of her makes you resentful, that’s power. That’s someone else being able to manipulate how you feel.” I reach for a clean T-shirt. “I know how much you hate being controlled. Do you want *Lyra* to have that much power?”

“Since when did you major in family counseling?”

I smile. “I’ll pick you up in twenty minutes, Nova.”

She sighs. “You better come in there with me. If she starts talking crap, I can’t be trusted not to jump over the table and choke her.”

I laugh.

Nova doesn’t.

I swallow hard. In a more serious tone, I promise, "I'll make sure you don't commit any felonies."

* * *

It's my first time in an interrogation room, although it's not my first time in a police station.

I've been arrested once. In college, I got dared to walk naked in the park and spent a night in jail for public indecency, but that's about the extent of my run-ins with the law.

It's strange to be *in* the room I've only seen on *Law & Order* episodes and legal thriller movies. I almost want to smash my hand on the table and yell '*you can't handle the truth*'.

But that would be foolish.

And inaccurate. Jack Nicholson was in a courtroom, not an interrogation room, during that scene in *A Few Good Men*.

The air is silent and still. I shudder from the cold, but I'm not sure if it's due to the air conditioner or the frosty looks shooting out of Lyra's eyes.

Nova's sister is sitting across from us, her hands cuffed and her body shrouded in an orange jumpsuit. It's a far cry from her usual, tight-fitting outfits.

"Why'd you bring him?" Her lips curl into a dark scowl. She points at me.

Nova ignores the question. "What do you want, Lyra? Why aren't you working with your lawyer?"

"I want to talk to you alone."

Nova checks her watch. "Fine. We'll both leave."

Lyra's jaw drops.

Nova stands up. "My time is worth a lot, but Adam's is worth three times more. You can't afford to waste it."

"You smug little rat." Lyra's grin is dark. "You always have to be right, don't you?"

Nova sits back down. "Beggars can't be choosers, Lyra. Get to the point before I change my mind and drag Adam out of here."

"Adam, Adam, Adam. Are you so obsessed with this white man that you'd abandon your own family?"

I don't flinch.

But Nova turns into a tigress. "Listen here, Lyra." She smacks her hand on the table, her tone harder than granite. "This coldness that I'm showing you? It didn't happen overnight. It took trusting you over and over again and getting slapped in the face every time to get to this point. I learned my lesson, but mom didn't and it sent her to the grave early."

Lyra rolls her eyes. "I knew you blamed me for that. Mom died because it was her time."

"She died because you refused to take responsibility and kept making the same mistakes over and over without learning a damn thing from them." Nova's trembling slightly.

Under the table, I slip my hand into hers. She curls her fingers around mine and sucks in a deep breath.

"I don't care about the past." Lyra turns her head to the side. "Just tell the police this is all a misunderstanding and get me out of here. I can't have another strike on my record."

Lyra folds her arms over her chest and lifts her chin obnoxiously. She fully expects Nova to fix her problems. The entitlement is astounding and I begin to see why Nova would rather avoid her.

"I thought I was a witch and a rat and a sell-out?"

"Which is why you should make it up to me now," Lyra says firmly.

I shake my head.

Nova stiffens. "You know what, Lyra? I'm not going to help you this time." When her sister's eyes widen, Nova lifts a dark finger and talks in a firm voice. "And I've been meaning to tell you this for a while. I am not a sell-out for speaking the way I speak and working where I work. Also, I love myself. I love my dark skin and my big nose and my hair. I love how dark my palms are and I love my curves. I like to dress in professional clothes and high heels, the same way you like cheetah prints and dying your hair. That's your style and who you are. This is my style and it's who I am. If that offends you, then you'll forever be offended because I'm not changing who I am to suit your narrow idea of what being 'black' should be."

My eyebrows hike.

Lyra's jaw drops.

Nova doesn't look affected at all. She nods at me. "I'm done here."

"You're just gonna leave?" Lyra shrieks.

“I’m going to respect who you are, Lyra.” Nova stops and turns back around. “But I have to warn you. If who you are pushes you to commit crimes, it won’t end well for you. So maybe look into yourself and figure out who you want to be before it’s too late. That’s my last advice as your big sister.”

“Nova, don’t you dare walk away from me!”

I open the door of the interrogation room and Nova sashays through.

“Nova!” Lyra screams.

We nod at Hall and the police officers who’d been supervising through the two-way mirror. Nova keeps moving and I’m right behind her. We don’t stop until we get into the sunshine.

Once we’re outside, she takes a big, deep breath. “You were right, Adam. That does feel better.”

I smile and wrap her in my arms. “Where do you want to go now?” I ask, my voice muffled in her braids. “Rowan’s at art camp and I’m free for the day. I can take you to the emporium or to Turkey or Belize. Wherever you want to go.”

“Home.” She meets my eyes and gives me a spent smile.

“Your apartment?”

“No.” She slides her fingers into mine and interlocks our hands. “I want to go to your place.”

CHAPTER 19

THE WAY WE DRAW CONCLUSIONS

NOVA

I DON'T KNOW when my apartment stopped feeling like home, but the thought of being in that big, empty space with all my minimalist furniture and rarely-used kitchen appliances does not appeal.

It's not like I fully understand the shift.

Not until I curl into Adam's arms on the porch swing. Looking out over his acreage, feeling a gentle wind on my face, it finally hits me.

"I don't think it's your house."

"What?" Adam stops, his hand halfway to the cupholder. We've both got glasses of lemonade chilling on either end of the porch swing.

"It's not your house that feels like home," I say, working through the revelation and letting the words out as they come to me. "It's you."

Adam blinks in shock.

I barely register his expression because I'm too busy sorting through my own baggage. Horror fills me to the brim. The swing bucks as I sit up abruptly and glare at Adam. "What did you *do* to me?"

"Uh... love you?"

I scowl at him. "Exactly. Why couldn't you love someone else? Why'd it have to be me?"

"Because you're Nova," he says simply. Not apologetic in the least.

The bastard.

I narrow my eyes.

He tucks one of my braids behind my ear. The movement causes his fingertips to slide over my temple and cheek. A shudder of pleasure wracks my body.

"You know," Adam says thoughtfully, "I think what you did today with your sister was incredible."

All the pleasure points he'd been firing up wind down. I press my back against the swing. Adam isn't talking about the moment when I told off Lyra in the interrogation room. He's talking about what happened after. When I told Hall to get Lyra off on a minor charge as long as she agreed to do community service and therapy.

"You're a lot kinder than people think."

“Too much of you has rubbed off on me.” I frown. “I’ve got all this sentimental crap in my heart now.”

He laughs and stretches his arm over the back of the chair. “Lyra didn’t succeed in stealing anything. I think, this time, giving her a chance is the right call.”

“Humph.” I fold my arms over my chest. “Why aren’t you more annoyed on behalf of the company? Lyra tried to steal from *you*, after all.”

His fingers slide over my shoulder. “She tried to steal from *us*.”

“It’s not my company.”

“Of course it is.” Adam looks down at me with his brown eyes that are deep enough to drown in. “It’s *our* company. Even if you leave Vision Tech forever and start working at Yoon Technologies, it’s yours. Whether we’re married or not, it’s yours.”

I jump in shock. Adam thinks he’s slick trying to slide that in. “Marriage?”

“Of course marriage.”

I scowl. “Adam.”

“Nova.”

“What kind of proposal is this?”

His grin is mischievous. “I’m talking about our future.”

“You’re feeling me out.”

“And from what I can feel,” his fingers trace my lips, “you seem partial to such an arrangement.”

Heat flares in my chest. I knock his hand back because it’s distracting. “You’re just trying to saddle me with Vision Tech so I have to take responsibility, even if I never go back.”

“Is it that obvious?”

I ram my fist into his muscular arm. It bounces off like a marshmallow against a brick fence.

He laughs and brings my hand up to his lips. When his mouth skates across my knuckles, I get a little lightheaded.

“It’s a solid plan, I’ll admit,” I say grudgingly. “But marriage won’t necessarily mean I own Vision Tech. There’s such a thing as a prenup.”

“I don’t believe in prenups.”

My business brain sends up a host of alarm bells. “What about your inventions? You’ll give me half of those?”

“Half? No.” He shakes his head. “You can have everything if you want it.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s a very bad business decision.”

“I tend to make those. You’re the one who comes in from behind and fixes it.”

“You’re not even sorry.”

“Why should I be? I’d rather lose the company than lose you. It’s very simple.”

“It is not. That’s a lot of money, Adam. You’re not just a regular guy. You’re a billionaire. With a *b*. Your inventions alone are bringing in massive royalties in perpetuity. Your children’s children are going to be rich.”

“Our children’s children,” he corrects me.

I glare at him again. “Think about it.”

“Nova, I’m going to need you to step out of executive assistant mode for a second and look at this my way.” He leans forward. “I’m willing to die for you. If I’m willing to literally lose my life, then on a sliding scale of doing absolutely nothing to disappearing from the earth, the money is a moot point.”

I half-snort. “How do you come up with those lines?”

“They come to me.”

“Tell them to leave.”

He presses a kiss to my lips. “No.”

“You are the worst,” I mumble, already melting.

“And somehow, I got lucky.” His eyes are on me. I sense that his joke was purely innocent, but it hits on a nerve.

The dirty little cat that purrs for Adam is awake.

And after the craziness of fake weddings, real funerals, attempted burglaries and who knows what else that could be waiting around the corner for us, I want a different kind of chaos. One that will leave me in happy tears rather than perpetual frowns.

“How lucky are we talking here?” I ask smoothly. Then I tilt my head. “I’m asking for clarification purposes.”

With a smile, he wraps me in his arms and binds me to his chest. “That depends on you.”

“In that case,” I walk my fingers up his shirt, “I might need some convincing. Preferably a well-designed PowerPoint presentation with an

accompanied nine-page summary of the pros and cons.”

“Hm.” Adam plants a kiss on my cheek and then another, using his lips to draw a soft line up to my temple. There, he presses his nose to my braids, inhales and says, “Pro—I love you and you love me.”

“That’s it?”

“Give me a second. When you look at me like that, I lose track of my thoughts.”

I can’t help it. I pounce on him. My lips capture Adam’s and I sip from his mouth, sucking all the sweetness from his bottom lip. The connection between us burns hot and bright. I want to shrug out of my jacket before I realize that I’m not even wearing one.

Adam’s hand comes up to cradle my face and tilt my head so he can deepen the kiss. His mouth is firm and hot and delicious. So delicious that I groan when he leans back.

“Still need a PowerPoint presentation?”

I crack an eye open and catch him smirking. “That was a good start. I might bend the rules for you.”

“A very wise decision, Miss Delaney.”

I leak a smile, feeling like a fool. But a happy one. The walls between us have all come crumbling down. We’ve weathered every kind of storm imaginable and we’ll continue to ride those waves. Together. Because I might be powerful on my own, but with Adam, I’m unstoppable.

We meet in another hungry kiss. His hand slides over my back, down my hip and over my thighs. I groan at how exquisitely good it feels. He starts unbuttoning his shirt and places my hand on his flexing abs. After one touch, I’m gone. I’m drowning. I’m getting barreled over by a lust so great I can barely contain it.

I want Adam. In all the ways a woman can want a man. And in all the positions a man can have a woman.

He’s my partner. My friend. My lover. My family. My future.

Adam’s touch slips under my shirt next and I nearly jump out of my own skin when he slides his fingers above my rib cage. The desperation that wells inside me, the total lack of control, is now a familiar sensation. I don’t run from it. Instead, I fall deeper, taking a hike off the cliff because I trust that the water will keep me afloat.

And maybe I’ll need some water soon. Are we burning this porch swing to bits? Can the house survive a fire of this size?

Desire sings me everywhere he touches. I want to take off my clothes, but even *thinking* of breaking our kiss physically hurts.

Adam whispers against my mouth. “Should I put up the foot rest again?”

A whirring sound follows the statement. I glance down and, in the sunlight, I finally see what Rowan painted on the foot rest. It’s a cartoon in his signature style. There are three figures and the word ‘home’ painted in big, bubbly letters.

He’s right.

This is home.

I glance up at Adam, my heart swelling. “Actually, I think we can continue this in the bedroom.”

Adam grins and swoops me up quickly as if he doesn’t want me changing my mind. But there’s no chance in hell that I’m stopping this train. I grab his face to keep kissing him and then stop abruptly when he bangs into the balcony doors.

I jolt.

He groans.

Then we look at each other and chuckle.

“Sorry.” I drop my hands from his face. “I forgot you need your eyes to navigate.”

Adam’s heated gaze slides over my body and turns my blood to molten lava. “Have I mentioned how much I love you, Nova Delaney?”

“Random timing,” I say breathlessly.

“I just had a thought.” Adam’s fingers brush against my cheek. “That I wouldn’t mind banging into more doors with you. I don’t even feel pain when you’re with me.”

“Uh-huh. That’s great. Can we forget about the doors and get to the banging. Please?” I beg.

“Yes, ma’am.” Laughing softly, Adam gets past the door, without leaving his face imprint on it this time, and carries me into his bedroom.

* * *

I DESCEND on the bed so gently, you’d think Adam was carrying a delicate piece of glass. My back sinks into the mattress and I keep my eyes on him

as he lowers himself in beside me.

My chest is heaving. My heart is roaring. My fingers are clutching his shirt, trying to drag him closer.

I want him on top of me. I want to breathe him in like he's the only oxygen in the room.

No, it's not a want.

It's a *need*. I'm burning with it.

But Adam isn't in a rush. His fingers skate against my lips and then slips under my neck. He lifts my head up, pulling my mouth close, and moves his lips softly over mine as if deepening the pressure will shatter me.

Soft explosions rock my world. I stake my elbows into the bed so I can prop myself up. Anticipation heightens the air, along with scents that remind me of the earth after a rain, musky and full of promise.

I'm ready.

So ready.

Adam eases his mouth away and I want to groan and yank him back to me.

No more distance, please. Seven years is enough.

My chest burning, I try to pull off my shirt.

Adam grabs my hand. "Ah-ah, Nova."

My eyes widen and I let out a pathetic mewl. How long is he going to make me wait?

Adam rolls me over and kisses me again, harder this time. He teases my lips open with his tongue and crushes me with his body, inhaling all of my panting breaths until I nearly die.

Every part of me feels like it's sizzling with flames and I ground my hips against his, testing his steely resolve.

He groans and blinks rapidly as if his head is spinning.

"Why are you taking your time?" My hands skate over his back. Lust is ricocheting inside my body like a frustrating game of pinball. The kind where the ball knocks against the ramps and pins, causing all the lights to flash and never falling into a hole.

Just get into a damn hole already!

Adam smirks. It's a slow, sexy smile that spreads from his lips and lights in his eyes. It makes my heart leap straight into my throat and makes my brain short-circuit.

"Do you know you have a teacher voice?"

“A what?” I croak.

He trails kisses over my jaw, dragging his mouth down the column of my neck and making me jolt when he stays in one place, sucking so furiously I’m sure it’ll leave a bruise. I release a loud moan and he leaves a nip on my neck like a deranged vampire.

Out of breath and unravelling with heat, I push him back and attack his jeans to get them off.

Adam stops me again.

I feel like scratching his eyes out.

“I know what you want, Nova,” Adam whispers in my ear. “And I’ll give it to you. But you can’t have control here.”

My eyes flit up to his.

His gaze is steady and dark. Those perfect lips are slightly parted and more brown than pink thanks to my lipstick.

I do my best to sort through his words. What does he want from me? The answer feels like it’s hiding in plain sight, but my lust-addled brain is in full get-Adam-naked mode. It starts glitching even harder when warm hands slide over my stomach.

“You are so beautiful,” Adam says, smoothing out the angry lines in my forehead with a kiss. “Even when you scowl.” He traces my lips with his thumb. “Do you know how much I want you, Nova?”

“Then show me,” I grind out.

Adam frowns and kisses me again, but it lacks the gentleness of before. This time, it’s almost angry. The force of it slams my head into a pillow. Carnivorous, violent, he pins me down with his body.

I encourage him, press myself against him, rile him up until my heart threatens to burst. My blood runs so hot it’s like I’m being boiled to the bone.

Adam yanks my shirt off and I quickly shimmy out of my pants before he can stop me. Cool air hits my bare shoulders and the sensible cotton lingerie I didn’t know I’d be showing off today.

He sucks in a sharp breath when he sees me, eyes slipping up my legs all the way to my chest. The doubts start clearing away. He finds me desirable. It’s written all over his face. Whatever’s going on, it’s not because he’s disappointed.

I arch up and twist my arm around to fumble with the clasp of my bra when Adam stops again.

At first, my nostrils flare in frustration.

Then I remember what he said.

You can't have control here.

Understanding bursts into my mind. I realize what he wants from me isn't just naked lust and open legs.

It's surrender.

My lips twist down and I go stiff. It's my instinct to be strong, to lead. To be the CEO of a company like Vision Tech, I've had to toughen up and it's affected every part of my life. I didn't realize it had tiptoed into this room with us.

Adam rubs my head and stares into my eyes. He watches me process, not saying a word. So kind. So patient. It almost makes me want to tear my heart out of my chest and offer it on a silver platter.

Maybe I could survive on my own.

But I don't want to.

I want Adam.

Looking back, I always have.

With a deep breath, I gather all the prickles, all the armour, all the parts of me that make it hard to be vulnerable with anyone. I set it aside the way that Adam discarded my shirt.

I stop thinking so much.

I just...

Let.

Go.

And then my bra is gone. And Adam's hot, insistent mouth descends on mine while he rips off the rest of my clothes. His hands move over every inch of my body, worshiping me, adoring me in a way that makes me feel way more powerful than if I'd been stubborn.

In the frenzy of reaching hands and greedy lips, I manage to get Adam's shirt over his head. He holds me down as I scrape my fingernails into the solid muscle of his back, feeling the corded strength like ropes lashing against his spine. He's an absolute work of art and I can't stop touching him. Can't stop feeling the hills and valleys of his biceps and the strength bounded beneath his tan flesh.

Adam lifts my thighs and spreads me out on the bed. With a hunger so ravenous I'm not sure I can survive it, he devours me with his wicked

tongue and equally evil fingers. Who taught him to move like that? To stake his claim like that?

I hear whimpering, a needy sound that definitely couldn't come from me because I am a fierce, independent...

Oh.

Oh... that's me.

Sweat rolls down my body.

Pleasure coils and coils in my center.

I moan, my hands fisting into the bedsheets as my vision turns white. I'm floating. And then I'm exploding like fireworks. The shudder that wracks me makes me wonder if an earthquake just hit the city.

Adam leaves the bed for a second and then he's back. The mattress dips. "Are you with me, darlin'?"

It takes me a second to nod.

"Good," he whispers. He brushes a kiss to my lips and I taste myself. I taste us. "Because," Adam growls, "I used up all my patience getting you to understand me."

I open my mouth to protest, but the words turn into a pinched gasp when he invades me so suddenly it rips a scream from my throat.

It's too much.

He's too much.

Pain and pleasure twine together, weaving in and out with the fury of a destructive hurricane.

Hot and lashing.

Punishing and rewarding.

I can't contain it all.

It feels like I'm shattering into a thousand pieces just trying to keep up.

Or maybe that's the bed that's about to crack as Adam pins my hips down and reveals what seven-years' worth of pent up desire feels like.

Faster.

Harder.

Setting a fire of want and need with every slick movement.

And I let myself burn. I open myself to be ravaged and pillaged and destroyed. I deny Adam nothing, giving him all of my body, all the low moans and the slickness of my pleasure.

I move with him and rise with him. Meet his lips in a kiss and then let my mouth stake claim of his jaw, his throat, leaving damp, wet trails

wherever I brush. His steady pace turns into a chaotic surge that nearly breaks me.

I hold on for dear life and then I can't hold on anymore. The wave that crashes into me is overwhelming, yanking me down by the ankles into a pleasure so consuming that it refuses to end. A living, breathing, moving *thing* that pulses and thrums and drags me further into Adam's orbit. Into his world. Making us one. Whole. Perfect.

And before it even ends, Adam shifts the motion, slowing down, building me back again. Silently promising me that there's more in store for me, the woman who finally trusted him with everything.

CHAPTER 20

THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN

NOVA

ONE BY ONE, my senses come back to me. I have to check if I have all my fingers and toes because, somewhere between the bed rocking, Adam growling in my ear and sweat running rivulets into the pillows where I've been balancing on my hands and knees, my body literally *ripped apart* with pleasure.

I blink unsteadily and keep wiggling. All digits are present and accounted for, down to the little toe.

"Okay," Adam breathes against my damp skin, "I'm going to need some time to recover from *that* one."

"*Now* you'll need some time?" I ask hoarsely. I lost my voice somewhere around the 'Adam Turns Me Into A Contortionist' part of the evening.

The sun has shifted all the way across the sky. Adam and I haven't left this bed once except to use the bathroom. I can't decide if he's a monster or a machine, but he's definitely not human.

I squint at him, my heart beating fast. "Are you sure you're not part alien?"

He arches a brow.

"It would explain why you're so good with technology," I reason. "And why you have such a weird obsession with helping mankind."

"You really aren't that logical when it comes to me, are you, darlin'?" He places a hand on the middle of my naked back and curls me into him. The faint smell of metal, the slight movement of his pecs as he sighs in contentment, the sight of his wavy, tuggable hair—it all invites me to snuggle deeper against his side.

Adam welcomes me with a kiss on my temple.

I smile.

My big, oversized, country darlin' is a cuddler.

All the signs were there from the start, he was holding me tightly the night that Alexa passed, but it still catches me by surprise. Probably because he spent the past couple hours wiping away all memories of his

gentleness and showing me the animal hidden beneath his tightly-held control.

As our breaths return to normal, I look up at him. A memory of what he said when we first got started returns to me. “Do I really have a teacher voice?”

“Yup.” Adam’s eyes remain closed.

My eyebrows knot. “Is it annoying?”

“Sometimes.”

I swat at him. “I don’t mean to have a teacher voice. I just need to get things done as efficiently as possible.”

“I know you do, Nova.”

I chew on my bottom lip, wondering how long he’s been annoyed by my tone.

Adam laughs softly. His fingertips graze the column of my throat. “Stop overthinking. It’s not a big deal.” When I don’t respond, Adam adds, “How about this? If I ever get enough of that teacher voice, I’m going to drag you somewhere private. It doesn’t matter where we are. I’ll take you away and shove your panties down to your knees...” He growls out the rest of his promise in my ear and my breaths start coming out rapidly.

“H-how will that help?” I croak, feeling hot all over.

“Positive reinforcement. ‘Teacher voice’ is now an invitation. You can keep doing it and I won’t mind.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I laughingly shake my head.

“Try it and we’ll see.” He yawns.

I settle into his side, enjoying the quiet hush of the evening and the thrum of his heart beating against my ear.

“I didn’t hurt you too much, did I?” Adam asks, mindlessly rubbing a circle on my hip.

“No, not too much.”

He poured every ounce of desire he had into me, unleashing punishing strokes that marked me from the inside out. I’m sure there will be *some* damage.

But I would do it again.

“Although,” I kiss his chest, thinking of his insatiable lust and the beastly way he kept coming at me, “you’re not as much of a gentleman as I thought you were. It makes me wonder how you survived seven years without even kissing me.”

“It’s a good thing you always kept that line between us,” Adam mumbles sleepily against my forehead. “Because if I’d tasted you before you were ready to be with me, I’d have driven myself crazy wanting you.”

“Really?”

“It was tough enough when I didn’t know what being with you was like. But if I’d had you and then couldn’t touch you again...?” He shakes his head.

I lightly trace a finger over his full pink lips and watch them curve into a smile. “So you don’t regret waiting seven years for me to resign and figure myself out?”

“Darlin’, I’d wait a lifetime.” He gives me a kiss full of sweetness and bubbly promises. Then he pulls back, his eyes still half-hooded. “But I’m glad I didn’t have to because,” he whistles and slides a hand down the dip of my waist and over my hip, stirring heat between my legs again, “you are too exquisite for words.”

I laugh softly. “You big flirt.”

He smiles against my braids.

I nuzzle his chest, inhaling the damp fragrance of us on his skin.

“Nova,” he breathes my name.

I glance up and find chocolate brown eyes blinking down at me. “Hm?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For trusting me.” He runs his hands over my back, following the curve of my spine, stopping at the dip where my spine meets my tailbone and swooping back up again. “For loving me.”

I sigh inward. “Adam.”

“I know how hard it is for you to put the sword down, and I know how terrifying it must be to realize you’re falling for me.”

“Fallen.” I nudge his chest. “It’s already done.”

He smiles and kisses the tips of my fingers. “I’m going to live my life showing you that you made the right choice. Because you’ve always made the right choices, Nova, and I’m not going to be the exception.”

“I believe you.” I narrow my eyes. “As long as we keep the fake marriages to a minimum.”

“Darlin’, the next time I walk down the aisle, it’ll be to get married to you.”

“Again with the non-proposals.”

“Who said it was a non-proposal? I’m totally serious.”

I make a frantic sound. “Hold your horses, cowboy. Let’s try dating first and then talk about marriage.”

“Always trying to slow me down,” he mutters, but a grin spreads over his face.

“That’s what I do. You show up with the grand ideas and I bring you back to reality. It’s why we work so well together.” My eyes stray to my cell phone. Speaking of work, I haven’t checked my phone once since Adam threw me into his bed and ripped my clothes off.

“You’re starting to suffer from withdrawal, aren’t you,” he says knowingly, wearing a handsome grin.

“I am not.” I frown. “When are you supposed to pick up Rowan from art camp?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?” I sit up to check my phone.

He grabs my wrist. “Why don’t you let me worry about that?”

My breath catches as he captures my hands and pins them above my head. His fingers slide over my palm and interlock with mine. I feel him pressing into me and I know what’s coming. I know he’s going to take everything he craves until I’m soft and dazed.

This is dangerous. I’m definitely saying ‘yes’ to marriage if it comes from this growly version of Adam.

His eyes glint dangerously as if he knows he has me in the palm of his hand. “We’ve got time.”

“Time to do what?” I feign innocence.

“Relax, Nova.”

Heat blasts me in the face, the chest, the thighs—every inch of my skin. A human inferno. I lift my chin, trying to be defiant. I can’t have Adam thinking that he’s tamed me, even if he has... a little bit.

“At least let me check my emails.”

“Lie down and spread your legs,” Adam orders, his voice dripping with dark authority.

Inside, I’m melting.

Outside, I resist. “Don’t think that tone will work on me all the time, Mr. Harrison.”

“Mr. Harrison?”

“I no longer work for you or Vision Tech, remember?”

“That’s right,” Adam says. The next thing I know, he’s grabbing my ankle and dragging me down. I yelp, skating over the bed and knocking my head into a pillow.

Adam crawls over me like lightning and grips my chin. It’s not a painful touch, but it is firm. I make a tortured sound as he swipes his thumb, stained with the essence of us, over my mouth, slowly circling, massaging, and tugging on my flesh.

I remain strong.

Until he moves his hands lower, lower, *there*, copying the same motions in aggravatingly slow swipes. I buck in delight, shudder with angry heat, reach for his hair and tug. My body is twisting and seeking him out in desperation.

Something inside me breaks.

I can barely breathe and, when he lifts his hands away, I cry out in protest.

Adam’s smile is filthy and wicked. “You are the undisputed queen in the boardroom, Nova,” he whispers, his eyes darker than the black of night, “but in here, *I’m* the boss. Do you understand?”

Sayanara, resistance.

I’m languid heat and anticipation when I wrap my legs around him. “Yes.”

* * *

THE DAYS FLOW into a rhythm of eating breakfast with Adam and Rowan and using the rest of my time to putter around my apartment, go shopping at the stationary store, or just sleep in to recover from whatever Adam did to me the night before.

Sometimes, in the evenings, I’ll pick Rowan up from art camp while Adam’s at work and we’ll go shopping at the supply store together. Or we watch movies and pick apart the plot until it’s nothing but bones.

Rowan’s trying to teach me how to draw, but it’s hopeless. Poor thing just won’t accept that yet.

Since leaving Vision Tech, my life has expanded to include more people as I have more time and less excuses to avoid events.

I've accepted Dejonae's invitations for Girl's Night more than any other social engagement. The farmhouse ladies are always funny and I leave the house feeling warm and happy.

It's nice to belong.

I've never had a group of female friends.

Correction, I've never had a group of friends *period*.

But Kenya, Sunny, Vanya, Dawn and Dejonae are understanding. They respect that I don't always have something to add to the conversation and seem content just to have my presence.

With all that, I do feel a bit aimless. Everything else in my life is rocketing upward, but there's a hint of discontent in my professional life that won't go away.

I've been thinking more and more about my next steps. Yoon Technologies gave me an offer to join their company. It's a great opportunity. Even Adam agreed, despite Yoon Technologies being our competitor.

"Go ahead. I'll support you wherever you go," he said, before rolling me over and trying to distract me from worrying.

It worked for a while, but I'm still restless. Picking a new path is a huge weight on my mind.

The options are endless.

I've got tons of offers to work for other companies.

I can even start my own business. Without Adam's money. I have my own saved up thanks to my uber-cautious take on finances.

I've even explored branching into a non-tech field, but it all feels wrong, like putting on a dress two sizes too small.

I'm sitting at home, doing research and feeling that same restless dissatisfaction when I decide to surprise Adam at work. He would always bring lunch for me when I was CEO of Vision Tech. Now that he's going into the office more, I should return the favor.

I cook Adam's favorite pasta, package it prettily and meet Steve downstairs.

Yes, Adam insisted on me keeping a driver. At first, I rejected it. But Steve is getting older and has children to put through college. I didn't want to take his job away so I agreed.

Steve smiles and waves.

I return the gesture as I get into the car.

On the way to Vision Tech, I look through the window at the city speeding past. I don't know if it's the familiarity of the route or the anticipation of seeing Adam, but simply moving in this direction is easing my nerves.

Steve stops in front of Vision Tech and the restless feeling goes completely away. It's like... I'm home.

I step inside. The responses are immediate.

"Hi, Miss Delaney!"

"Are you back from vacation?"

"We missed you, Miss Delaney."

Henry walks up to me as I'm waiting for the elevator. He gives me a shy smile which I return.

"Hi, Henry, how have you been?"

"Good." He meets my eyes. "It's good to see you."

I nod.

"Hey, babe." Courtney, the intern, slips an arm around Henry's arm.

My eyes bulge.

Henry rubs the back of his neck. "Did I mention? I got a new girlfriend."

"Henry, that's great."

"Thanks." He eyes me. "Uh, I already spoke to Mr. Harrison but, there are no hard feelings with us, right?"

"None at all. I'm happy for you." I dip my head.

He smiles and gets into the elevator with me, squeezing his girlfriend's hand. I am genuinely happy for Henry. He's a nice guy and he's going places. I'm glad that Adam was able to set his feelings aside and find a way to keep Henry at Vision Tech. He's going to be an asset for the company. I can feel it.

As I walk into the office on the top floor, I feel energy surging through my veins. My heels click in time to my quickening heart. The lights are bright. The employees are shining. It's like stepping into a magical world.

"Miss Delaney!" Rochelle shoots to her feet and aims a big grin at me.

I greet her with a nod. "Where's Adam?"

"Mr. Harrison is in a meeting right now. They're trying to decide if he should continue to participate in the inventor's competition since he's running Vision Tech now."

"What?" My jaw drops.

Rochelle checks her computer. "He should be finished soon."

I start to charge down the hallway when I remember that I don't have a right to step into that meeting.

I'm no longer working at Vision Tech.

The dissatisfaction returns.

I wait in Adam's office, which used to be *my* old office, and pout until the door opens.

Adam steps in, looking like a GQ model in a button-down shirt and dark slacks. He traded his flannel and jeans to fit into office attire. And though he looks tasty enough to lick, I prefer him in his cowboy boots and casual clothes.

"Nova." A brilliant smile spreads across his face and lights up his eyes.

I shoot out of the chair and approach him.

The light in his eyes putters out when he sees my fierce expression.

"Uh-oh. What did I do?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were thinking of withdrawing from the competition?" I demand.

"Oh, it's that?"

"It's that?" I fold my arms over my chest. "Adam, you worked hard and you earned your spot fair and square. You deserve to present in the next round."

He walks closer to me, his long legs eating up the distance between us. "It's always been a grey area, but with me in the office now, it's a clear conflict of interest. I can't, in good faith, participate."

"Bull."

His lips quirk.

I turn around and lick my lips. In a cautious voice, I suggest, "If you need me to come back to Vision Tech—"

"We don't need you," he says cheerfully.

I cringe.

"The team is doing a great job. Of course, it's ironic that we needed three people to make up for *one* of you, but they're pulling their weight and making you proud. Besides, I've already won the first round of the competition. That's better than not participating at all. I can take a break and let other people have a chance to come in first."

"But you don't have to," I say shakily.

"It's okay. I'm fine with it."

“But—”

“Ooh,” Adam reaches for the bag I’m holding, “did you make the pasta I like?”

“No pasta for you.” I haul the bag back.

Adam looks up with a wry grin. “Am I being punished?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“I…” My brain goes blank. I only know that I’m annoyed and I’m not sure why.

Adam embraces me. “Nova, just say it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I mumble against his chest.

“Always so stubborn,” he mutters. “Just say you want to come back to Vision Tech.”

I tuck a braid behind my ear and frown at him. Rather than play tough, I let it out. “I want to come back to Vision Tech.”

“Was that so hard?”

“It’s humiliating. I left so dramatically.”

“And you can come back just as dramatically. If you want, I’ll rent some horses. You can ride into the lobby, declaring your takeover.”

I stare at him in mild horror. “I do not understand how your brain works.”

“It’s a *joke*, darlin’.” He grips both my shoulders and rubs up and down. “I’ve already informed the rest of the team. You can have a smooth transition into this new dynamic. The team’s responsibilities will remain the same. I’ve put measures in place to make sure they stay accountable to you. I don’t want you over-working yourself like you did in the past. With the team behind you, you’ll finish work whenever you want to and you’ll have people to run beside you. People who’ve proven that they *can* handle the strain.”

“Wait, go back. You told the team I was coming back before I even told you?”

Adam plants such a hard kiss on my lips that my ears start ringing. Without warning, he releases me and looks down with confidence. “You’ve forgotten that I know you as well as you know me.”

“That’s still too much. You couldn’t be sure.”

“You’ve been stealing my Vision Tech files from home and reading them.”

I avert my gaze. I didn't think he'd noticed that.

"And you ask me about Vision Tech's latest projects in every conversation. You really aren't that sneaky, Nova."

I scoff. "You should have asked me to come back sooner then."

"Mm-hm." He shakes his head. "I wanted you to be sure first. I know it takes you a while to figure out your own feelings. Thankfully, this time, it didn't take seven years."

I swat him with the bag.

"Careful," he says, "don't ruin my lunch."

I laugh and hand him the bag.

Adam sets it aside.

My eyes widen. "Aren't you going to eat that now?"

"That's for later. I'm having dessert first." Adam takes my hand and leads me to the sofa. He pulls me into his lap as if his door isn't sprawling open.

When I try to squirm, he holds fast. "I really love when you visit me. Whether it's here or the lab." He rubs his nose against mine. "You're the best part of my day."

I lean back. "Don't even think about trying anything in here, Mr. Harrison. You're on the clock."

"You weren't so against it last time," he says, sliding a hand up my skirt.

I swat at him. "Last time, it was late in the evening and there weren't hundreds of employees in the building. Besides, this room isn't soundproof."

"Then I'll have to fix that." He leans closer.

I close my eyes. Adam takes command of my lips and kisses away all my objections. By the time he's done, I can't remember my own name, much less why he shouldn't be bending me over his desk.

His tan hand caresses my cheek. "I love you."

"I love you," I answer muddily, still not fully in control of myself. "Is there anything pointy on your desk?"

Adam smirks and nudges me away. "As much as I'd love to answer that, we have a meeting."

"We?"

"Did you want to wait before you make a comeback? Didn't you rush all the way here to meddle?"

“I don’t *meddle*,” I defend myself. “I came over here to give my loving, handsome boyfriend a meal, as all loving, devoted girlfriends do.”

He places his fingers on my chin and drags my face closer. “You still can’t lie, Nova.”

Shoot.

I shake him off and gesture to the door. “Shall we?”

Adam laughs, rises to his full height and takes my hand. “Welcome back, darlin’.”

EPILOGUE

ADAM

I DAB PAINT on the edge of Rowan's nose and make a run for it when he comes after me with the paint roller. Nova squeaks from the middle of the yard where she was dunking the other used paint rollers into buckets.

"Too slow, Ro," I yell over my shoulder, zigzagging through the grass.

My son pumps his skinny arms and tackles me. I get a paint roller straight to the side of the face.

"Aha!" Rowan cries out in victory.

It's a short-lived sound as a bucket of water gets poured over our heads, drenching us both. Shivering, we glance up into Nova's grinning face.

"Oops."

"Let's get her!" Rowan yells.

"Charge!"

Nova's eyes widen as she sees the folly of her ways, but it's too late. I grab the hose, Rowan grabs another bucket and, with a common enemy, we become allies.

Nova doesn't stand a chance.

We corner her near the edge of the porch steps and I turn the nozzle up. Rowan throws the rest of the water in the bucket.

Nova sputters and holds up her hands in surrender.

I cut the hose and grin when she gives me a stink eye.

"You were too eager to do that," Nova points out.

I shrug.

She plucks her damp shirt away from her skin. "Ew."

I wrap her in my arms, making us both doubly wet.

"What are you doing?"

"I've got a way to dry us fast." Spinning her around, I grin when she wraps her arms around my neck and stops me.

"I'm getting dizzy."

"It's probably a side-effect from when you fell from heaven."

"That's pitiful."

"You know you love it."

She gives me an affectionate kiss on the lips. I try my best not to stick my tongue down her throat since we have an audience.

But it seems like I don't do a good enough job keeping it PG.

"You two are so gross." Rowan sinks to the grass and covers his face. "Aw! My eyes!"

Nova's lips disconnect from mine. She smirks at him. "I think he got that overdramatic side from you."

"Probably."

I set her on her feet and we all dry off as best as we can before moving inside.

"This paint got all over my skin. I'll have to take a shower," Nova says, throwing an inviting look over her shoulder.

Instantly, I imagine hoisting her up beneath the streaming rain, slamming her against every wall in the walk-in shower and utterly ravaging her.

I take an eager step toward Nova when Rowan tugs on my shirt. "Adam."

I glance down.

"You think my mural's dry yet?"

"Not sure, bud." I meet Nova's gaze and give her a disappointed look.

She winks as if to say *maybe later*.

Oh, I will definitely be taking her up on that.

With a resigned sigh, I follow my son into his new and renovated room.

Technically, it's the same old guest room.

Also, it's not renovated yet.

I managed to get the in-demand and highly lauded Sunny Hastings to agree to redecorate the room for us. She only squeezed us into her schedule because of Nova, but I've seen the mock-ups and I already know Rowan's room is about to be epic.

Even more epic than the furniture, however, is the mural Rowan designed with his cartoon characters. We've been painting the room together in the evenings. I use it as a way to bond with him and stretch my creative muscles.

But I've actually enjoyed it.

Since today was the last day, I invited Nova to help us finish up.

Now, the mural spreads out in all its colorful glory. There's a skill to the design that puts a smile on my face.

Rowan is going to be a famous artist someday. Maybe someday soon. He's already looking at starting his own art channel where he'll take videos of himself making paintings.

Now that I'm seeing the design all together, I notice there are four cartoon figures.

"By any chance, Rowan," I point, "are those... us?"

He turns shy, which is rare for him.

"I drew one for mom," he says, "then I drew one for me and you. And it didn't feel right without Nova..."

I hook an arm around his neck and bring him in for a side-hug. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want it to be weird."

"What's weird about this? It makes the mural even more awesome."

He grins, getting back some confidence.

"Adam."

"Mm?"

"Would it be weird if I called you 'dad'?"

Dumbstruck, I freeze.

"Calling you Adam is weird." His eyes skitter away. "Especially when I'm with my friends. Even Beth calls Mr. Stinton 'dad' and he's not her real dad. Bailey and Micheal do it to Mr. Hastings too and their real dad died. It's weird that I'm the only one not calling you dad even though we're actually related."

"Oh." I blink at his astute explanation. "I mean, that makes sense."

"Dad," Rowan says suddenly.

My heart climbs all the way to my throat and blocks any air from coming out.

"Dad." Rowan scrunches his nose. "It's weird."

"You'll get used to it," I say quickly. There's no way I can go back to being called 'Adam' after hearing that.

His lips curl up. "Dad?"

"Hm?"

"I'm really glad mom put me on that bus. I'm really glad I knocked on your door. And... I'm really glad I found you."

My eyes start welling with tears and it takes all my strength to keep them from falling. "Me too, Rowan."

The mood is way too sappy, so I clap his back. “Now take a shower and get ready to go to the farmhouse. And make sure you get all the paint behind your ears. Niko’s got sharp eyes. She’s not going to like you if you’re dirty.”

His ears get extremely red. “Who said I want Niko to like me?”

“I just meant as friends, bud.”

I did not.

But it’s clear Rowan can’t handle being exposed yet.

His entire face turning red, Rowan shuffles into his adjoining bathroom.

I chuckle and find my way into my room.

Nova is sitting on the bed. Sadly, she’s fully dressed but when she greets me with a small, welcoming smile, I forget my disappointment. The woman makes me weak in the knees just by breathing.

I slide my gaze up. Her hair is contained in a plastic bag and I smirk at it.

“Do I want to know?”

“It’s a black woman thing.”

“I want to know.”

She rolls her eyes. “This is day two of my wash-and-go. If I rinse out my hair, my products and gel will wash out and then all my hard work will be for nothing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And this is why you didn’t need to know.”

Have I mentioned I find this woman sexy as hell when she scowls at me?

Nova looks so beautiful sitting in the sunlight, her dark skin on fire and her eyes alive with purpose. I draw in a steady breath, hoping to slow the thudding against my ribs.

It doesn’t work.

“What?” she asks, still a little snappy.

Rather than answer, I walk over to her until I can feel her breath skittering over my cheek. My lips find hers. At the first touch, she draws me in, stirring a hunger inside that can only be satisfied by one woman—Nova freaking Delaney.

My breath catches when she twines her fingers in my shirt. I feel myself being pulled toward the bed and nearly lose my balance. Propping my

hands into the mattress, I step over her and delve into the sweetness of her mouth.

As her kiss turns insistent, I start unbuttoning her shirt, eager to feel her skin, grip her from behind and hammer the life out of her.

Heat fills the room and I'm one layer away from paradise... when I hear Rowan's bathroom door thudding open and remember we're not alone.

Nova gives me another, quick kiss before pushing herself up.

I notice her chuckling and frown. "What?"

"I'm wearing a literal plastic bag on my head and that isn't enough to stop you."

"Darlin', you could be wearing a potato sack and I'd still take you on every flat surface."

She smirks and pulls her clothes back on.

I sit beside her and run a hand through my hair. As my body settles down, I remember what I wanted to share with her. "Nova, you won't believe what just happened."

She glances pointedly down at my pants and looks back up. "Is this about to be a dirty joke or..."

"No, no. Nothing like that." I blow out a breath. "Rowan just called me 'dad'"

Her eyes widen. She understands without me having to explain more. "Adam, that's... wow. I'm so happy for you both."

"I was so shocked I kind of short-circuited for a minute." I shake my head. "I promised myself I wouldn't rush him and I'd let him call me 'dad' on his own time, but when it actually happened, I wasn't prepared for it."

"That's a sign of how much you've gained his trust and respect," Nova says softly. "You should be proud of yourself, Adam. You're a good dad. Even if you haven't been with him all his life, you're with him now. That's what matters."

I squeeze her hand, feeling complete and more grateful than I've ever been in my life. I have the woman I love beside me and my son is safe, happy and healthy.

Really, a man couldn't ask for more.

After Nova's finished with her hair, I stand and extend my hand to her. "Let's go celebrate this momentous occasion with our friends."

She places her slender hand in mine and I whisk her out the door.

* * *

NOVA

“Hey, *stranger*,” Island coos to me from her station. “Are you fed up with your natural hair again?”

“No.” I take the seat she points to.

“Then?” Island arches an eyebrow. She’s chosen a makeup look with thick, square eyebrows and a dark brown lipstick. Her hair is split down the middle. The front has two braids with beads at the end. The back is in two afro puffs.

“I’m just here for a trim. I’m keeping my natural hair until I feel like putting in another style.”

“Ooh. Look at you. Learning how to roll with the punches.” She winks and flutters the apron around me. “How’s that fine man of yours? He good?”

I smile. Maybe it’s because Adam’s softened me, but I don’t find Island annoying anymore. She might be chatty, but she’s kind, brilliant at business, and smarter than she’d like people to think. Since I’m in a season of collecting new female friends, I’m thinking of challenging myself and getting to know her.

“Yes, he’s good.” I nod.

“I heard you two made a big announcement.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“What did you hear?” There’s a rumor going around that Adam and I are already engaged. It’s not true, for one. And I have a sneaky suspicion that Adam’s the one who started it—whether intentionally or not.

“That you’re the new owner of Vision Tech.”

“Oh.” Heat flares in my cheeks.

A few weeks ago, Adam gathered all the employees together and revealed that he’d been the ‘former owner’ of Vision Tech. While everyone was gasping and absorbing the news, he called me to the front and declared me as the new largest shareholder.

It took me completely by surprise.

But not as much as all the employees. Especially the lab techs who would often talk badly about Adam or openly resent him for his

achievements. After finding out who he really was, I saw some people who'd been rude to Adam in the past trying hard not to wet their pants.

"I'm not the new owner per say. I just hold half of Adam's shares now."

"Look at you. Using your brains and body to make big moves."

"I wouldn't say it was my body—"

"Girl, we both know Adam's not with you just because you're good at business." She winks. "Now, even though that man is *my* secret husband, I'll give up the race and concede to you."

"Thanks." I snort. Island is just messing around, so I don't feel threatened or disrespected in the least.

She smiles and nudges me toward one of the stylists. "Go wash your hair and then I'll come back and shape it."

As I move out of the chair, the front door of the salon bangs open.

Everyone looks up. A man built like a tank is standing in the doorway. He's wearing a plain green shirt, dog tags and jeans.

My eyes widen when I recognize him.

Clay?

His sharp blue gaze sweeps through the room and lands on Island with an audible click. From the intensity of his focus and the scowl on his face, I can tell this isn't a friendly visit.

Island can too because she moves behind the counter with a steely smile on her face. "Can I help you?"

"Island Hayes?" Clay's voice is as rough as sandpaper. I don't remember him being so hostile when Adam and I met with him. He was to-the-point and as welcoming as a tar pit, sure, but he wasn't this... dangerous.

Clay takes a step forward.

Island stops him with a look. "State your business."

"Let's talk outside," Clay growls.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Island says, her voice calm even as her body tenses. "State your business quickly or taste a bullet from the nine-milli that I keep right under this counter for pushy, dictatorial, clunk-butts like you." She gestures down to the counter where she's got her hands hidden.

"Dictatorial?"

"You didn't think I knew big words, did you?"

Clay's eyebrows relax a bit and then they tighten as if he just remembered something. "This is better discussed in private."

"Then you should have made an appointment like a gentleman instead of throwing doors open like you're at a saloon in the Wild, Wild West. Now..." A click sounds. Island's voice is velvet steel. "This is the last time I'm going to ask you nicely."

Clay's fingers curl into fists. Island probably doesn't know he's ex-military but, from the way she's handling herself, I'm not sure which of them would draw their weapons first.

Clay slides his eyes over Island's body as if measuring her threat level. Then he narrows his eyes. "You sent a social worker over to my house."

"No, I d—" Island's expression shifts. She watches him with new eyes. "*You're* that little girl's dad?"

What little girl?

It hits me in a second.

Wait... did Island send CPS to Clay Bolton's house?

My stomach twists into knots.

Clay storms into the salon and stops right in front of Island. She's so shocked that she doesn't even move.

Leaning in until he's nose-to-nose with her, Clay's voice drops to a dark whisper, "If I lose my daughter because of your stupid meddling, then I will make your life a living hell. Consider yourself warned."

Island gathers herself quickly and snarls, "Back off and get the hell out of my shop."

Clay straightens up. His face an impenetrable mask, he looks down at Island. "I think you're mistaken, Miss Hayes. This is *my* shop."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"All your franchises are under loan agreements with United Bank." Clay lifts his chin haughtily. "And I just bought the bank."

Island's jaw drops.

Mine hits the floor soon after.

Without another word, Clay turns sharply and leaves the salon, dragging the door shut behind him.

I give Island a worried look and then glance outside to Clay's retreating back.

"Dammit!" Island pounds her hands against the counter, her face twisted in annoyance.

I don't know the full story nor do I know how things are going to unfold.

But I'm sure of one thing.

This is *not* going to end well.

* * *

Thank you for reading *Bossy Romance*. Yes! There will be more from Island and Clay Bolton. While you're waiting for Book 7, don't miss [Nova and Adam's bonus epilogue here](#).

Interested in how Dejonae and Sazuki got together?

[Tap here to dive into PRICKLY ROMANCE](#)

PRICKLY ROMANCE

EXCERPT

PRICKLY ROMANCE PROLOGUE

SAZUKI

BLINDING streaks of light blast through the windshield, spinning crazily as the car careens across the road.

In the driver's seat, Akira fights for control of the steering wheel.

A sickening crunch fills the air just as my entire body rattles.

The car falls still.

"Are you alright?" Akira asks, looking over her shoulder at me.

I nod.

Behind us, doors open and slam shut. Moments later, my protection team surrounds the car.

"I am fine," I say, calming them before they can ask.

"I did not expect a deer to come running across the road." Akira takes out her phone. "The car is damaged and you do not seem well. I will let Alistair know we cannot attend the gala."

I ease out of the car, ignoring my aching neck caused from whiplash. "I gave my word. I must be at the gala tonight."

Akira seems displeased, but she makes the call.

On the way to the event, I bend my fingers and release.

There is no pain.

Not even an ache.

But I am still on edge when I take the elevator and even as we walk closer to the banquet hall.

What would I have done if my hands were injured?

The sound of rich, decadent notes lures me from my thoughts. I stop in the middle of the hallway to listen. The player is not well-versed and yet there is something about the way they interpret the song. It is infused with feeling, a raw, unvarnished composition that's as arresting as it is unsettling.

"Sir?" My team is waiting for me.

I move into the banquet hall.

Inside, the beautifully dressed crowd is silent. All gazes are affixed to the woman on stage. She is small, dark, and pouring her heart out on the piano.

My piano.

As I watch her—eyes closed and face enraptured, my body recoils. It feels as though she is placing those hot, passionate fingers on my heart. I do not care for the way my pulse quivers. Nor do I care for the burn—a prickly sensation that reminds me I am more than the unfeeling man I have become.

My steps remain strong and sure as I storm to the front of the room along with my team.

At first, we are unnoticed. But it does not take long for a stir of whispers and startled eyes to catch sight of us.

I cross the stage.

My team forms a circle around me and the piano.

The woman's hands freeze on the black and white keys. She stares at me, fear written in the depths of her big brown eyes.

“W—who are you?”

I take a step toward her.

“What’s going on?” Her eyes dart to my men. “Why are you up here?”

I still do not respond.

Panic crests her features. Face dainty and striking. Her fear twists something deep inside me. Brings all the shards of my broken heart to life.

But I do not want to feel.

And I resent her for being the one to kickstart what I thought was dead.

I plant one hand on the piano desk. The other, I set on the bench at her hip. She leans backward wearily. Her shaky retreat kicks up the hunter hidden in the depths of my soul. *Where do you think you can run, kitten?*

“Who gave you permission to touch my piano?” I ask aloud.

Her eyes get even bigger. I can see the anxiety flooding her. Drowning her.

Such innocence. Such naivety. A crushing force against my own jaded lens.

“They told me—”

“If you were going to force yourself somewhere you don’t belong,” I cut her off, “you should have at least put in more effort.”

Her small shoulders heave and her eyes narrow. Anger slashes her brown mouth into a thin line.

I lean forward slightly. My fingertips brush over her hands. I am almost knocked back by the snap of energy that crackles from the touch.

This woman is dangerous. Fire.

I growl at her, needing to get her away from my piano. From me.
Yet I cannot resist touching her.
Lifting her fingers, I warn, “Never place these hands on something they are not worthy enough to touch.”
She snaps her hand back.
Rage radiates from her like heat waves that cling to the skin.
I motion to one of my men and they are quick to relocate the woman away from me. Even as the distance grows, the connection between us pulls and pulls.
I catch sight of her muttering curses at me before I pitch my eyes away.
Calmly, I take the seat in front of the piano.
She still lingers. Her scent. Her warmth.
A ghost in a T-shirt and jeans.
But I will not allow her to haunt me.
Uncontrollable feelings have wreaked their havoc on my life once before. I will not allow my heart—that has finally healed—to be destroyed twice.

[Tap here to dive into The Ex Proposal](#)

PRICKLY ROMANCE CHAPTER ONE

DEJONAE

THERE ARE certain things you just don't do in life.

Like accompany your chai obsessed, supermodel best friend to sneak in a latte behind her husband's back.

Or drag her three-month old baby into a vicious middle school street fight.

Or immediately fall in love with a nine-year old ninja only to find out her dad is the devil himself.

But guess who did all three?

I lift a trembling finger as I stare down the man who single-handedly ruined one of the biggest nights of my life.

"You? *You're* her dad?" I croak.

"That is what I said," Ryotaro Sazuki responds in the world's most impatient tone.

If I could find a loose stone to throw at his face, I would.

Sazuki rips his gaze away from mine. Despite his gruff voice, his touch is gentle when he cradles his daughter's face.

I start making quick comparisons. Sazuki is tall and regal. Broad shoulders taper down to a lean waist. With his silky hair brushed back, his brown eyes and chiseled jawline reveal a chillingly sharp face. Even though he's dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and slacks, looking every bit the under-the-radar billionaire that he is, there's something cold and dangerous about him.

His daughter, on the other hand, is pure sunshine. Golden-brown skin, full, Cupid's bow lips, and long curly hair that reaches almost to her tail bone. The only hint of her mixed ancestry is in the shape and tilt of her stunning brown eyes.

This really is Sazuki's daughter.

I can't believe the Lord allowed this man to *procreate*.

Sazuki mutters something in Japanese and Niko seems to understand because she nods.

Turning slightly so the sun hits his formidable cheekbones, Sazuki grunts. "What happened here?"

My jaw drops at his rudeness.

Vanya pushes her stroller forward and sets a hand on my arm. "I got this."

She's way too calm. And I can only assume that being a new parent has given her inestimable patience.

"We were out for a stroll," Vanya begins, "and overheard some boys harassing someone in the alley. Dejonae ran off like Superwoman, and by the time I got here, the boys were on the ground and your daughter looked unharmed."

Baby Ollie starts cooing like she wants to give her eyewitness account.

Sazuki inhales a deep, measured breath. His nostrils flare and, with his eyes closed, he looks more intimidating than ever.

Sazuki's daughter glances up with a sheepish expression. She pokes her dad in the shoulder. Lips moving soundlessly, she signs, "How did you find me?"

"Akira." Sazuki scans her face. "You were supposed to meet her at the school gate."

Niko chews on her bottom lip and doesn't respond.

Abruptly, Sazuki turns to us. When his eyes meet mine, he frowns in distaste.

Glad to know the feeling is mutual, jerkface.

He dips his head, still looking annoyed. "Thank you."

"Deej did most of the rescuing." Vanya gives me a dazzling grin.

Sazuki seems unarmed by Vanya's smile, which is totally understandable. The plus-sized model is gorgeous. Vanya's been rocking fashionable clothes all through her pregnancy and that hasn't changed now that Ollie's joined us in the real world.

Today, she's wearing a flowing blue dress with a plunging neckline that shows off her cleavage. Her hair is slightly curled at the ends and brushes against her bare shoulders.

Sazuki finishes his little scan and then returns to scowling at me. "Thank you as well."

Wow. Growly much? "No need to thank me. I'm glad your daughter's okay." Bending slightly, I sign to Niko. "It was nice to meet you."

She grins, making her eyes collapse with happiness.

Sazuki's shock is hidden quickly. When he looks at me this time, it's with more than just disdain. He hesitates, mouth opening and closing before he comes to some kind of internal conclusion. Hands steady on Niko's shoulders, he steers his daughter away.

Niko stops him with a slight touch on his arm and I make note of how he leans down to watch her. One of my sister's biggest frustrations growing up was not being heard when she had something to say. I can tell that Sazuki and his daughter are close by how in-tune he is to her needs.

He's still a major douche-canoe.

But he's not a... horrible dad.

"I want her to come with me," Niko signs.

The scowl that crawls over Sazuki's face is ten times darker than before. "No."

Niko pushes out her bottom lip.

Vanya inches the baby stroller toward me and peers at the father-daughter duo. "What are they saying?"

"Niko wants one of us to go with them."

"Go where?"

"Don't know."

"And which one of us?"

"I'm not sure. She didn't specify."

Just then, Sazuki's sharp gaze swings to me and I swear, it's like he's *impaling* me with his eyes.

Vanya clears her throat. "I think I have an idea which one of us he *doesn't* want, but look... his daughter is pointing to you. I think she wants you, Deej."

"I'm not going anywhere with him."

"Why not? He's cute."

"Cute isn't the right word," I mutter. Sazuki's too sharp. Too angular. Too *intense*.

"You're right. Sexy is a better word, I think."

"Aren't you married?"

“What are you? The marriage police?” She snorts.

I scowl.

“Deej, I’m married. Not blind. And I’m not looking for me. I’m thinking of you. You and Sazuki can clear up whatever happened at the gala.”

“I’m *never* forgiving him for what he did at the gala.”

“What exactly did he do to you?” Vanya asks.

“Throwing me off his keyboard wasn’t a big enough infraction for you?”

“I meant, what did he *say*?”

I shake my head. “All you need to know is that he’s rude and obnoxious and not worth my time.”

Niko’s hands are still moving at warp speed. Sazuki watches intently.

“Did you know that Sazuki’s daughter was deaf?” Vanya whispers while the two fight it out.

“I don’t think anyone knew he *had* a daughter.”

Vanya pulls the shade a little further over Baby Ollie, who’s starting to fuss. “You know he comes from a line of super famous, super rich, super mysterious musicians, right?”

“I’m familiar with the Sazuki family,” I respond dryly. Anyone with classical music training would have studied them at one point or another.

Vanya peers at Ollie. “I wonder if the reason Sazuki stayed out of the spotlight, maybe even the reason he’s moving permanently to the US, has anything to do with his kid.”

“It’s none of our business either way.” I bend over the stroller and coo, “Isn’t that right, Ollie? Tell your nosy mama to butt out.”

Vanya and Hadyn’s three-month-old stops crying long enough to grant me a befuddled expression.

A sound of abject frustration comes from behind me. I check over my shoulder and see Niko pushing her dad my way. Sazuki’s almost digging his feet into the sand to keep from coming over.

“I wonder why she wants you to go with her?” Vanya muses.

“Probably because I understand her.”

“That simple?”

“Imagine how black travelers feel when they see another black tourist in a foreign country. It’s like you know them and they know you even though you’re strangers. The deaf community is kind of like that.”

Vanya suddenly looks away. “Oh shoot. He’s almost here. Act natural.”
I roll my eyes.

Sazuki stops in front of us. He inhales a deep breath that fills his whole chest and then leaks out a resigned sigh.

“Are you busy?”

I keep my arms loose at my sides. “Yes.”

“She’s not. She’s very un-busy.” Vanya nudges me forward with her elbow.

I shoot a dark glare over my shoulder.

“*What are you doing?*” I hiss.

“Ollie’s getting fussy. We’ll head back home so I can put her down for a nap.” Vanya juts her chin at Sazuki and Niko. Her long, dangling earrings brush against dark cheeks. “Go with them.”

“What about chai?” I ask, knowing it’s her weakness.

She hesitates but not for long. “We’ll grab chai another time.”

“I’m sorry.” I frown at Sazuki because the last place I want to be is alone with him. Even if he comes with an adorable daughter. “I’m supposed to be Vanya’s bodyguard. She gave birth a few months ago and she hasn’t really recovered yet. I should make sure she gets home safely.”

“That is fine with me,” Sazuki says in his crisp accent. He tries to take his daughter’s hand.

Niko pulls away, looks imploringly at me, and rubs a circle on her chest. It’s the sign for ‘please’.

Must resist.

Must...

“Okay.”

* * *

[Tap here to dive into PRICKLY ROMANCE](#)

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