



Bossing



ME

A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

SLOAN STORM

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Thank You Very Much!

Also by Sloan Storm

Bossing Me
A Billionaire Office Romance

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Published in the United States of America.

First published in March, 2019.

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DESCRIPTION

"BEDROOM OR BOARDROOM, CHERRY. IT DOESN'T MATTER. I'M ONE HUNDRED PERCENT IN CHARGE."

Those words are burned on my brain.

Spoken by none other than my billionaire-bastard-of-a-boss, Rex March.

He's part empire builder, part dream crusher.

Controlling. Demanding. Hard as steel.

Feared by his enemies. Loved by more women than a rock star.

And he's the man I'm relying on to save me from financial ruin.

I know. Smart, right?

Rex swooped in with his bag of money to rescue my cosmetics business.

I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

Our spark is instant, undeniable but
surrendering to those urges comes at a price.

I've traded everything for one shot at success
and love.

Will Rex be the hero of my dreams or my own
special ruin?

PUCKER UP (CHERRY)

O *h. My. God.*

This wasn't happening. What was he thinking? What the hell was he doing?

More important, why wasn't I trying to stop him?

I wasn't one of *those* women. Everyone knows the kind - the kind who kisses her boss!

That *wasn't* me. Or was it?

Considering he'd just pressed his tender, hot lips hard into mine and I'd done nothing to stop him, *umm yeah*, looks like I am one of those women. His powerful hands held me suspended somewhere between right and *oh so wrong*. I couldn't find a breath in my lungs, my body prickled with desire.

I'm not stupid. The tension existed between us, building since the first day we'd met.

But even if I'd been truthful about the feelings he stirred in me, experiencing them like this was the absolute last thing I wanted to do.

I swear.

I struggled, squirmed and did everything short of slapping him but nothing worked. In a split second, all eyes were on me.

Yeah, that's right.

Eyes!

No sooner had he done it than a collective gasp came over the room. My ears *burned*, whispers and chatter from a flock of voyeurs echoed in my head. Without looking, I sensed the faces of jealous women twisting into scowls and frowns, slut-shaming me with venomous glares.

Not that it mattered to *him*.

He moved closer.

"Cherry," he said, his voice vibrating.

My body *tingled*.

Distracted from the awkward spectacle for a second, I looked at him. Our eyes met and I struggled to keep my wits.

God, he smelled good. A heady blend of vanilla and tobacco, a scent I'd grown to crave, permeated my senses.

No, no, no. Please, please snap out of it...

I wanted to, I really did.

In spite of the gaggle of onlookers leering in our direction, my pent up desire got to me. How much

longer could I fight it? After all, it wasn't supposed to happen this way.

Hell, it wasn't supposed to happen at all!

But true to his nature, he'd taken me by surprise, shocking me and the crowd with his aggression. He'd gone *way* too far. This *is not* what he was supposed to do.

That's just soooo like him though, doing everything *his way, always* without asking.

Breath returned to me in small gulps. My blood pumped hot and fast, racing to my face and sending of wave of fire across my cheeks.

I'd heard rumors about him having this effect on women.

I mean, who hadn't?

Still, it's not like I was powerless. It's not like he'd *forced me* to do it.

Oh wait, yes he had.

No matter, I had to refocus. After all, as everyone knows, I *do not* put the moves on guys - no way. Also, I most certainly was not the type of woman to let a man do whatever he wanted.

Yet here he was, *doing just that*, claiming me in front of everyone I knew. Hell, maybe that's what made it all the more exciting, I really didn't know. My mind was of little use to me in those red hot seconds.

However, in spite of my brain fog, I did know one thing...

I cared!

There was no shortage of reasons I shouldn't.

For starters, my *entire family* was there... My mom, my dad, *shit*, my little sister. After everything we'd been through, there was no telling what they were thinking.

Ugh!

And could this be less like a regular office romance, please? Of course it was nothing like the typical cat and mouse pursuit, coming to sweaty fruition on top of a desk in a dark, scandalous enclave.

No, just my luck it happened in front of a throng of people and at my first red carpet event no less! Everything I'd been working for, sacrificing to achieve, now on the verge of vaporizing before my eyes.

And the reason for it was inches away from me, his turquoise blue eyes holding my rapt attention. Yes, my entire future flashed before me and it was all thanks to this hard-bodied, hunk-of-a-man, my billionaire boss...

Rex March.

From the *instant* I first met him, my life had been nothing but a whirlwind. Barging into my existence, unannounced and uninvited, Rex swept my dreams up into a frenzy, just like he'd corralled me into his arms that night.

As the heaviness of that awareness set in,

unease crept up my spine. Briefly, I snapped out of the trance-like state he'd brought about in me. Everything about the situation screamed for me to break free of him, wrestle myself loose of his powerful grasp.

However, I'd never been this close to him.

No matter how bad my mind might have wanted me to run screaming from the room, my body betrayed me - *this* is what it wanted.

Then, a sudden realization came over me.

Had he *used* the event as an excuse?

Was I what he *really* wanted?

Is this what he meant by being *one hundred percent* in charge?

I wriggled one last time in his arms. A hard swallow crept down my throat. Gathering myself, I focused.

"Please, let go," I whispered, putting as much strength in my tone as I could.

A wry smile spread across his face, deep dimples cut charming grooves into his five o'clock shadow.

It all happened so fast.

Where did the time go?

WHAT'S MINE IS MINE (REX)

Holding her against me, I licked my lips. She tasted incredible, even sweeter than the thin layer of tasty passion fruit gloss coating her mouth.

My cock pulsed. *Damn!*

In all my years of doing deals, she's the only one who'd ever made me violate my "one rule".

Now that I'd done it, I wasn't turning back.

Otherwise, she was lucky the room was full of people. A momentary fantasy of taking her right then and there scorched my gray matter. That's how hot the desire she'd stoked inside of me burned.

Still, it'd been well worth the tortuous wait to hold her in my arms.

Friends, family and enemies - they all looked on, *leering*. I didn't care who saw or what they

thought about it because I'd never been so sure of what I wanted. Nothing would stop me from having it.

Taking it. *Taking her.*

From the first second I laid eyes on Cherry, I knew this would happen. The only thing I didn't know was when or where. And anyway, those are just goddamn details.

Here's the thing... I *always* get what I want and I wanted everything she had to offer.

Could I have done it differently?

Yeah, maybe, but that's not me.

Truth be told, the awkwardness of the whole situation made it all the more fun. Being super successful is incredible, don't let anyone tell you different. But sometimes, you gotta have fun, even when it means risking everything - *especially* when it means risking everything.

That's one of my biggest strengths, taking chances others won't.

You know, having *balls*.

Honestly, I think it's why most people fail in life - they worry too much about what others think. So they muddle through, trying to appease everyone from cradle to grave and what do they wind up with?

Yep, a pathetic excuse for an existence!

Abandoned dreams, lost goals, crushed spirits and for what? Fretting about the opinions of

desperate, jealous bystanders too afraid of life to step out of their comfort zones and take a chance?

The hell with that!

Me?

I assume everyone is envious and wants to see me fail. That way, I have nothing to lose. In fact, that mindset is what led me to all my success, and more importantly, to her.

Cherry quivered in my grasp.

I'm pretty sure no one, least of all her, expected something like this but that's just the way I wanted it. From day one, I'd kept my libido at bay but damn it if the anticipation didn't get the better of me in recent weeks. Every time I saw her and watched those full hips swing from side to side, I almost forgot there was more to Cherry than just the physical.

A hell of a lot more - millions of dollars more, in fact.

Was I taking an even bigger risk by doing this to her, in this place, at this time?

That's hard to say.

Most of the time, all you can do is what you think makes the most sense and let things play out - life will tell you whether you're right or wrong. Risky or not, the opportunity I saw in her, *with her*, gave me all the confidence I needed to take a chance.

Don't get the wrong idea though - Cherry's not

some fling and this wasn't *only* about getting my dick wet.

In the short time I'd gotten to know her, she'd proved my initial hunch about her to be right. Cherry wasn't like any other woman I'd ever met. She had it all and I wasn't about to let her slip through my fingers.

Speaking of my digits, I hooked my hands around her midsection, curling them just above her waist. Of course, she resisted. The tension in her body traveled into my hungry mits, setting the tips of them alive with a need to get at the ample flesh beneath her clothes.

Pulling her closer to me, I pressed her full tits against my body.

Only one thing left to do now...

FREIGHT TRAIN A COMIN' (CHERRY)

TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS EARLIER

Chewing on my lower lip, I stared at it for like the *ten thousandth* time that day.

The giant red X on my whiteboard wall calendar mocked me from across the room, taunting me once more. My entire body remained frozen in place, butt stuck to my chair - glued there by a sense of impending, and inescapable, *dread*.

No way were we going to get this done in time. *Zero chance*. It seemed like every day brought more chaos, drama and roadblocks.

What had I gotten myself into?

It could've been just as easy, hell, *a lot easier* to keep things simple, small.

How had I decided this was something that I wanted?

Was it because of my family?

What drove me?

I exhaled. It didn't matter. At this point, there was no turning back. One way or another, we had to find a way forward and do it soon.

It wasn't just me, everyone felt the stress.

Cue the family drama...

“Dad! This is the fifth time today!”

The sound of my little sister's voice echoed along the walls of our small manufacturing facility. Even with my office door closed, there was no mistaking the frustration in her voice.

Closing my eyes, I reached up and rubbed my temples.

Not again.

I stood, shoving my college dorm room chair away from my butt. It banged into the wall behind me, rattling its wheels. The years hadn't been kind to it. My first adult furniture purchase, now a shadow of its former self - a sad mish-mash of duct tape and zip ties keeping it on life support.

Heading toward the sound of another argument, I grimaced. Their bickering grew worse by the day. I wrapped my fingers around the knob and ripped the door open.

My Dad's voice boomed. “Quit yelling, Em!”

I turned my attention to the unfolding battle. My dad, Frank, stood there with his arms crossed. Emily, my sister, held her hands on her hips.

“What's going on now?” I asked, taking several steps toward them. “I was just out here not thirty

minutes ago!”

Emily shook her head. “Dad is being impossible, he...”

Dad interrupted her. “No, we already talked about this. You aren’t listening and...”

I cut them both off. “Enough, enough! If this is about the labels again, I don’t want to hear any more bickering. Swear to God.”

I stopped talking for a second. Sometimes the threats worked, sometimes not so much. They glared at each other without any acknowledgment of what I said. I pursed my lips and glanced around the room, noticing a suspicious absence.

“Where’s Mom?”

My dad took his attention off Emily long enough to at least look at me.

“She had to run a quick errand.”

Truthfully, that was fine by me.

At this point, it was just one less person I’d have to comfort or coddle. That’s what I felt like these days - like a babysitter, for God’s sake. It’s not like I enjoyed it, I didn’t. Raising my hand in the air, I made a *come-hither* motion with my index finger.

“It doesn’t matter where she is. Forget it. Both of you come with me. Now.”

After walking back inside my office, I spun in place and plopped down on the edge of my desk. Curling my fingers around it, I braced myself while

I sat.

I lifted my chin and nodded in the direction of the calendar.

“How many more times do I need to go over this? You guys know the delivery date will be here before we know it. The constant back and forth needs to end. If it doesn’t, we’ll never get that order for Masters done in time. Honestly, I mean... I can’t believe we have to keep talking about this.”

Their rigid body language softened, sheepish looks framed their faces. By my estimate, this conversation entered its tenth minute. Add a half dozen of these and it’s an hour wasted each day - we didn’t have time for that!

I let out a long exhale.

“Didn’t you guys agree about the solution to the label problem like, an hour ago?”

Neither one of them offered a response, instead both nodding at me in silence.

“All right, there’s nothing we can do about a long-term fix right now. We are just going to have to make do.”

I stopped and pointed at my chair.

“Look at that thing. Do you see me complaining? I’m lucky I haven’t been killed! We have old crap, beat up equipment, but we have to make it work.”

Closing my eyes, I inhaled before continuing.

“I realize things are cramped out there. I know

we're stretched to the limit but we've got to find a way to keep pushing forward. Please. I'm begging you... Okay?"

Looking into their eyes for a response, I thought back to when they first came to help me out about a year ago. At the time, tons of naive fantasies flooded my mind. I mean, what could be more fantastic than working with my family every day?

Don't get me wrong...

Sometimes it *was* great, even better than I hoped. But other times, *especially times like right now*, it was pretty-much-not-at-all fantastic. If I'm being honest, the situation was my own fault. I'd still not gotten used to treating my family like employees.

I know. I know. Not the best way to run a business.

But it is what it is, we had to keep going. I stood up and rounded my desk, heading toward my chair.

"Are you guys going to find a way to get along for the rest of the day? I really need to focus in here."

After muttering some half-hearted agreement with me, my sister and father shuffled out of my office, closing the door behind them. I could only hope for some peace and quiet.

God knows I needed it.

I wheeled my ailing chair back into position. After propping my elbows on the edge of my desk,

I dropped my head into my hands and tried to clear my mind. What was that old saying again? Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it?

I don't know, something like that.

All I did know is the "being careful" part started to make a lot more sense to me. Reaching across my desk, I picked up my original strawberry lip gloss formulation, opened it and inhaled.

The scent carried me back to my freshman year in college.

I looked at the gloss. It was never supposed to be anything more than a way to make a little extra cash. Glancing in the direction of my office door, I thought about my entire family out there working and helping me to chase my dreams.

It'd gone far beyond a fun freshman project. Everyone depended on me to deliver now - in ways I'd never imagined. Closing the gloss, I tossed it on my desk with a casual flick of the wrist.

I could feel *IT* looking at me again, drilling a hole in to the center of my soul. Drawing my gaze up, I looked at the big red X once more.

I gave it the finger. "Fuck you."

ON THE PROWL (REX)

“**I**’m really looking forward to you taking a larger role at the company, Sam. With your background, you’re going to make a tremendous impact.”

This probably wasn’t what she envisioned for herself when we first met but in the long run, this would still be a hell of a deal for her.

A smile came to the corner of her mouth. Reaching up, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear before responding, “You know a lot more about these kinds of things than I do.”

Part of me wanted to tell her that she was right - I did.

However, it’s also important to be empathetic. This transition would take time but the good news is we had plenty to spare. I stood from my chair and nodded at her.

“I’ll walk you out.”

Rounding my desk, I touched my stunning blonde-haired, blue-eyed executive on her upper arm. In these situations you have to be careful, because the wrong goddamn message gets sent fast, especially considering the history between us.

At the same time, I did respect the hell out of her. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have done what I did. But, that was then and this is now. To move forward we had to leave the past behind. I only hoped she could do the same.

We passed through the threshold of my office.

“Thanks again, Sam.”

Without breaking her stride, she looked at me over her shoulder and smiled. It seemed genuine enough. I suppose only time would tell the truth about how she felt.

“Never gets easier,” I muttered, shaking my head.

Once she disappeared from view my secretary, Daphne, caught my attention. Sitting at her desk, she appeared engrossed in what she was doing.

Unfortunately, it didn’t look like goddamn work.

Strolling over toward her, I noticed a handful of what appeared to be lip gloss samples scattered across her desk. I stopped a couple of feet away, sliding my hands into the pockets of my pants, waiting for her to notice.

I might as well have been a ghost - standing there for several minutes before she even bothered to look up, let alone take a breath.

Talk about obsessed.

When it became clear my presence wasn't going to be enough to distract her, I cleared my throat. She looked up at me like I'd caught her stealing something.

“Whatcha got there?”

She kind of nodded and grunted at the same time. It was a strange, semi-guilty sound. Half-looking up at me, Daphne responded, “Hmm?”

I smiled at her and chuckled. It wasn't unusual for her to get distracted but Christ, come on.

“On your desk,” I said, pointing. “What is that?”

That did the trick. Without hesitation she snatched up one of the lip gloss samples and looked at me. A gleeful expression came to her face.

“Ohhhh,” she cooed. “Cherry's Berries...”

Now, I pretty much know my industry inside and out. Cosmetics are a big part of it. That said, I'd never heard of Cherry's Berries.

Daphne held the sample up, extending it toward me.

I leaned in a fraction, squinted my eyes and focused on the lip gloss but before I could ask any questions about it, my secretary went off the rails with praise.

“It’s the best I’ve ever used, the taste, the smell, the feel on my lips... Mr. March, you have no idea... I...”

With that, she covered her mouth with her hand. Muttering, Daphne shook her head back and forth.

“Sorry Mr. March, I didn’t mean that,” she said, her hand falling away from her mouth. “I mean, I love your stuff, it’s just that...”

I shrugged her off. Besides, she had my attention. “It’s no big deal.”

“Let me see,” I said, extending my hand.

She passed me one of the samples, strawberry something. I looked at her for a fraction of a second. Her eyes widened while I lifted the sample toward my nose. Before it even got there, the aroma hit me, blasting my nasal passages with the scent of homemade strawberry jam.

“Hmm,” I said, taking another whiff. “How is it on your lips?”

Daphne slapped her hand against her chest, covering her heart, “Oh my God, like, you can’t even... I don’t even know what to say.”

Shaking my head, I passed the sample to her. “That good, huh?”

“No, it’s not good - it’s the best. The *best* I’ve ever used.”

Daphne took the gloss and placed it inside of the box like a cherished family heirloom. She had

my curiosity up, that's for goddamn sure.

"How did you find out about it?"

"Hmmm," she muttered nibbling on her lower lip. "I don't really remember, I think it was online or something. Like, a blog maybe?"

While she answered my question, I picked up the packaging and looked at it. Sure enough, there it was, the domain name plastered across the bottom of the box - www.cherrysberries.com.

"Where did you get the sampler?" I said, turning the package around, making sure the name of the website faced her. "Did you buy from them or someone else?"

My secretary pointed at the box. "I got it from them, that website right there."

I nodded. "Okay, thanks."

She smiled at me. "Are you sure you're not upset with me, Mr. March?"

"Why would I be upset? If things turn out like I think - you could be in line for a nice raise."

Relieved, Daphne beamed at me. "Oh wow, are you serious?"

"Very."

A little while later with my feet up on my desk, I kicked back, fired up my mobile browser and headed to the Cherry's Berries website. Once there, I checked everything out, including reviews. Based on Daphne's excitement, it didn't surprise me to see an overwhelming percentage of them positive.

In spite of all the good news, one thing jumped out at me. They had *zero* retail presence - the products were only available for purchase on their website. For something with such obvious appeal, that mystified me.

On the other hand, it could be a huge opportunity.

I continued browsing the site, clicking on the “About Us” link. In no time, the owner’s picture filled the screen of my mobile phone. Cherisse “Cherry” Clements looked to be in her early twenties and an absolute beauty - fiery red hair and deep green eyes, a color like the first blades of grass in spring.

My cock twitched.

After getting an eyeful of her, I reminded myself the product came first.

The “one rule” trumps all - *I don't let my cock make business decisions.*

There were plenty of opportunities here, wider distribution being the most obvious. It wouldn't be long before some of the people I knew went calling, trying to get in on the ground floor.

Hmm. Maybe they already had.

Whether I'd make a pitch to become an investor or just work out some kind of royalty share with them for my connections, I'd have to do it soon. The most important thing right now was taking action, the minor details can always be

ironed out later.

Reaching for my office phone, I called Daphne.

“Yes, sir?”

“Clear my schedule for tomorrow morning,” I replied. “Actually, make it till mid-afternoon.”

I could *hear* her face twisting into a grimace on the other end of the line.

“Okay? Was there any particular reason? I mean, you’ve got a couple of conference calls in here. What should I tell them?”

“Just reschedule them. It’s no one’s business what I’m doing.”

“All right.”

“Daphne?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’m going to be paying an impromptu visit to the manufacturing location of Cherry’s Berries. Can you make sure Eduardo gets directions?”

After hanging up with her, I leaned back in my chair once more. Even though most deals don’t amount to much, this one felt different.

I looked at her picture again. “Very different.”

STRANGER DANGER (CHERRY)

My sister barged into my office without knocking, sending me out of my chair like a terrified cat.

“Jesus Christ, Emily!” I yelled. “I’m super freaking busy! What do you want?”

My sister’s breath came in huge gulps - bordering on panting.

“There’s a... guy, well, not just a guy, I mean, he’s really hot. But that’s not all, he...”

My sister turned her back on me. Strands of her dark hair swirled around her neck and upper back while she looked in the direction of the mysterious man lurking beyond the walls of my office.

She stopped talking.

I frowned. “He... What? What is *he* doing?”

She just stood there, her shoulders rising and falling, keeping time with her rapid breaths. Still,

she didn't say a word.

"Emily?" I said, rolling my eyes and squeezing a pen in my hand. "Hello?!"

My tone of voice snapped her out of her trance long enough to get her to look at me.

"You were saying? There's a guy?"

I sensed her sloooowly coming back to me. Whoever this person was, whatever he wanted, he'd thrown my sister for a loop.

"Yeah, sorry," she replied. "Sorry. He um, he's out there asking questions. All kinds of questions."

I made a circular gesture with my hand, encouraging her to continue. "Okay? Questions about what?"

I'd never seen Emily like this. Her skin flushed red, giving her the appearance of a human thermometer.

"Oh, I don't know, I mean, everything! The business, the products, our manufacturing process... when I say everything, I mean everything!"

Masters Mercantile. A spy!

Without a second thought, I headed toward her.

I'd heard stories about spies for Masters keeping constant tabs on their new suppliers. They were well-known for taking chances on new brands but also notorious for being ruthless with them. If they somehow found out about the trouble we were having with the initial order...

Ugh.

I didn't even want to think about it.

"Let's go," I said, gesturing toward the door.

Heat radiated in my armpits. My entire body flashed with waves of cold and hot. With every step I took, I worried the future of our fledgling business might be in the hands of an ominous, yet *super-hot* corporate spy, lurking on the manufacturing room floor.

I'd anticipated every possibility. Except this one. If it was a spy for Masters, I wasn't so sure we'd be able to get through it unscathed.

Soon enough the stranger came into view.

Emily wasn't kidding. He was seriously good-looking.

Wow.

When I left my office moments earlier, I'd done so with my head held high, shoulders back and chin up. But the closer I drew to him, the more my knees weakened.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Right now was not the time to give into my libido. The only problem was that, well, it had been like, *forever* since umm, you know.

It'd been a while. We'll leave it at that.

Keep it together, Cherry. Keep it together.

Collecting myself, I continued to walk in his direction, every vertebra in my spine aligning with purpose. A mix of caution and doubt coursed

through my veins. Emily peeled off, leaving me to fend for myself but not before eyeballing me with a look of anxiety.

Yeah, not helpful.

But before I could get a single word out, the stranger beamed a big smile at me. The flash of bright white stopped me dead in my tracks, mere feet from him. He extended his hand, connected to a ramrod straight arm, self-confidence radiating from each fingertip.

“Rex March.”

Like that was all he needed to say.

In a way, I guess it was. I didn't know the face, at least in any kind of familiar way, but I definitely knew the name. He was a legend in the business, a billionaire and only thirty years old.

Well, at least he wasn't a Masters spy. On the other hand, I might've been better off if he was. I mean, at least I would have known why he was there.

But, Rex March? I didn't have a clue.

I tried to collect myself, re-focus my attention on the strangeness of his visit and get the situation handled.

“Yeah, I don't mean to be rude but technically, you're a competitor. Unless you tell me something reassuring about why you're here, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.”

He just kind of, I dunno, stood there?

The seconds crept by while he took in the entirety of the manufacturing floor, ignoring me at the same time. Rex turned in my direction - the ruggedness of his chiseled jawline dug a crater in my resolve.

Crap.

And those eyes... Getting too close to those brilliant blues would do me no good.

Double crap.

“Ask me to leave?” he began, ignoring my surging lust. “Why? I just got here.”

Smugness curled his lip upward, forming a mischievous smile. At this point, I felt like I had a couple of options. Walking over to the door and throwing him out was one. The other, and probably the smarter one, was listening to what he had to say.

I decided to listen. I mean, I’m not stupid.

A man like this wouldn’t waste his time. The dangerous part, the part making me want to grab him by the collar of his shirt and drag him out of there, was the meaning behind the visit.

Why was he here?

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Okay,” I said, reaching up and crossing my arms at my chest. “I’ll give you thirty seconds to tell me what you’re doing here. That’s it.”

From behind, I heard the shuffling of footsteps - my family. I sensed them staring, eyeballs boring

into my backside. I didn't care. At this point, the only thing that mattered to me was the order with Masters Mercantile.

Entertaining a playboy billionaire was pretty low on my list of priorities.

"Thirty seconds huh?" Rex said in response. His jaw tightened and he stepped toward me. "I only need ten."

His smug attitude rubbed me the wrong way. Who does this jerk think he is?

"You know," he said, winking at me, "you should be flattered that I'm here considering..."

That word, *considering*, it just kind of hung out there like laundry on a clothesline. It wasn't an insult but it might as well have been.

Clenching my jaw, I glared at him. "Considering what?"

While I stared, Rex walked past me.

Okay, so I should probably add that not only was he physical perfection from head to toe but smelled incredible - like *knee-knocking* incredible.

Keep it together. You've got this. Just need to hold my breath for a few seconds.

While I refused to allow his scent to affect me, I watched while he approached each member of my family, glad-handing them like a presidential candidate. Stunned, I looked on at my family's slack-jawed, wide-eyed reactions to him.

Every introduction was the same, well-

rehearsed and undeniably potent.

“Rex March, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Even my own father, a man who probably spoke ten words while I grew up, seemed entranced by Rex.

Great. Awesome. Just what I need right now.

Trying to get control back, I interrupted him when he leaned in to kiss my mother on the cheek.

I mean, come on... Really?

“Guys?” I said, clearing my throat for emphasis. “Would you all excuse us? I need to have a word with Mr. March, in private.”

Rex froze, inches from my mother’s crimson-colored cheek.

“Maybe another time,” he said, flashing his charming dimples at her.

I shook my head. *This guy is too much.*

Before long, it was just Rex and me on the manufacturing floor.

He didn’t waste any time. “I admire your directness with your family. I know it’s difficult to work in these kinds of situations.”

With the manufacturing floor empty, I was a lot more interested in getting to the reason behind his visit than collecting congratulatory slaps on the back from him.

“Again, I don’t mean to be rude - I’m just super busy. Let’s try one more time. You said I should be flattered you are here, *considering...*”

I ended the sentence with a leading tone, making it clear he should fill in the blank or head for the exit.

He nodded. “Probably came across poorly. I apologize.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Look, why don’t you just tell me what you’re doing here.”

Turning his back on me, Rex clapped his hands together. The sound of the impact echoed like a small thunderclap in the cramped warehouse.

“I won’t waste your time. I’ve heard good things about your products - a lot of very good things.”

He stopped in place and did a slow turn, facing me again.

“I already know quite a bit about your fledgling enterprise here.”

Rex said it in a way that made it seem like I should be impressed he’d taken an interest. With that, he turned away from me again and took deliberate steps across the cement floor, the sound of his expensive alligator loafers *clip-clapping* on the ground with every step.

“What began as a desire to fix your own problem, extremely dry and chapped lips, blossomed into something unimaginable. I know you started while you were still in college, selling your handmade formulations to anyone who would buy them. It wasn’t until you got the recognition of

Desiree Golden that your business took off.”

He paused, arching an eyebrow at me. “And that’s why you’re in trouble...”

Moisture escaped from my mouth, the dryness a symptom of wondering how much he knew, or suspected. Either way, it wasn’t reassuring. Not only did he know my history but he’d nailed the growing pains we were having...

I forced a difficult swallow.

At this point, I began to wonder if he knew about the Masters Mercantile order as well.

I mean, anything was possible.

As if my indecision and anxiousness weren’t obvious enough, Rex just stood there, looking at me, *through me*... It’s like there was no doubt in his mind about how right he was.

Of course, *he was right*, but what did that mean?

I still had no idea why he was there.

“I’ll take your silence as proof my guess is pretty close to *one hundred percent* accurate.”

Rex winked at me again. I’d already tired of it, no matter how cute it might be.

“The only thing my silence reflects is my skepticism of you.” I snapped. “Now, I’m not going to ask you again. What do you want and why are you here?”

While I talked, Rex picked up one of our samples and rolled it between his fingertips.

“Fair enough,” he replied, looking at me. “It’s my business to stay on top of the latest and greatest products in my industry. When you think about it from that point of view, it only makes sense I’d be interested in what you’re doing. Don’t you agree?”

I shook my head. “But, *why* though? You have tons of different lines of gloss. Why would you be interested in what we’re doing?”

Rex waved me off. “Because that’s my job. Just like your job is growing your gloss line, mine is growing March Enterprises. That job never ends, Cherry.”

Ooof.

Something about the way he said my name sent a tingle down my spine.

Not good!

He took a couple of steps in my direction.

I stiffened my spine. “My name. Is Cherisse.” I snapped, trying to squelch whatever the hell was happening inside of me.

“Okay, Cherisse.” He chuckled. “I’m also here because I can sense a business opportunity when I see one. There’s room to grow your product line outside of your website.”

Uh, talk about insulting!

It’s not like we were just sitting around waiting for Rex March to rescue us. Getting the order ready for Masters Mercantile would guarantee us the visibility he mentioned.

“We’ve got that under control,” I said, wanting to tell him where to stick his “big idea”. Instead, I kept my cool. “Thanks, though.”

Rex nodded at me. “So... Who’s the big order with?”

I didn’t bother responding. Besides, it’s not like I could. The agreement I signed with Masters made any discussion about it impossible.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Ah, it’s Masters then, is it?”

Shit.

By some miracle, I didn’t blink or give him any indication he’d guessed right. I chalked it up to pure luck - no other explanation fit.

It didn’t matter. Rex seemed convinced.

“I can help you with Trent. We go way back.”

I hadn’t even met Trent Masters, the CEO of Masters Mercantile. We’d only dealt with his team but to discover he and Rex were BFFs? *Great.* This world was a lot smaller than I imagined.

“I’m fine,” I began, shifting my weight uncomfortably to one side. “Thank you for the offer though.”

He closed to within a foot of me. Everything masculine about him permeated my senses. All of my instincts were telling me to resist the next words out of his mouth.

Only, he didn’t say anything.

Instead, he reached inside the pocket of his suit

coat, pulled out a business card and passed it to me.

“When you’re ready, give me a call and we can talk about it. That’s my cell. I promise, I’ll make you a fair offer.”

Offer? Offer for what?

Without a word, Rex turned and headed for the exit. I glanced between the card and his tailor-made suit, clinging to the backside of his muscular, perfect ass.

“Damn.”

DIGGING DEEPER (REX)

““**M**arjorie, it’s Rex. Is Trent in? I need to have a word with him.”
“He is,” Trent’s personal secretary said. “Hold on just a second.”

Truth be told, Marjorie always had a little crush on me. Even though she was nearly my mother’s age, I enjoyed having fun with her. Anyway, it meant she always tracked Trent down when I called.

I hadn’t left a message for him in *years*. What can I say?

Perks.

He picked up. “Hey man, long time no talk.”

Trent and I went way back, more than a decade by my count. He’d transformed his family business into a global department store behemoth. Shrewd and tough, Trent also had a ton of integrity, not to

mention a nose for opportunity.

“No complaints,” I replied.

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s doing well, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear that you asked about her.”

Trent chuckled. “Yeah, I bet. So what’s up? Why am I getting the privilege of a call today?”

The movers and shakers in every industry all know each other - mine’s no different. Cherry’s deal had to be with Trent. Nothing else made sense. Now it was time to get the confirmation I needed.

“Want to talk to you about Cherry Clements.”

“Hmm,” he muttered, “never heard of her.”

I smiled and leaned back in my chair. “Don’t bullshit me. Cherry’s Berries, the lip gloss line.”

“Nope, not ringing a bell.”

“Oh, my mistake then.” I replied. “So, I guess when I take over the operation, I won’t need to worry about keeping your order at the front of the queue. Good. Frees me up.”

Trent exhaled, grumbling into the receiver. “All right, I’m listening. Do you want to tell me what this is about?”

Even though I’d planted the seed with Cherry about a possible deal, I couldn’t predict what she’d do next. I had a hunch I’d hear from her but entrepreneurs can be difficult.

This was especially true for someone like her. I didn’t have to hang around the warehouse for long

to see she'd gotten them to where they were by a ton of hard work and effort. Business owners like that tend to be the most tenacious in negotiations.

Yes, they were in trouble - any investor with two eyes could see it. But convincing a strong-willed businesswoman she needed help, *and a lot of it*, well that would take some time.

As for Trent, judging by the tone of his voice, my interest in her caught him by surprise. My guess is he thought he'd scooped the market. If it wasn't for my secretary, he might have.

My silence didn't go unnoticed.

"Hey," he began, snapping me to attention. "Are you going to tell me why you are so interested or am I going to have to beat it out of you?"

"I think you already know the answer. You never know where the next billion-dollar idea is coming from, isn't that right? Even the most basic of products, like lip gloss, can blow up if positioned correctly and marketed effectively."

"Uh huh," Trent muttered. "Let me guess. You're just the guy to do it, right?"

I smiled.

"Well, let's put it this way... Who do you trust more? Would you rather put the reputation of your flagship store on the line with an unproven product and inexperienced management team or would you be more comfortable having someone in the mix you know you can count on?"

“Why are we talking in code here?” Trent asked. “Why don’t you just get right to it? How did you find out about them? Are you thinking about making an offer to buy them out?”

Normally, Trent wasn’t the impatient type. It made me all the more confident in my hunch - Cherry had a winner. It’s rare, as in never, that I see Trent so focused on the prospect of an almost unknown product.

I continued, “I’ve been by their manufacturing facility, spoken with Cherry.”

“And...”

“Well, I think that you and I both see a lot of potential in her. It’s the same old story though, growing too fast for their own good. They’ve got a serious cash flow issue on the horizon.”

Trent paused. “I don’t like the sound of that. Am I going to get my order?”

I couldn’t blame him for wanting to know the answer. Reverse our roles and I’d feel the same way.

He continued, “If this is going to go against me, just tell me now. I’ll pull the plug on the whole thing.”

I had his attention.

“As of right now, I don’t blame you for feeling the way you do. You have good reason to be concerned.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s tough and determined but that won’t be enough. Cherry’s going to need a lot of luck.”

Trent paused, exhaling. “Well, my team really believes in her. They gave me the all clear. Hell, until this phone call I hadn’t even given it a second thought.”

“Well, there you go.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My gut tells me the same thing about her. The timing is problematic, much more so for you than me.”

“You make a good point,” he said, after a brief hesitation. “And, you’re probably right. Even so, I think we’re going to go ahead with the order. Long-term, the risk is small even if the whole thing turns out to be a shit show.”

I nodded while listening. “True. Limited downside, lots of upside.”

“So, what about you?” he asked. “Are you going to make her an offer?”

“Not sure,” I replied, mulling over the question. “If I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

Trent chuckled. “Can’t wait.”

After we hung up, I leaned back in my chair, interlocking my fingers behind my head.

In spite of all its warts, Cherry had a good thing going. But, did I want to be part of it? After years of doing deals I’d learned to trust my instincts, believe in my gut.

This time, there was more to it than just a simple transaction. I wanted to know what made *her* tick, why she interested me so much. Her beauty captivated me, her tenacity inspired me.

Still, the “one rule” kept my urges in check.

I decided to sleep on it.

STORM CLOUDS (CHERRY)

I sat at my desk and flicked at the corner of Rex's business card while I waited on hold to talk to my supplier.

The most critical ingredient in our gloss - extra virgin coconut oil - hadn't yet shipped. Unfortunately, it took the better part of a year to find a reliable, eco-friendly source in the Philippines. Since then, we'd had no issues, that is, until Maribel came into my life.

She was a real bitch, *believe me*.

However, Maribel wasn't someone I could yell at... or fire.

Nope, Maribel, a Category 5 typhoon, hit the islands with disastrous consequences. The good news, if there was any, is that no one was injured and the facility was functional. The bad news was our key ingredient could be delayed by up to a

month.

To make matters worse, no matter how many times I talked to my supplier, Dave, the news never seemed to get any better. I hoped today would be different - and in a good way - because we needed it.

The line hissed when he picked up. I flicked the business card across my desk and stood.

“Hey, sorry about that,” he said. “Crazy around here and...”

Having no time for small talk, I cut him off.

“Can’t we just get a partial shipment? I thought there was enough stock left over. Isn’t that what you told me before the storm?”

I dragged my fingers through my hair and closed my eyes, hoping against hope the news would fall in our favor.

He didn’t hesitate. “Afraid not, Cherry.”

Stay calm. Stay calm. Breathe...

“Dave,” I began, trying to keep my tone steady. “I’ve waited on this almost as long as I can. If I can’t get something from you, and soon, I’m going to miss my shipment deadline. If I do, that’s going to be the end of us. It’s just not possible for this situation to be any more serious.”

“I’m well aware of that,” he replied, his tone terse. “We have this discussion almost every day. I’m not sure what else it is you want me to tell you at this point. I’m very sorry. I’m doing everything I

can.”

If I hadn't sold Masters the formulation with this coconut oil, I might, *might* have considered a domestic source. But no way in hell would I chance it now. I had no idea whether or not another oil would alter the formulation and integrity of our gloss.

It wasn't a risk I wanted to take, not yet anyway.

“I'm sorry,” I said, “I know you're doing the best you can. If anything changes, good or bad, please let me know right away.”

“Will do.”

Part of me wanted to slam the phone back into its cradle. However, doing that wouldn't solve anything. Right now, I needed clear thinking and calm nerves. Rex's business card caught my attention again.

I swear it talked to me. I'm serious.

“Pick me up, Cherry... You know you want to.”

“Shut up.” I snapped.

Staring at it, I had to admit Rex knew more about my problems than I realized. Pursing my lips, I reached for the card and picked it up from my desk.

Should I?

What was the worst thing that could happen if I called him?

Hah! Who am I kidding?

No doubt he'd be smug and condescending. Hell, what else should I expect from someone who *never* loses? Still, with my options dwindling, putting up with some grief from him wouldn't be the worst thing.

I exhaled. *Screw it.*

Snatching my phone from its cradle, I dialed and slid into my chair. Once the ringing started, I reminded myself I was only *listening*. It's not like I had to make a deal with him.

And anyway, it's not like he'd offered me a deal.

He'd said, "Fair offer."

Nothing more.

He answered, "Rex March."

Oh crap.

"Yes, um, Rex," I stammered. "This is Cherisse Clements. We..."

He cut me off. "How could I forget that voice?"

He didn't say anything else, leaving me to fill the void.

"Okay, yeah," I began, my mind muddled by his reply. "I'm not even sure why I'm calling. I just thought..."

Rex interrupted me again. "I'm guessing it's because you aren't going to be able to get that order ready for Masters Mercantile. Is that it?"

It wasn't like I could admit he was right. There

was nothing I could say about the order one way or the other. Instead, I tried a different approach.

“Well, as you know, I can’t say anything about deals I’ve made, or not. Anyway, that’s not really why I’m calling.”

“It isn’t?”

“No.”

Rex paused. “Okay, go ahead. I’m all ears.”

Over the next few minutes, I confessed my dilemma with as much vagueness as possible. I told him about the problem with the coconut oil and how it impacted production.

“Can’t that be sourced somewhere else?” he asked. “It seems like a point of failure since the entire line can be held up by something like this. Wouldn’t you agree?”

It’s not like I hadn’t thought about this, fretted over it a million times, including today.

“Okay, so I’ve tested dozens of oils from around the world. This one is far and away the best one I’ve ever used. It’s not something I’d ever be willing to compromise on.”

Rex sort of grunted into the receiver. I didn’t know him well enough to know if he agreed with me or not.

“Cherry, I think it takes a lot of guts for you to do what you’ve done. After all, you’re the one supporting your entire family by taking on the risk that you have. Failure isn’t something to be

ashamed of, it's just part of the learning process. It's also the only way to become successful.”

His understanding caught me by surprise - I got so little of it in my everyday life.

He continued, “The only question is... How badly do you want to win?”

I'd never thought about my company that way.

The entire time I'd run my business, making ends meet was the only goal I had. Some months I got lucky, putting a little extra in the bank. I didn't have time to sit around thinking about “winning” when survival seemed hard enough.

If I were still fending for myself, that'd be one thing, but there were other people involved. My entire family counted on me and I couldn't let them down.

I wouldn't.

“Winning” started to sound better by the second.

A deep breath passed between my lips. “Okay, um, what's the next step?”

“We get to know each other better,” he replied without hesitation. “You'll need to come to my office in Beverly Hills so we can talk about this in person.”

Reaching up, I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. This was the first time I'd ever even considered making a deal with anyone for the company. I had no idea what to expect.

“You’ll need to bring all of the financials with you. I don’t want to leave anything to chance. Do you understand?”

I slumped in my chair. My stomach sank. “Yes.”

“Great,” he replied. “And Cherisse...”

“Yeah?”

“You are making a smart decision,” he said, his tone dripping with confidence. “We’re gonna do great things together. You have my word on that.”

I thanked him and after agreeing to meet him the next day, I hung up the phone. Reaching up, I covered my face with my hands and groaned.

Ugh, the financials.

The truth is the financial aspects of running the business weren’t my strength. Numbers made my head swim. Product creation and marketing, that’s where I’m comfortable.

Luckily, I’d turned all my accounting over to a bookkeeper early on. I swallowed hard and hoped the numbers weren’t so bad he’d throw me out of his office.

The truth of the matter was that I really didn’t know.



I HAD my meeting with Rex scheduled for ten in the

morning. Unfortunately, my brain *did not* get the message.

No. I woke up at three o'clock.

Then four.

Then five and...

Ugh!

Up hours early, the rest of the morning didn't go much better. On top of not sleeping, I singed my tongue on scalding hot coffee and burned my oatmeal - in the microwave!

How is that even possible?

I mean, stuff I didn't even have to think about caused me nothing but problems.

Don't even get me started on my hair.

And, of course, the way to Rex's office meant driving against traffic and into the mid-morning sun. By the time I arrived - burnt, hungry and half-blind - I wanted to crawl back into bed and start over.

In spite of it all, I managed to arrive fifteen minutes early and pulled into the parking lot for March Enterprises, double-checking the address at the same time. Muttering it to myself, I looked at the number on the building, comparing it to the one I'd entered into my mobile.

They matched.

Small victories.

As for the building itself, it was pretty close to what I imagined - a giant, gleaming structure -

testament to the power and prestige of its boss.

Or something like that.

I shook my head and continued on, pulling my car into a spot. Looking in the vanity mirror, I checked my makeup and hair, salvaging what I could.

“Ugh.” I groaned. “What I am doing here?”

Before closing the mirror, I reminded myself. “Trying to save my company.”

After entering, I made my way across the sparkling marble floor and toward a large bank of elevators. The doors opened and a man appeared, wearing a coat and cap, like a doorman in an expensive condo.

He smiled at me. “What floor?”

I’d never been in an elevator with a valet. Hell, I’d hardly used valet parking! Not that I would valet my piece of crap. But anyway, there he stood, waiting for me to answer.

“I, umm, I’m going to see Rex March.”

The man looked at me and nodded.

“The big boss. Sixtieth floor coming up.”

The big boss?

After an ear popping ascent, the elevator came to an abrupt stop.

“Executive suite, madam.”

Madam? Wow, fancy.

I nodded and smiled at the man. Getting off an elevator with a valet who called me “madam”, I

half-expected to get a hot towel for my face.

Didn't happen.

"Thank you," I said, exiting.

After leaving the elevator, I noticed a desk ahead of me. A brunette woman sat behind it with a phone against her ear.

This is it.

Summoning my courage with a deep inhale, I straightened my posture and walked in her direction. Along the way, I couldn't help but notice the minimal furnishings and decor. Considering the spectacle of the building itself, the contrast stuck me.

Before I reached the desk, the woman hung up the phone and bent over in her chair, disappearing from view by the time I arrived.

"Excuse me," I began, clearing my throat. "I'm..."

The woman didn't look up. She didn't even turn her head.

"Yes, Miss Clements, Mr. March is expecting you."

I hesitated. "Umm, okay, which way do I..."

Just then, she lifted her head and smiled at me. Next, she angled her body, leaning in her chair and craning her neck down the hallway.

What the hell?

She turned and looked at me. Extending her hand, she introduced herself with a whisper.

“My name is Daphne. I’m a huuuge fan of your lip gloss. Like, I use it every day, seriously.”

I started to thank her but she raised a finger to her lips.

“I have to watch what I say around Mr. March. Sometimes he gets grumpy about competition. I’m not sure how he feels about you though, so I have to play it safe. Still, yay! I’m so excited you’re here!”

With that, she stood from her desk and beamed another big smile at me, her voice turning businesslike again.

“Right this way, Miss Clements.”

I smiled and shook my head. Adjusting the strap of my bag on my shoulder, I followed her down the hallway. Before long, she stopped in front of a large door, knocked and cracked it open.

She poked her head inside. “Mr. March, Miss Clements to see you.”

She turned around. “Go right in.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you.”

I walked inside. Rex sat behind his desk on a phone call. After I closed the door, he motioned for me to approach and sit in a chair across from his desk.

While I did, I noticed that, just like the furnishings in the lobby, Rex kept his office decor to a minimum. I slid into the chair, placing my bag in my lap right around the time he hung up.

“Welcome,” he said, easing back in his oversized chair. “Any trouble finding the place?”

“No,” I replied. “There are not a lot of sixty story buildings in Beverly Hills.”

A slight smile came to the corner of his mouth.

“Beautiful, smart and witty - a deadly combination.”

Shifting in my chair, I smiled at him. “It’s gotten me this far.”

Rex chuckled and started to stand. “Ready to talk?”

I stood and followed him to a sleek glass conference table overlooking all of Beverly Hills.

“Your furnishings,” I said, walking behind him, “for such a huge place, they’re understated.”

Rex stopped at the table and pulled out a chair. Gesturing for me to sit, he said, “There’s nothing worse than inefficiency and waste in business. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I swallowed hard, tightening my grip on the bag holding the financials. If we didn’t have inefficiency and waste in my company, we wouldn’t have anything!

Eesh.

I tried not to think about it. After all, it would only be a matter of time before he found out.

“Thank you,” I said, sliding into the chair he’d pulled out for me.

After I’d taken my seat, Rex pulled up a chair.

He didn't say a word, he didn't have to - a vibe of quiet power and confidence radiated from him. I can't lie, the *intimidation feels* swirled in all directions.

Keep calm, Cherry. He came to you. Remember?

Rex placed his hands on the table, interlocking his fingers. "This won't take long, Cherisse. Did you bring the documents I requested?"

"Yes."

After removing them from my bag, I passed them to Rex.

"Thanks."

He took them from me and then... went silent.

A cocoon of absolute focus overcame him. I'd never seen anything quite like it. Every so often he would grunt or make a humming sound.

Uh, huh. Hmm. Ahh, okay.

By the time I glanced at my cell phone, nearly twenty minutes had passed. Soon after, Rex finished reading, closed the folder, and slid it toward me. Before he spoke, he sputtered a deep exhale.

Uh oh.

"I've got to be blunt, Cherisse. By my estimation, you're only a month or two from going under. Without that deal from Masters, your cash flow dries up."

I felt my eyes widen. How did he know about

Masters? The answer wasn't long in coming.

"Don't worry, I called Trent myself. He knows we've been talking."

I nodded at him. "I uh, um, okay."

The revelation didn't do much to calm my nerves, in fact, it only made things worse. I wondered what else they talked about.

"It's true, that order is significant. I'll give you that much and you are to be congratulated for it. However, based on the way I saw things running at the warehouse, It will be nothing short of a miracle if you get it delivered on time."

I wasn't sure where he was going with this.

Is he interested or not?

The way he talked, we were headed straight for bankruptcy.

I shifted in my seat. "So what are you trying to say?"

Rex shrugged and leaned back in his chair, casually draping his hand over one arm.

"Well, it's like this. You've got potential, no question about it. But, to really make this thing fly, there have to be a lot of changes made."

I grimaced at him. "What kinds of changes?"

"We can talk about that when the time is right."

He sat up in his chair and reached for the folder containing the financials. Patting on it, Rex turned and looked at me.

"Based on what I've seen here, I'm prepared to

make you an offer. But first, I have a couple of questions for you.”

I nodded at him. “Okay.”

Rex spent the next few minutes asking me a series of probing questions, mostly surrounding trademarks, patents and naming rights. He wanted to know who had control of them - the company?

Feeling like an idiot, I shook my head.

“No,” I began, clearing my throat. “I, um, never bothered to transfer the rights to the company. I always meant to but I’ve been so busy, there wasn’t time. They’re all in my personal name.”

Rex didn’t have a big reaction. He just nodded.

“I see. Well, that can be fixed when the time is right. Anyway, I’m prepared to offer you one million dollars in exchange for a majority stake in the company. This investment will be made after a period of thirty days.”

A million bucks!

“The deal also includes an upfront infusion of capital in the amount of two-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars. That will be enough to shore up your short-term cash flow needs.”

Another two-hundred-fifty-thousand! He had me at one million.

“However, the upfront cash comes with a catch. If you take it and for whatever reason the deal doesn’t work out in the first month, you are required to pay me back within ninety days from

the date the arrangement is terminated.”

Wow. Talk about a lot to think about.

“Okay, umm... The two-hundred-fifty-thousand. You said if things don’t work out, I have to pay it back.”

Rex maintained eye contact with me. “That’s right.”

“Why, exactly?”

“Good question,” he replied with a nod. “The thing is, I’ve made lots of deals over the years. Some go well, some don’t. I learned long ago it’s best if everyone agrees on all the terms in advance. No surprises. Make sense?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“If you don’t like the offer, you don’t have to take it. There’re no hard feelings on my end. I have to protect my interests just like you have to protect yours.”

Two-hundred-fifty-thousand here, a million there. I wondered what it would be like to have that kind of power, the power to change peoples’ destinies with the stroke of a pen.

“Cherisse, do you understand all of this?”

I looked up at him. “You said a majority stake?”

He nodded at me. “That’s right.”

Looking away, I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms. I assumed he’d want a big piece of the pie but a majority?

No.

“It’s just... I’ve always been in control of my business. I’m not sure. I don’t know how I feel about giving that up.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, you’re not alone. Most entrepreneurs I deal with feel the same way.”

Rex leaned forward, turning toward me.

“But here’s what’s going to happen. If you don’t take the deal I’ll just wait until you go bankrupt and then buy the naming rights, trademarks and formulas from you for pennies on the dollar.”

Frowning, I turned and looked at him.

“However, that’s not an outcome I want for anyone, especially you. Wouldn’t you rather have a partner who’s interested in helping you become successful? That’s the reason you’re here isn’t it? I’ve got all the connections. I can make things happen that you can’t.”

While he spoke, I nibbled at my lip. Though frustrating, what he said made sense.

Still. A majority?

“I don’t know. Um, I just don’t know how I feel about giving up what I’ve worked so hard to build.”

“I understand,” he said. “It’s a difficult decision. However, you’ll have to find a way to come to terms with it because that’s not something I’m willing to negotiate. If you want my money, you’re going to have to do things my way.”

He slid the folder containing the financials

toward me. I reached for it and opened my bag.

“I understand,” I began, putting them back inside. “I just need some time to think about it, talk it over with my family and my attorney.”

Rex nodded at me and began to stand up.

“Absolutely. I’ll have a copy of my proposal sent to you in the morning. You’ll have seventy-two hours from then to make a decision - not a minute more.”

While he spoke, I stood up and slid the strap of my bag over my shoulder, smiling at him.

“No matter what I decide, I want you to know I’m grateful to you for taking an interest.”

Rex straightened his jacket. “The pleasure is all mine, Cherisse. I’m looking forward to a successful future together.”

“You know what? You can call me Cherry.”

“Okay.” Rex fell silent for a second, maybe two. Our eyes met. “Cherry.”

Just then, the door to his office opened. I turned my head and an older woman made her way inside. Rex began to walk in her direction, stopping and touching me on the shoulder.

“Excuse me.”

He continued on and I prepared to leave, following not far behind him. I noticed the woman staring at me, like, looking me up and down. I’m not normally suspicious but I got the feeling she was judging me or something.

By then, Rex leaned in and kissed her on the cheek before turning and facing me again.

“Cherry,” he said, gesturing toward her. “I’d like you to meet my mother, Gwenny.”

Extending my hand, I smiled at her. “Nice to meet you.”

She hesitated, looking at my outstretched fingers like they might infect her. At last, she touched her hand to mine. I’m not kidding. She grazed her fingers against my hand, making no effort to shake it before walking past me - without a word.

Bitch.

I looked at Rex. He shook his head.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

A few seconds later, I watched the elevator doors draw together until his handsome face disappeared behind them.

After the ride down, I exited the building, stopping for a second to turn and look at it once more. Drawing my eyes up the massive structure, I sensed how insignificant my world seemed. I’d hoped the meeting would bring some certainty to my small company and the future for my family and me.

It hadn’t.

OLD WOUNDS (REX)

I found it hard to get a read on Cherry. On paper, yeah, she needed my help. But, entrepreneurs are different than most people. They always think the best is ahead of them.

The hard goddamn truth is most of the time, it isn't.

If her company continued down the same path, Cherry would find that out soon enough. In spite of her reservations about my offer, I suspected there was a fifty-fifty chance she'd take me up on it.

Reaching my office, I noticed my mother across the room, looking out the window.

I grimaced. The way she'd greeted Cherry pissed me off.

Time to get to the bottom of this.

With that, I closed the door behind me and she turned around. As usual, she didn't waste any time.

“Flavor of the month?”

I shook my head at her and walked toward my desk. “No, she’s got a lip gloss line I’m interested in.”

Now heading in my direction, she scoffed. “Uh huh.”

“What’s with you?” I replied, frowning and sliding into my chair.

She didn’t answer my question, blowing me off instead.

“Nothing.”

If I wasn’t so damn busy, I might’ve probed a little bit more. On the other hand, I’d never met a woman my mother wasn’t suspicious of to some degree. For the most part, I ignored it. Besides, I had important business to conduct.

Grabbing a pen from my desk, I looked up at her. “Are you ready?”

My mother let out a groan. “I can’t believe you’re really going through with this.”

While she talked, I snatched the document from the front of my desk and spun it around, getting any eyeful of it.

“Really? I would think of all people you would understand, more than anyone.”

“It’s been more than twenty years, Rex,” she said, crossing her arms and fixing a scowl to her face. “I’ve moved on from your father’s infidelity. Why can’t you?”

We'd had this conversation hundreds of times.

I didn't care.

I loved every second of getting my revenge on him, almost as much as I loved building my own fortune. The satisfaction of driving his import business into bankruptcy was unlike anything else I'd achieved. And now, the final nail in the coffin looked up at me from my desk.

Glancing up, I caught my mother's glare. "You know, this took almost ten years to pull off, not to mention millions of dollars. It was worth every goddamn penny."

"I'm not going to congratulate you," she began, lines of disapproval etching deeper across her brow. "You need to learn how to forgive."

While she blabbed on, I signed it. After, I looked at her again.

"Forgiving is for losers. All it does is give the terrible people in your life permission to abuse you."

My mother lifted her chin, a realization dawning on her. "Now that you've destroyed him, what will you use for motivation in your life?"

"Don't worry about me. I've got plenty of motivation."

She didn't respond.

"Do you want to talk about anything else?" I asked. "If not, I've got to get back to work."

My mother looked down at her hand while she

flicked at a fingernail. “What? With that girl’s lip gloss line?”

“That girl... has a name.” I snapped. “It’s Cherry. And yes, I am more than interested in her company.”

“My, my... Cherry,” my mother said, shaking her head, and letting out a snarky chuckle. “What a delightfully trashy name.”

I glared at her.

FAMILY MATTERS (CHERRY)

The next night I drove to my parents' house for our monthly family dinner; the same one we'd had for as long as I could remember.

Most of the time, it was great - a chance for us to relax, have fun and talk about anything *except* business. But tonight would be different, even if they didn't know it yet, all thanks to Rex March.

Since meeting with him I hadn't been able to focus on much else. Sure, he made an incredible offer but giving up almost everything in exchange still didn't sit right with me. Even after thinking it over for almost a day, I wasn't any closer to making a decision.

To make matters worse, I had to let my family know.

It's not like it was a big secret we were having

trouble getting the Masters order finished. Hell, we worked together on it around the clock.

It would be easy to justify talking to Rex. In fact, they'd probably be supportive of it, if not for one teensy, weensy detail.

Which is totally my fault.

See, I'd always promised them ownership in the business but just like with the naming rights, trademarks and formulas, I'd never found the time to get around to it.

Now, instead of making a place for them, I'd met with a complete outsider who wanted to take majority ownership. Where would that leave them?

Ugh.

What was I thinking?

After pulling into the driveway, I turned off my car and sat there - hands fused to the steering wheel by doubt. I lowered my head toward it, tapping a couple of times and breaking into a steady chant.

"Everything will be fine."

"Everything will be fine."

"Everything will be fine."

After a third time, I realized I sounded more like Dorothy trying to escape Oz than a supposedly successful CEO.

Get it together Cherry!

Minutes later, I walked inside, calling out, "Where are you guys?"

"In the dining room!" My mom yelled.

I entered, surprised to see they'd already sat down and started to eat. "Geez, thanks for waiting."

My sister looked up at me. "I texted you like five times. Didn't you get my messages?"

I slung my bag over the back of the chair. Sitting down, I grumbled a reply.

"No, I mean, I'm not sure..."

"How are you not sure?" she said, frowning at me. "You either got the texts or you didn't."

I didn't feel like getting into a whole thing with her.

"Look, I'm sorry I'm late. Can we just eat and forget about it?"

My sister ignored my comment, instead passing the casserole to me.

"You could have at least brought a dish with you."

Without thinking, I curled my fingers into a fist and banged on the table. "Stop it!"

My mother groaned, "Girls, enough."

"Why are you always sticking up for her?" Emily snapped.

I glared at my sister. "What are you talking about?"

"Hey! Hey!" My dad bellowed. "You heard your mother. Now, that's enough. Knock it off."

My sister shot a nasty look at me. Snatching the casserole from the table, I took a couple of

spoonfuls and passed it to my dad.

For the next minute or so, we didn't say a word to each other - only the sound of silverware clanking against plates broke the silence.

Some family dinner!

A few forkfuls in and I'd already had enough. What little appetite I did have disappeared after fighting with Emily.

Even if we managed to turn the company in the right direction, it seemed like the family couldn't be.

While I sat there, poking at my food, I became aware they'd all stopped eating. Looking up, I noticed them staring at me. My mom and sister both looked at me for another second or two before turning their attention to my dad.

Following their lead, I frowned at him. "What?" He shifted in his seat.

"Dad, whatever it is. Just say it."

"The coconut oil," he began. "From the Philippines, there's no way we're going to get it in time."

I dropped my fork onto the plate. Shrugging, I looked at each one of them before returning my focus to my father.

"What do you want me to say? I'm doing everything I can. There's a typhoon, you know. In case you've forgotten, I am not God and can't control the weather."

My dad sat forward. “Cherry, none of us are accusing you of not doing your very best. That’s not the point.”

I took a deep breath. This is not what I needed.

“We’ve been talking - the three of us. We feel like it would make sense to find a domestic source for the coconut oil, just in case.”

This wasn’t the first time they’d come to me with this idea.

Hell, it’s not like I hadn’t fretted over it myself!

Up until now, deliveries weren’t a problem. Under no circumstances did I want to compromise but with each passing day, sticking to the decision grew more difficult.

I looked at my dad again. “Is that all?”

“Isn’t that enough?” he replied with a shrug.

“I hear what you’re saying. But again, we’re not going to be dealing with any domestic suppliers. In fact, I’m working on something that will hopefully buy us some time.”

My family exchanged glances with each other while I continued speaking.

“I’m not sure exactly how things are going to play out. Right now I’m thinking it over. I just need time to think.”

“There’s no more time, Cherry,” my dad replied without hesitation. “You know that. If you’ve got an idea to get us out of this mess, you need to share it. Now is not the time for keeping secrets.”

My mother and sister shifted in their seats. It wouldn't be long before they were jumping down my throat, as well. Truth be told, I probably deserved it, at least a little bit.

Anyway, I raised my hands in the air.

“Okay, okay,” I said, clearing my throat. “I wasn't sure how or when I would tell you guys about it. I guess now is as good a time as any.”

Confusion spread across each one of their faces. Over the next few minutes I came clean, telling them about the meeting with Rex. I let them know how much he'd offered and what he wanted in return. When I'd finished, I leaned back in my chair.

“And that's where things stand right now.”

My dad spoke first, asking the most obvious question.

“What about us? Did you talk to him about the equity you've promised?”

“He's aware of everything. I told him how important it is to me, keeping my promise to you guys. Right now though, we've got to get through this crisis. If we don't, there won't be any ownership to divide.”

“Cherry,” my dad began. “You started this company but we've helped you build it every step of the way. Promise you won't keep us in the dark. That's all we ask.”

I looked at each one of them. “I promise.”

Later on, after getting in my car, I took one last look into my parents' home. They were all in the kitchen, probably talking about me - about my meeting with Rex.

I *hated* the growing disconnect between us.

What's more, I worried bringing Rex into the business could make things far worse.

Time was running out and so were my options.



THE DEADLINE WITH REX LOOMED.

Not gonna lie, I wrestled with the decision.

On the one hand, an investment from him took a ton of pressure off. On the other, I worried it might create other problems, stuff I hadn't even considered.

Even so, I still had time.

Like, thirty minutes.

While I waited on hold to talk to my supplier, I doodled on a piece of paper, trying to figure a way through this on my own.

Again.

If I could somehow, someway, get him to deliver, a chance existed to salvage the Masters order, fix our cash flow problems and not have to sign over control to Rex.

A long shot? Hell, yes. But, what else could I

do?

I *had* to try.

Just then, the “on hold” music stopped.
“Cherry. What can I do for you?”

Seriously?

“Dave, do you really need to ask me that question?”

I’d probably called him fifteen or twenty times in the past week. Each time the tone in his voice carried less sympathy and more frustration.

“I’m not sure what it is you want me to tell you. I don’t have any updates about the shipment. When and if I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

While he talked, I wondered if this is what “being at your wits’ end” felt like.

I lowered my head into my hand.

Christ.

Not having any more time to spare, I hung up the phone and grabbed Rex’s proposal from my desk. I held it in my hand, realizing I had no other alternative. If I didn’t take the deal, we wouldn’t make it. If I did, at least we’d have a chance.

Or so I hoped.

Failure is a funny thing. Most of the time it’s easy to spot. You try something and it doesn’t work, you’ve failed.

But the company hadn’t failed - *it grew too fast.*

No one ever told me about this kind of failure.

But math never lies. The agreement in my hand confirmed it. If I didn't take Rex up on his offer, we'd go bankrupt, a victim of our own success.

How does that even make sense?

To hell with it.

I picked up the phone and called his cell.

"Cherry," he said, satisfaction in his tone. "I've been looking forward to your call. Am I going to be happy with what you've got to tell me?"

I hesitated. If I gave him the answer he wanted, that's it, Cherry's Berries would no longer be the company I created.

Rex noticed my silence. "Cherry? You there?"

"Yes, I... I'm here. Sorry about that."

"Not a problem. Is everything okay? Have you had a chance to talk over the agreement with your family and your attorney?"

I plopped down in my rickety office chair, tossing the agreement onto my desk.

"Yes. I've discussed it with everyone."

"I see," he said, his tone turning serious. "And what have you decided?"

Sliding my fingers into my hair, I closed my eyes, dragging a reply from somewhere deep inside.

"I've um, decided to go ahead. I'm going to take you up on your offer."

Hearing the words pass through my lips felt like an out of body experience.

Was this happening?

“I realize it probably doesn’t feel great right now,” Rex said. “But these situations are never easy. Trust me when I tell you that a year from now you’ll look back on this day and laugh.”

Of all the things I thought I might do, laughing wasn’t one of them. I know he was just trying to make me feel better but I wasn’t in the mood.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am,” he replied. “I am.”

Getting out of my chair, I began to pace around my office. A pit formed in my stomach, a bodily symptom of my mental state.

“Ok well, what do we do next?”

Rex paused. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s take care of it tonight over dinner. Do you know where *Bistro Bistro* is?”

Bistro Bistro?

Yeah, it’s only the most expensive restaurant in Beverly Hills. Before this conversation, the closest I’d ever get to eating there is diving in the dumpster behind it.

Only that’s not what I said. I opted for something less visual.

“Yes, I’ve heard of it but it’s a little bit out of my price range.”

“Cherry,” he said, chuckling at my confession. “Tonight’s on me. One day when you’re rich and famous you can return the favor.”

I realized that probably sounded pretty stupid.

But, I'd never been around rich people. This would take some getting used to, no doubt about it.

"How does eight o'clock sound?"

I paused and glanced at the agreement again. "Sounds good. I'll see you at eight."

"Great, I'm looking forward to it."

I almost hung up when his voice caught my attention. "Cherry?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to bring the agreement with you. You'd be surprised how often that happens."

By that time I'd reached my desk again. I traced the signature line with my finger, staring at the place where I would sign my future away.

"I won't. I promise."



IF SIGNING my life away to Rex March wasn't bad enough, being forced to valet park my fourteen-year-old beater at the most exclusive restaurant in Beverly Hills took a close second.

Getting out of the car, I looked at the valet and arched an eyebrow at him. I doubted he even had a learner's permit.

"Are you dining with us tonight, ma'am?"

I ignored his question, this was no time for games.

“Listen,” I began, looking him in the eye. “Don’t ride the clutch. If you do, you’ll flood the engine and I’ll be stuck here for hours.”

Smiling, he passed the claim ticket to me. You’d think I’d be worried, *no panicked*, about a million dollar deal.

Really, I should be.

But I soooo did not want to get stuck out here and have to *call my dad at midnight* to come rescue me.

I mean. *Right?*

Xander reassured me. *Yeah, Xander.* “Don’t worry ma’am, I’ll take good care of it.”

I took the ticket and studied him, watching for any signs of weakness.

“I’m serious, *Xander*. Don’t you ride that clutch. You think I’m kidding. I’m not.”

“Enjoy your meal,” he replied, nodding at me. “You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

With that, “*Xander*” jumped inside. Stepping onto the curb, I watched with anticipation. The car jerked a little bit and then *a lot*, and before I blinked a second time...

Stalled.

Jesus! Xander!

This was the absolute *last thing* I needed. I stormed over toward the car while *Xander* climbed out of the driver’s seat.

“What did I say about the clutch?”

He stammered a half-hearted apology while I motioned for him to get out of the way.

“I swear to God,” I muttered, getting into the car again. “If this thing gets stuck here...”

A few minutes and several failed attempts later, I banged my head against the steering wheel before Xander caught my attention.

“Ma’am?”

I turned and looked at him. “What?”

“You um,” he muttered, “you can’t leave your car here. It’s blocking the valet entrance.”

I snatched my purse and jumped out of the car, pointing at him.

“That’s not my problem,” I said, gesturing in the direction of the restaurant. “I’ve got a very important dinner in there. Now, I told you what to do but you didn’t listen. I can tell you this car isn’t starting any time soon. Moving it out of the way is your problem, not mine.”

“If you don’t move it,” he began, his tone of voice carrying the emotion of pencil shavings. “We’ll have to have it towed. Company policy.”

“Towed!” I snapped. “If you know what’s good for you, you won’t.”

Christ! I had to get inside!

“Look,” I said, pointing at him, “just push it out of the way. It’s downhill to the garage from here. I’ll deal with it later.”

He shook his head. “Can’t. Company policy.”

Oh. My. God.

Out of time, I dropped my purse on the curb and pointed toward the car.

I cannot believe I am doing this.

“Get inside and put it in neutral.”

Soooo yeah, there I am...

Dressed for a dinner at the most exclusive restaurant in Beverly Hills, trying to make the most important deal of my life and now leaning with all my might against the dusty, dirty backend of my junker.

I squinted and groaned and used every ounce of strength I had.

Nothing!

Stepping back, I glanced at the lights on the back of the car.

Uh! Damn it!

“Xander!” I yelled. “Get your foot off the brake!”

With that, the lights flickered off and I dug in for one last try. If I couldn’t budge it, well, I guess they’d have to tow it because I was out of time.

“Come on.” I groaned. “Please. Just once!”

No sooner did I finish than I felt the tiniest hint of the wheels giving way and starting to turn over. I re-doubled my efforts, pushing with all my might until at last, I sensed the car separate from my fingers and coast away.

I watched Xander pull down the hill and park.

Thank God. Well done, Xander.

Looking down at my dust-covered hands, I shook my head in disbelief. If this was any indication of how the rest of the night would go, I wasn't optimistic. Snatching my purse from the ground, I turned in the direction of the restaurant and moved as fast as I could.

I'd deal with my piece of crap car, and Xander, later.

Crisis averted, I turned to walk into the restaurant, made a beeline for the ladies' room and tried to salvage what I could with no time to spare.

Before leaving, I took one last look in the mirror.

Calm down.

Breathe.



AFTER EXITING the restroom and finding the hostess, I followed her to Rex's table. We rounded a corner, coming upon a dimly lit enclave.

I froze.

Rex sat there, but not by himself.

A striking, beautiful woman sat next to him. She looked to be in her early thirties, blonde and more than comfortable in his presence.

Who was she?

A girlfriend?

Wife?

For some reason, whether or not Rex had someone in his life hadn't occurred to me. I mean, it's not like it mattered. I'm not even sure why I began thinking about it.

Oh wait, yes I am.

I knew exactly why. He is H-O-T, *HOT*.

Now it made sense.

The hostess kept moving toward them while I lagged behind, my thoughts about his availability occupying my mind at the worst possible time.

Strictly business, Cherry. Strictly business.

The hostess gestured toward the table.

"Thanks," I said, smiling at her.

By the time I turned toward the table again, Rex stood and walked up to me. Without a word, he leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

"Cherry, glad you could make it."

Fine hairs from places I didn't know I had them sprung to life, sending a pulse of desire through me.

Uhhh, what the hell was that?

Instead of acknowledging my reaction, Rex pulled away like it never happened, turning to look toward the pretty blonde at the table.

"Cherry Clements, I'd like for you to meet Samantha Criss."

Holy shit! Samantha Criss!

It couldn't be. I mean, Criss Cosmetics!

Growing up, I loved her stuff. Who didn't? It was easily the hottest cosmetics brand on the planet. Somehow or another I'd moved on from those products but I still remembered them.

If I wasn't careful, she might be subjected to a torrent of fan-girling word vomit. After taking a split second to control myself, I smiled at her.

"I am, was, a huge fan of your stuff. I used all of your products at one time or another, Samantha. I mean, Miss Criss. Mrs.?"

Ugh. Smooth, Cherry.

She smiled, extending her hand toward me. "Thanks, you don't know how happy I am to hear that. By the way, you can call me Sam."

I reached for her hand but before I could say anything, Rex spoke.

"Criss Cosmetics, a wholly-owned March Enterprises company. Isn't that right, Sam?"

Shaking Sam's hand, I glanced at Rex.

Wholly owned subsidiary? What's that all about?

"Cherry, Sam is going to be helping you with my investment in Cherry's Berries. She's been through the drill before. You'll be in good hands with her. Isn't that right, Sam?"

Huh?

This was news to me. I didn't know what to make of any of it but before I could say anything, Sam stood from the table.

“Cherry, it was nice to meet you. I’m looking forward to working with you soon.”

I smiled at her while Rex leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, just like he had with me five minutes earlier.

Okay, what is going on here?

The questions piled up - not the least of which was that Rex appeared affectionate with the women in his orbit. However, like the kiss he’d given me minutes earlier, Sam’s wasn’t sexual. Even so, I’d call it a *touch* beyond polite.

I watched Sam walk away. Maybe Rex picked up on my confusion - it’s hard to say. Anyway, he gestured toward the table.

“I know you’re probably a little confused. Everything will make sense soon, I promise. Have a seat.”

Putting the strangeness out of my mind, I did as he asked. Rex took a seat across from me.

“Did you bring the purchase agreement with you?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Reaching inside of my purse, I pulled out the agreement and placed it on the table, halfway between us. Rex glanced at it then looked at me.

“You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes.”

Still looking at me, Rex leaned forward, angling his upper body over the table.

“Good. I want to make sure there is no question in your mind about what’s to happen if you sign it. In exchange for the investment, I am going to be one hundred percent in charge of everything going forward.”

Not like I could forget!

I’m not sure why he felt the need to remind me. Maybe he’d done so many deals, it was how he operated. For some reason, the “reminder” bugged me.

I replied without thinking, “I guess I don’t have a choice.”

Rex leaned away from me, easing into a relaxed posture.

“You always have a choice. You can get up right now and walk out the door. No hard feelings. Or, you can choose to accept my help and turn your business into what you always dreamed it could be. But don’t fool yourself, there are always choices in life.”

After he finished, I looked away. In spite of what he said, I really didn’t feel like I had a choice. It wasn’t his fault though, it was mine.

“Well?” he began, snapping me out of my doubt. “What’s it going to be?”

I looked at him again. All of sudden, Sam popped into my head. Something about her presence bothered me. I wasn’t even sure why but I wouldn’t sign anything until I got an answer.

“What did you mean Sam would be helping with the transition? I was under the impression I’d be working with you.”

Rex didn’t reply right away. Instead, he looked at me in silence, studying me before answering my question.

“We will be,” he said, at last. “However, I am extremely busy and there are going to be times when you’ll need to rely on someone else besides me. That someone is Sam. Anyway, Sam is top notch, she can handle anything. I have complete confidence in her.”

He might have but did that mean I am supposed to believe him without any questions? In fact, with each passing second I wondered where their professional relationship ended and where their personal relationship began.

“Cherry?”

Maybe Rex picked up on my hesitation. Maybe not. For whatever reason, the way he said my name - it commanded my attention. I don’t know how else to describe it. I drew my eyes up to meet his.

“You need to trust me. There is no way in hell I would throw away more than a million dollars. You’ll have my support, the vast resources of March Enterprises at your disposal. I am in this for the long haul. You need to believe me.”

I continued to look at him, nibbling on my lip.

“Make it official,” he said, keeping the pressure

on. “Sign the agreement and let’s get to work. I promise you’ll have the time of your life.”

Part of me wanted to - God knows I’d suffered long enough trying to carry this on my own. Still, there were issues, like Masters.

“What about the order? How do you plan on helping us with Masters? There’s nothing you can do to get us out of the delay caused by Maribel. Without that coconut oil, there’s no way we’re going to make that deadline.”

Rex raised a hand.

“I can get that handled with a simple phone call. The typhoon is a non-issue. Sign the agreement and I promise - all of your troubles will disappear.”

With that, Rex reached into the pocket of his suit coat.

“Here, use my pen.”

Grimacing at him, I took it. Rex pushed the document across the table to me.

With my fears put to rest, for now, I signed the document and passed it to him. He took it from me, folding it and slipping it into the pocket of his suit coat.

“You’ve made the right decision, Cherry.”

Deep down, I knew the truth. I’d made *a decision*. Whether or not it was the right one, I wouldn’t know for weeks or even months.

Rex looked at me again.

“I’ll be by the warehouse tomorrow morning at

ten o'clock sharp. It's time to get your family on board with the new vision for Cherry's Berries."

Ugh. My family. I didn't even want to think about that conversation right now.

A little over an hour later, we'd finished dinner.

Walking together, we exited the restaurant. As we did, Rex's chauffeur-driven stretch Mercedes Maybach waited. A tall, thin man in a suit held the door open for him.

Wow.

Unfortunately, the soothing feel of the warm night air and the pleasure of Rex's company didn't last long.

Freaking Xander appeared out of nowhere, walking up and passing me a business card.

"Here's the towing company we use," he said, invading my personal space with his hand. "You know, in case you can't get your car started. Also, I..."

Good Lord. Scowling at him, I snatched the card.

"Thanks."

Rex frowned at me. "Towing company? Did you break down or?"

Ugh.

"Well, my car's a little old," I grumbled, unwilling to make eye contact with him. "It's no big deal. I'll get it started sooner or later."

Rex paused and looked around. "Where is it?"

Xander jumped in with an answer.

“It’s at the bottom of the hill,” he began, pointing toward the garage. “That’s where I parked it after she pushed it. But, there’s something else, I...”

Great, thanks Xander. Thanks a lot.

“Pushed it? In what you’re wearing?” he asked, cutting Xander off. “Gotta say, I admire that kind of grit.”

“Hah, hah,” I replied. “Thanks.”

He winked at me. “You sure you don’t need a ride? I’ll have Eduardo take you wherever you need to go.”

Gee, lemme see...

Ride to the Valley in one of the world’s most luxurious cars or traipse down the hill and hope against hope I could get my hunk of junk moving again. As much as I would have liked to, I had to get the beater home, one way or another.

“I’ll be fine, really,” I replied. “It happens all the time.”

Rex grimaced. “I don’t feel right about leaving you here.”

Reaching inside of his pants pocket, he pulled out a wad of cash, peeling off five one-hundred dollar bills and passing them to Xander.

“Stay with this woman until she gets her car started. Understand?”

“Yes, sir!” Xander replied, his voice dripping

with excitement.

I shook my head. “No, please! Five hundred dollars, that’s insane! It’s not necessary, really.”

“I’m not taking no for answer,” Rex replied, leaning in and kissing me on the cheek.

He seriously needed to quit doing that.

Rex leaned away from me. “After all, I have to protect my investment.”

His words cut through the haze of lust clouding my mind. If I couldn’t control myself one hour into the partnership, what the hell would the next one year be like?

“Last chance,” Rex said. “You sure I can’t give you a ride?”

“Hmm,” I muttered, still savoring the roughness of his five o’clock shadow on my cheek. “No, I’ll... I’ll be fine. And anyway, Sandy will be with me.”

“Xander, ma’am.”

I looked at the baby-faced valet. “Right. What did I say?”

“Sandy, ma’am.”

Whatever. Potato, potat-oh.

“All right, then.” Rex began, straightening his jacket. “If I can’t persuade you to change your mind, I’ll be going. See you in the morning. Ten o’clock sharp.”

I smiled at him. “Okay.”

He turned and headed toward his waiting

limousine. I watched him from behind, my eyes glued to his perfect ass, locked on it like a lustful tractor beam, savoring every step he took.

After the limo pulled away, I turned and looked at Xander.

“Keys?”

A sheepish grin came to his face.

“What?” I asked, frowning.

“Well,” he began, clearing his throat. “That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier. I didn’t want to be rude, but I couldn’t get a word in.”

This guy. I swear.

“What is it? Just tell me. I’m tired and I want to go home.”

“It’s about the keys,” he mumbled, gesturing toward the garage. “I kind of locked them in the car.”

I just shook my head. *Of course he did. Of course.*

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” he said. “If there’s anything I can do, please tell me.”

Pointing at the five one hundred dollar bills in his hand, I passed him the business card for the towing company.

“Put that money to good use.”

About an hour later, the towing company managed to get the door unlocked and mercifully, my clunker started without incident. Driving away, my thoughts shifted to the next morning and how

things would never be the same.

Rex's words still echoed in my head...

"I'm one-hundred percent in charge."

My stomach sank.



I SAT STRAIGHT up in bed, a sheen of perspiration coating my body.

You know when you have a nightmare and wake up, only to realize you've had a dream? Sometimes they're so intense, *so real*, you're left wondering how to go on if what happened in the dream came to pass.

I touched my forehead, fingers trembling across a cool brow. If this is what being successful looked like, I worried I might not have what it took.

Slinging my feet over the edge of my bed, I exhaled. The night ended late - too late to let my family know what I'd decided to do. Not only that but after our dinner together, I worried they'd react badly to a deal which didn't include them even though, sooner or later, I would.

However, we had to get through this crisis first. If we did, there'd be plenty for all of us.

A few hours later, I sat in my office looking at the clock on my wall. Rex would be here in minutes. As much as I dreaded doing it, I had to let

them know what I decided and do it before Rex arrived.

After gathering my family in the warehouse, I explained everything to them, not leaving a single detail out. I'd hardly finished when the accusations started flying.

"What do you mean you've given him control of the business? How could you do that?"

"What do you really know about him?"

"How do we know he can be trusted?"

And on, and on, and on.

I'd had enough.

"I get that you're all upset, okay?" I said, raising both arms in the air and showing them my palms. "But, this is my company. I don't have a crystal ball but Rex has a long track record of success. *We don't*. It's a matter of survival."

I paused, looking at each one of them. "Now, I've made my decision and that's the way it's going to be."

No sooner had I finished than the door to the warehouse opened. We all turned to see Rex standing there.

Great, just great. I'm sure the sight of us arguing with each other gave him a ton of confidence.

The door closed and Rex walked toward us, speaking once he was about ten feet away.

"Good morning, everyone," he said, pausing

and looking at me. “Cherry, I see you’ve started without me.”

Crap. I forgot about what he’d said at dinner.

Rex continued, “I want to say a couple of words to all of you. First of all, I realize that change is always difficult. However, I want to reassure you I’ve done many deals like this over the years. You’ve got nothing to worry about. In fact, the opposite is true.”

My dad cleared his throat, otherwise, silence hung in the air.

“Having me as an owner in the business means *stability*. I’ll get into more details later but suffice it to say, the company is receiving a huge cash infusion. Believe me when I tell you we’re going to put Cherry’s Berries on a course for success you can’t possibly imagine.”

Rex walked toward my dad, extending his hand. “You should be extremely proud of your daughter. I have no doubt she’s going to be a wildly successful entrepreneur. It’s a privilege to work alongside all of you.”

My Dad shook his hand. For whatever reason, Rex had a way with my family. It’s hard to describe. He’d diffused the situation. On one hand it was a relief but on the other I knew there would be more conflicts to come - sooner or later.

“Thank you for that,” my dad said, his face brightening. He looked in my direction. “We are

very proud of her.”

After releasing my Dad’s hand, Rex straightened his suit coat and looked at me.

“Cherry,” he said, gesturing toward my office. “I’d like to speak to you in private for a few minutes.”

I nodded at him and not long after, I walked into my office with Rex following close behind.

He closed the door, semi-slamming it. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Startled, I frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

His expression turned dark.

What the hell is going on?

Rex took several angry steps in my direction, pointing at me. “Last night, when I said I was one-hundred percent in charge... *I meant it.*”

I just stood there, my mouth hanging open.

Where was this coming from?

Rex extended his arm, pointing in the direction of the warehouse.

“That wasn’t your announcement to make. It was mine. I told you as much last night.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think, I...”

“That’s right, you didn’t,” he said, cutting me off. “These situations can be combustible. You need to spend more time listening and watching. This is a warning.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. The man

in front of me was as different from our meeting as night was to day.

Who *exactly* had I signed control over to?

He wasn't finished.

“Cherry, do you understand what I'm saying? If you don't, we need to hash this out right now. During these critical first few weeks and months I need to be able to trust you're going to listen to my direction and take my orders when I give them to you.”

Orders? No, no, no. Oh hell, no.

I snapped my hands to my hips.

“Rex, I'm not going to be bullied by you. I'm telling you right now, I will back out of this deal. No one tells me what to think, say or do.”

He didn't hesitate. “How's that been working out for you, Cherry?”

I glared at him.

“Your company is nearly bankrupt, your family is on the verge of being torn apart and yet for some reason, you still feel the need to stir things up.”

My hands moved from my hips upward, snapping across my chest. Part of me wanted to tell him to get the hell out but I couldn't deny he had a point - even if I might have hated him for it in the moment.

Rex took a couple of steps in my direction.

“Look, I'm doing this for your own good,” he said. “You have to trust me. I want this company to

be a success every bit as much as you. Let's just chalk this up to a learning experience - for both of us."

Before I could reply, Rex took a quick glance at his watch and then changed subjects.

"Has there been any update from your supplier about the coconut oil shipment?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I haven't had a chance to talk to him today but I'll get it handled."

"I know you will," Rex said, a smile returning to his face. "Come on. Let's get back out there and finish the conversation with your family."

I nodded at him. "Okay, you go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

"Don't keep me waiting."

With that, he turned and began to walk out of my office.

I watched him disappear from sight. My stomach churned. I didn't recognize the man who'd scolded me for the past few minutes. The Rex March I'd signed a deal with wasn't the same person who'd just left my office.

Even though I hated the way he made me feel, I reminded myself this was all about business - nothing more.

Right?

RAMPING UP (REX)

I hadn't expected friction from Cherry - not this early anyway.

However, sooner or later *every* entrepreneur fights back once they realize I'm serious about being one-hundred percent in charge. It never fails - they always think it's a goddamn bluff. Having to remind them about what it means to make a deal with me *never* gets easier.

I prefer to get the bullshit over with and move on to making the company successful. My experience tells me that achieving big goals and becoming successful helps them get over hurt feelings pretty quick.

While Cherry pouted, I approached her family.

"Cherry will be right out. While we are waiting, do any of you have questions for me?"

Cherry's father raised his hand. "I do."

“Go ahead, Frank.”

“I’m wondering about the order with Masters Mercantile. What’s your plan to get the situation fixed? There’s no way we’re going to make the deadline.”

“Good question,” I replied, nodding at him. “In fact, that’s the first thing on my agenda. As soon as we’re done with our discussions here this morning, I’ll be on the phone with Trent Masters. I can promise you he’ll listen to what I have to say. You’ve got nothing to be concerned about.”

After answering him, I looked at Cherry’s mother and sister.

“Any other questions?”

Just then, Cherry walked up and joined us. I waited for a couple of seconds, but when no one spoke up, I took it as my cue to summarize our action plan going forward.

“Very briefly,” I said, looking at each of them, “I’ve reached an agreement with Cherry to invest \$1.25 million into the company. In exchange for this investment, I’ll be taking a majority ownership position and will be one-hundred percent in charge of all company decisions from now on.”

I paused and watched as they exchanged glances with each other. It’s always interesting to study the reactions of people in these situations.

“It’s my intention to hit the ground running. Starting today, we are going to be re-launching and

re-branding the entire product line.”

I paused, looking at Cherry.

“Within the next forty-eight hours, I want ideas for six new flavors of lip gloss. That will bring the product line to an even dozen.”

A nasty frown came to her face.

“That’s crazy!” She said, shaking her head. “There’s no way we can come up with six new products on such short notice.”

“Of course you can,” I replied, expecting resistance from her. Breaking eye contact with Cherry, I looked at each of her family members. “I have complete confidence in all of you. To grow this into a successful international brand, you’re all going to have to dig deep. This is only the beginning.”

With every word I spoke, the tension in the room grew. That was fine by me – perfect, in fact. In my experience, nothing got people more motivated than demanding the impossible of them.

“For now though, I’ve got to go. I look forward to working closely with all of you, not just Cherry.”

I took a couple of minutes to thank each one of them personally. While it’s important to establish my position of authority, it’s just as important to make genuine connections with all of the people working for me.

After all, without them, success is impossible.

Once I’d finished, I turned to Cherry. “Walk

with me.”

Sensing her ongoing frustration, I said, “Listen, just come up with ideas for the new gloss. I’m not asking you to have finished products ready on such short notice. That’s not what this is about.”

Cherry exhaled. “Well, what is it about? I’m confused.”

“It’s about excitement, building *buzz* around the brand. Right now, we need a few fresh concepts. Once we decide on the final products, you’ll have complete access to my development team to develop the finished products.”

Frustration lined her expression.

“Hey,” I began, looking at her. “I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

Cherry didn’t respond immediately, instead shaking her head. “I want to but I’m just not sure. I’m not happy right now.”

I chuckled at her. “That’s okay. You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t.”

That got to her a little bit. Cherry cracked a smile.

“There you go. That’s better.”

Wanting to leave things on a high note, I told her I’d be in touch soon and left, arriving back at my office within the hour. Once there, I hopped on the phone and called Trent. After Marjorie put me through, he picked up.

“I wondered when I’d hear from you.”

I leaned back in my chair. “I’m assuming you got a copy of the signature page.”

“I did,” he replied. “But that doesn’t do anything for me. You realize that don’t you?”

“True. Not yet. But, having it in your hands should give you some peace of mind.”

Trent grunted a response. “Yeah, it helps a little. But without the order, it’s short-lived.”

He was right. There was a ton of work to do. What we needed more than anything right now was time - just a little bit of time. Of course, I was more than willing to pay for it.

“I’m not expecting any special favors from you here,” I said. “We’re going to have some big things coming up, new products and a re-launch. If you can see your way to cutting us a little bit of slack, I’ll give you exclusive distribution rights on the new products for a period of sixty days.”

“I’ve have a better idea,” he said. “How about six months?”

Even though we had a new product, there was no reason to negotiate from a position of fear.

“Hmmm,” I began, stroking my chin. “Somewhere in the middle, maybe? How’s ninety days sound?”

Trent mulled it over for a couple of seconds. I stayed silent. It’s always better to keep quiet once the offer is on the table.

“You always know how to sweeten a deal.”

I smiled. *Bingo.*

“I appreciate it, man. I promise you’re not going to regret this.”

I had a pretty good hunch Trent would take me up on the offer but you never know for sure until the deal is done.

“Hey, I wanted to mention were having a big party for the re-launch. It’s going to be a red-carpet event and I’m expecting you to be there - we need a huge show of support from Masters.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he replied. “When and where?”

“Once we get the details finalized, I’ll have Daphne get them over to your office.”

I stood from my chair.

“Thanks for giving us a second chance here, Trent. You’ve made a smart decision.”

“I hope you’re right, Rex. I really do.”

NOSE TO THE GRINDSTONE
(CHERRY)

““O h my God, that’s such a relief.”
Rex called with the good news a couple of days later. He’d kept his promise and bought us time with Masters Mercantile.

“I knew you’d feel that way,” he said.

Yes, I was relieved. Still, the tricky part is in the details and so far he hadn’t given me any.

“Can you fill me in on the rest?”

“I will,” he replied. “I’m coming by later today. Do me a favor. Don’t mention anything about this to your family. I’d like to be the one to make the announcement.”

Remembering how he’d acted when I stole his thunder before, I agreed with him. With everything else I had going on, it wasn’t a battle I felt like fighting.

“Not a problem.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. What’s the latest with the lines of gloss I asked you to work on?”

“We’ve got some ideas. I think you’ll be happy with them.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I’m sure I will. Looking forward to seeing them.”

It had only been a few days but “taking orders” still didn’t sit well with me. I picked up the paper with the ideas for gloss my family and I brainstormed. We decided on an all tropical fruit theme. There wasn’t anything quite like it on the market.

Now all we had to do was convince Rex.

Hah! Easier said than done...

Later that day, we gathered together in the warehouse when Rex made his way inside. He smiled at each member of my family, shaking their hands before turning his attention to me.

“Cherry,” he said, nodding at me.

When he spoke, I felt a hollowness in my stomach.

Shit.

It was then I realized something was wrong, very wrong. I’d hoped for the same greeting he gave me at the restaurant - a kiss on the cheek.

What the hell is the matter with me?

Here he is, keeping things professional and I’m acting like, well... a lost puppy.

Ugh!

What am I doing? Too much was on the line, I had to get over it and focus on what mattered, growing the business and ignoring what didn't - my silly - *crush?*

Rex clapped his hands together, startling me out of my fog.

“Great news. Masters Mercantile is granting us an extension on the first order.”

Though I already knew about it, I pretended to be surprised. Judging by the relieved looks on everyone's faces, the news couldn't come at a better time.

Hell, maybe this was going to work out after all.

“In exchange for giving us more time, I've offered Masters exclusive distribution rights to the line of lip gloss for a period of ninety days.”

He paused and looked at me. “Speaking of the line, where are you on it?”

“We've got some ideas. They're in my office.”

“Okay, great,” he replied. “I'll leave that for you and Sam to discuss. What's the latest with the supplier?”

Sam?

“Um,” I said, confused by his response. “The delivery is finally on its way. We should have it at customs within a week or so.”

A huge smile spread across Rex's face. “That's terrific news.”

With the energy in the room high, Rex continued.

“I’d also like to let all of you know I’m planning a red-carpet event for the re-launch of Cherry’s Berries. The details will be finalized in a matter of days. It’s going to be an exciting time for the company and of course, for each one of you.”

Red-carpet event? With the idea settling in my brain, Rex looked at me.

“Sam will be in touch with you about the event. I’m expecting you to be fully prepared for the big night.”

Huh?

“What do you mean, prepared? Prepared for what?”

“Well it’s basically your coming-out party, Cherry. There’s going to be media - a huge press gathering - think of it as the debut of Cherry’s Berries 2.0. You are going to be the center of attention.”

Center of attention?

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than my fingertips started to moisten.

“Um, what do you mean by center of attention?”

“You’re the star of the show,” he said, winking at me. “The spotlight’s going to be on you. No pressure though.”

My knees wobbled. The idea of being on stage,

up there all alone, made me dizzy. Things were moving way too fast and I wasn't doing a good job of keeping up.

“Cherry, my company does launches like this all the time. Don't worry, I promise you'll be prepared for everything.”

I swallowed hard. Rex stepped closer to me.

“I've got to get going,” Rex said. “I'll be out of town for a few days. As I mentioned, I want you and Sam to get together and work on the ideas you have for the new lip gloss. She'll prep you for the red carpet event. Just do everything she says and you'll be fine. Can you do that for me?”

I wasn't going to let fear, or desire, beat me.

“Yes, I can.”



I SAT in the backseat of the limousine, picking at the beading on my clutch.

My entire family, Sam and I came in from the Valley and were mere minutes away from the Hollywood destination. Sam sat next to me and reached over, touching my hand. I jumped and snapped my head toward her.

“Cherry, your hand is like ice! Are you okay?”

Am I okay?

My hands, feet and butt felt like they'd been

stuck in a deep freeze. At the same time, I prayed I had enough deodorant on to keep me from sweating right through my dress.

Oh my God... I did put deodorant on, didn't I?

Faking a smile, I looked at Sam.

"I'm fine." I lied. "I think it's just cold in here or something."

The look on her face pretty much said it all. She knew I was lying but instead of calling me on it, she smiled.

"You're going to do great. You'll see."

Even though I appreciated her saying so, "doing great" seemed out of reach.

At this point, I'd take not passing out.

My family sat across from me. Somehow, if I couldn't keep it together for myself, I had to find a way to do it for them. After all, I'd promised Rex as much. Speaking of Rex, I hadn't spoken to him since the last time he was at the warehouse.

I looked at Sam again. "Have you talked to Rex recently?"

"Earlier today. Why?"

"I don't know," I replied, shrugging. "I guess I thought I might see him before tonight."

While I spoke, the limousine pulled up and stopped. Sam tapped on the glass and pointed.

"Looks like you got your wish."

Following the line of her finger, I watched Rex come into view. Looking every bit the billionaire

CEO, he stood there in a jaw-dropping tuxedo, owning the red carpet.

Christ. That's all I need!

Soon the driver opened the door and we all started to get out of the limo. The press huddled around, dozens of cameras blinding us with brilliant flashes of light. I held my hand up in front of my face and shielded my eyes when a familiar voice cut through the chaos.

“Guys, guys!” Rex exclaimed. “There’ll be plenty of time for that later. Give Cherry some room!”

I felt his strong hand slide around my waist. His presence came over me like a shadow, protecting me from the incessant camera flashes. He lingered there for a second too long but not long enough for anyone to notice, except me of course.

And then, right there on the red carpet, Rex leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. I wasn’t certain but I had the distinct sensation he’d inhaled along my jawline. I felt a rush of warmth heat my skin, tingles followed close behind, standing the fine hairs of my neck on end.

The encounter sent a jolt through me. The feelings I tried to ignore came roaring back at the worst possible time.

Just when it seemed like he was all business, suddenly he wasn’t.

Or was he?

I looked up, expecting to see the truth in his face. But by then he'd pulled away, turning his attention to my family, and snapping pictures with them. Rex gestured for all of us to follow him inside. It was almost time for the big announcement.

His kiss provided me a brief distraction. But then, remembering what I had to do hit me again, freezing me in place. I just sort of... stood there. Rex took notice and walked over.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Hmm?” I muttered, half-listening.

Rex leaned in close. “You’ve got a job to do, remember? Are you ready?”

My stomach sank. With reluctance, I sputtered a reply. “Yeah. I think so.”

Rex smiled and offered his arm to me. His confidence and upbeat attitude helped. After I hooked my arm around his, we began walking. However, we hadn’t taken more than a handful of steps when he froze in place - his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Confused, I looked at him. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He stood there shaking his head. “What the fuck?”

I had no idea what he was looking at or why he was so pissed. Rex began to look around, craning

his neck in every direction until he found the person he wanted.

“Sam!”

She turned and looked at him. Without a word, Rex gestured for her to approach.

Before she reached us, he snapped at her. “What the hell is Peter doing here?”

Peter?

Before she could say anything, Rex continued, “Did you have something to do with this?”

“I did,” She replied, her startled reaction turning to a smile. “I thought you’d enjoy rubbing his nose in it. Was I wrong?”

Her comment seemed to have an effect on him. For a few seconds it looked like he’d lose it. Instead, he just stared at her in silence.

Just then, a man approached Sam and kissed her on the cheek.

I took a sideways glance at Rex and noticed him shooting a stone-faced glare at the man. Having never seen this side of him before, it made me curious about why this Peter guy drove Rex to such a state of near rage.

While Rex stared at him in silence, the man spoke.

“Well, I guess congratulations are in order.”

Rex ignored him. Without hesitating, he wrapped the fingers of his hand around my forearm and started to escort me past him, issuing a stern

warning to Sam on the way.

“Don’t make us wait.”

Once we’d gotten a few feet away, I turned and looked at him.

“Who was that?”

“Peter Grimes,” Rex snarled. “I was in a bidding war over Sam’s company with him. He’s a complete lowlife.”

With each step we took, Rex relaxed his grip on my forearm. I didn’t really know what to say or do. It turned out not to matter much because a few seconds later, he’d dropped his anger over seeing Peter.

We stopped walking and he turned to face me.

“Cherry, tonight is only the beginning. There are so many more exciting things to come. Are you ready?”

If I’m being honest, *hell , hell, hell no*. However, turning back wasn’t an option.

I nodded. “Yes.”

Rex gestured for me to follow him and we entered a room where the press corps gathered. Following behind Rex, I watched while he glad-handed members of the press, greeting most of them on our way to the front of the room.

A stage appeared ahead of me, filled with Cherry’s Berries promotional posters and unfortunately, a *gigantic photo* of my face.

I am not even kidding when I say it was five

feet tall.

I recognized it immediately. A while back, we'd booked studio time for website pictures. To begin with, the photographer wayyyy overpriced and then she insisted on taking shots that made my complexion look totally bizarre and...

Anyway, I hated that picture.

In the midst of my discomfort, I noticed my family sitting in the front row. Rex and I continued up onto the stage where he gestured for me to take a seat in a nearby chair.

"You're gonna be great." He whispered.

Even though every fiber of my being wanted to run screaming from the stage, I gave him a polite smile and took a seat. Rex spent the next several minutes welcoming everyone, thanking them for being present at such an exciting time for the company's future.

He talked briefly about his investment in the company before turning his attention to an announcement about the additions to our lip gloss line.

"Those products will be distributed exclusively into Masters Mercantile stores." He paused and pointed toward a man in the front row. "I'd like to acknowledge Trent Masters for his unwavering support. Thanks, Trent."

I'd never seen Trent in the flesh, having only dealt with his staff.

I don't think I'd use the words "good-looking" to describe him. Instead, it would probably be something more like...

Oh my God, get me something to fan myself with, looking.

I mean, *wow*.

I think he acknowledged Rex's statement with a nod or a wave but I got so distracted looking at him, it's possible I imagined it. A few seconds later, Rex concluded his remarks to a smattering of applause.

Then he turned and looked at me.

"Cherry? Would you like to say a few words?"

I swallowed hard.

This was it.



HANDS SHAKING, I stood and opened my clutch, reaching inside for my notes while, of course, paying *zero attention* to where I walked.

No sooner had I started to pull them out than my heel caught in a wire running across the stage.

Oh shit!

Weightlessness came over me and I fell forward, heading straight for a collision with the podium. A gasp rippled across the room while I closed my eyes and braced myself for the fall.

Only, it never came.

Instead, a pair of hands snatched me in midair, holding me like I weighed next to nothing and lifting me to safety. Opening my eyes, I saw Rex standing there in front of me, still holding me in his grasp.

“You got this,” he whispered, steadying me. “You’re a goddamn star, Cherry. Own it.”

With that, he let go and walked past me, leaving me alone on the stage. After my near death experience, I stood behind the podium and tried to regain my composure.

Everyone went quiet.

Panic soon gave way to an intense thirst. If I didn’t drink something soon, I’d have to give my speech in sign language. Luckily, there happened to be a couple of full glasses of water beneath the podium.

“Excuse me,” I muttered, reaching for one of them.

I grabbed hold of the glass and picked it up, desperate for a sip. However, somewhere between there and my mouth, my shaky hand bumped the glass against the edge of the podium, spilling water all over my notes.

Ahhh!

I jumped back, grabbing my note cards and trying to keep them from getting soaked. Rex got up from his chair and came toward me but it was

too late. The ink on the cards streaked so bad they were unreadable.

“Sorry,” I said, reaching for the microphone. “I’m such a klutz!”

I turned and looked at Rex, not knowing what to expect. He had a huge smile on his face.

“It can only get better from here,” he said, pointing at his chest. “Just speak from the heart.”

I looked down at the waterlogged note cards and shook my head.

He was right.

Stepping up to the podium again, I reached for the microphone and pulled it close to my mouth.

“Well, at least that wasn’t awkward.”

The audience laughed. Whether it was at me or for me, I didn’t care. At least they weren’t silent any longer.

I smiled. “The good news is I have nothing to do with the manufacturing process.”

After another round of laughter, I felt my breathing slow. I realized I probably wasn’t going to die up there after all. Soon after, the words started to flow and the talking points from my note cards popped back into my brain.

Whew.

I covered everything, including how excited we were to have Rex as a partner and how thrilling it was to be able to debut our products in a prestigious store like Masters Mercantile.

When I touched on the new products, Rex stood from his chair.

“Cherry? Can I interrupt for a sec?”

I nodded at him.

“Everyone,” he began, turning to face the audience. “When you arrived at the event, you should have received some sample swag from us. If you haven’t already, I invite you to try some of the gloss for yourselves. You won’t be disappointed.”

When Rex finished talking, one of the reporters, a twenty-something woman, raised her hand. Swiveling my head, I looked at Rex and he gestured for me to call on her.

“Yes?” I said, pointing. “You had a question?”

“I do,” she replied. “Do you have a favorite gloss from your line?”

I smiled at her. “Well, I love them all but if I had to pick just one, I’d say it’s my original strawberry formulation.”

Rex interrupted. “Why don’t you put some on for us?”

Huh?

While it seemed like a strange request, I decided to go along with it. Reaching inside of my clutch, I pulled it out and after a twist, applied a thin layer to my lips.

While I did so, Rex took a couple of steps in my direction.

“Wow,” he said, raising the sound of his voice.

“That’s amazing. It’s like smelling fresh baked strawberry pie.”

I kind of smiled at him and shook my head at the same time. But he didn’t let up. Instead, Rex turned his attention toward the audience.

“And I’m a couple of feet away. If I were closer, it would probably seem like I was right there when the pie came out of the oven.”

Rex continued to walk in my direction and stopped right in front of me. Suddenly, he was closer than he should’ve been, towering over me. He didn’t stop there. Wordless, he wrapped his hands around my upper arms, holding me firm and shocking me into attention.

Our eyes met.

Oh, no. What is he doing?

Without hesitating, Rex leaned in and crashed his lips into mine, sending a double edged sensation of desire and disbelief through my entire body.

It was everything I’d wanted but in a place I didn’t - an awful mix of lust and shame consumed me while Rex devoured my mouth with his...



Oh. My. God.

This wasn’t happening. What was he thinking? What the hell was he doing?

More important, why wasn't I trying to stop him?

I wasn't one of *those* women. Everyone knows the kind - the kind who kisses her boss!

That *wasn't* me. Or was it?

Considering he'd just pressed his tender, hot lips hard into mine and I'd done nothing to stop him, umm yeah, looks like I am one of those women. His powerful hands held me suspended somewhere between right and *oh so wrong*. I couldn't find a breath in my lungs, my body prickled with desire.

But even if I'd been truthful about the feelings he stirred in me, experiencing them like this was the absolute last thing I wanted to do.

I swear.

I struggled, squirmed and did everything short of slapping him but nothing worked. In a split second, all eyes were on me.

Yeah, that's right.

Eyes!

No sooner had he done it than a collective gasp came over the room. My ears *burned*, whispers and chatter from a flock of voyeurs echoed in my head. Without looking, I sensed the faces of jealous women twisting into scowls and frowns, slut-shaming me with venomous glares.

Not that it mattered to *him*.

He moved closer.

“Cherry,” he said, his voice vibrating.

My body *tingled*.

Distracted from the awkward spectacle for a second, I looked at him. Our eyes met and I struggled to keep my wits.

God, he smelled good. A heady blend of vanilla and tobacco, a scent I’d grown to crave, permeated my senses.

No, no, no... Please, please snap out of it.

I wanted to, I really did.

In spite of the gaggle of onlookers leering in our direction, my pent up desire got to me. How much longer could I fight it? After all, it wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

Hell, it wasn’t supposed to happen at all!

But true to his nature, he’d taken me by surprise, shocking me and the crowd with his aggression. He’d gone *way* too far. This *is not* what he was supposed to do.

That’s just soooo like him though, doing everything *his* way, *always* without asking.

Breath returned to me in small gulps. My blood pumped hot and fast, racing to my face and sending of wave of fire across my cheeks.

I’d heard rumors about him having this effect on women.

I mean, who hadn’t?

Still, it’s not like I was powerless. It’s not like he’d *forced me* to do it.

Oh wait, yes he had.

No matter, I had to refocus. After all, as everyone knows, I *do not* put the moves on guys - no way. Also, I most certainly was not the type of woman to let a man do whatever he wanted.

Yet here he was, *doing just that*, claiming me in front of everyone I knew. Hell, maybe that's what made it all the more exciting, I really didn't know. My mind was of little use to me in those red hot seconds. Everything about the situation screamed for me to break free of him, wrestle myself loose of his powerful grasp.

However, I'd never been this close to him.

No matter how bad my mind might have wanted me to run screaming from the room, my body betrayed me - *this* is what it wanted.

Then, a sudden realization came over me.

Had he *used* the event as an excuse?

Was I what he *really* wanted?

Is this what he meant by being *one-hundred percent* in charge?

I wriggled one last time in his arms, a hard swallow crept down my throat. Gathering myself, I focused.

"Please, let go," I whispered, putting as much strength in my tone as I could.

A wry smile spread across his face, deep dimples cut charming grooves into his five o'clock shadow.

It all happened so fast. Where did the time go?



REX PULLED AWAY, gesturing toward the audience like nothing happened.

“Tastes as good as it looks,” he said, a huge smile coming to his face.

I stood there, frozen. Speechless.

And desperate for more.

Rex kept going, like the kiss was part of his promotional plan all along - nothing but a mere demonstration of how well the product worked.

I mean... Was he lying to them? *To me?*

Had I misread the way he'd kissed me? It's not like it was a casual thing, a fleeting touch of the lips having no meaning behind it. No. I'd kissed enough people to know the difference.

I shifted my focus to the audience, realizing I had a far bigger problem. If this was his plan all along, that was one thing.

If it wasn't, well...

My panties didn't get the memo.

“I want to thank Cherry for volunteering.”

Volunteering? Is that what I did?

While he spoke, I looked toward the audience. Every woman looked to have a smile on her face, like in some way wishing they could be on stage

with him doing what I'd done.

“Ladies,” he began, holding the gloss in his hand. “If you want to drive the man in your life wild, this is the lip gloss for you.”

I watched his performance in utter disbelief. Rex turned toward me and winked before looking at the audience again.

“I want to thank you all for coming tonight. If you have any questions for us, we'll be more than happy to answer them.”

And then, just like that, he'd pulled it off - *the kiss that wasn't a kiss.*

In fact, he'd been so effective that during the next hour or so while answering questions, I didn't get a single one about it.

Not one!

Of course, I hadn't forgotten about it, *just the opposite.* It was pretty much impossible to stay focused and answer questions. While I stood there talking to a couple of reporters, Rex walked up.

“Mind if I steal her away?” he asked, flashing a quick smile at them.

Charming currency, that smile.

I grimaced but started to walk with him, the brashness of his kiss still front and center in my mind.

Can you blame me?

While we walked, Rex carried on about what a great job I'd done and how nothing but good would

come from the event. I ignored him. With every step, I found myself less able to pretend. At last I stopped, blurting out my frustration.

“Why did you do that?”

Rex looked at me, confusion in his eyes. Or, at least that’s the way he made it appear.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” I replied. “You know what.”

Rex closed the distance between us, his demeanor turning serious.

“You didn’t like it? Is that what you’re telling me?”

No, no. That’s not going to work.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I scoffed. “Of course I liked it. That’s not the point.”

Rex tilted his chin up, looking down at me with suspicion.

“Go on.”

“It’s real simple,” I began, crossing my arms at my chest. “I want to know exactly what this ‘deal’ between us is about. I don’t appreciate being made spectacle of in front of my family and everyone else. What are you trying to do?”

He nodded, taking a few seconds to reply.

“It wasn’t my intention to make you uncomfortable. It’s just that when you put the lip gloss on, you smelled so goddamn good, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Please!” I scoffed. “Don’t give me that. You can’t expect me to believe that you...”

Before another word tumbled from my lips, Rex reached toward me, pressing my mouth against his.

Oh Christ. Fuck.

Where the first kiss left me in shock, this one dragged me right to the edge of my self-control. Already weakened, I didn’t try to resist.

I couldn’t.

For the next few seconds, I disappeared into him, all the pent-up desire inside of me clawed for freedom, for pleasure.

Rex pulled away.

“Like I said,” he began, straightening his tie. “I couldn’t help myself.”

No sooner did he finish speaking than my family came around the corner with Sam following close behind.

With caution, I looked at all of them. Whether they were being polite or withholding judgment, I guess it didn’t matter at the time. I swallowed hard knowing there’d be plenty of questions on the limo ride home.

Which, I mean, awesome right? Why wouldn’t I just loooove talking about it?

For his part, Rex seemed unfazed and unconcerned. Acting like nothing happened, he thanked my family members and Sam for all the hard work they’d done.

Once he finished, Sam looked at me. “Are you ready?”

I nodded and looked toward Rex, searching for the least awkward goodbye I could. Without having any idea of what I was going to say, I opened my mouth to speak when he cut me off.

“I’ll get you home,” he said, turning and looking at my family and Sam again. “I’ve got to talk to Cherry about a couple of things.”

What? What things?

“Rex,” I began, shaking my head. “You really don’t have to do that. We can just talk tomorrow...”

“I insist,” he replied, holding up his hand. “It won’t be long, a couple of hours at most.”

Rather than get into a whole thing with him, I decided to accept his offer. Within minutes, I’d said goodbye to everyone, leaving Rex and I alone together.

While I watched them drive away, I realized there was nothing to stop him from trying to kiss me again.

I mean, not that I would.

While I might’ve had *borderline-raging-insane-lust* for him, I had more on the line than satisfying my needs.

Or at least as much.

After all, I was an entrepreneur, a businesswoman and no man, not even one as

powerful and dropdead sexy as Rex would knock me off course.

While I wrestled with my thoughts, Rex gladdened the last of the remaining members of the press still lingering at the event. Whatever his motives were toward me, it appeared he had every intention of helping my company succeed, just like he'd promised.

Rex approached. "Ready to go?"

The question sent a tremor through me, leaving a kaleidoscope of meaning in its wake. Before I went anywhere, I was determined to get an answer.

"What is it you want to 'discuss' with me?" I asked. "What's so important that I had to stay behind?"

He walked right up, the answer he gave leaving me slack-jawed.

"It's not a discussion, Cherry," he replied, angling his head downward. "I want to rip the clothes from your body and ravish every square inch of you. *I. Am. Done. Pretending.* If you want that, come with me. If you don't, don't. It's your choice. Nothing about our business arrangement changes, no matter what you decide."

Ooof.

While I listened to him, my mouth drifted open, images of his rock-hard torso hovering above filled my mind. Scandalous visions permeated my consciousness. I was losing my willpower, and fast.

No. I can't.

“Rex,” I began, struggling for a way to tell him I was flattered but couldn't let my desires get the better of me. “I...”

Without hesitating, Rex grabbed hold of me, pulling me close and pressing his lips into mine. I felt myself go limp, melting into the power of his grasp. I lingered there, savoring the prowess of his kissing.

Unfortunately, my words weren't matching the desire I'd tried to suppress. I couldn't lose myself to my needs.

I won't!

“No!” I gasped, pushing myself away from him.

His scent lingered, taunting me. Rex licked his lips.

“Yes?”

I felt like two different people or maybe one split right down the middle. *Whatever.* My brain wanted to lecture him while my body wanted to, well, *not talk at all.*

Grunting on the other hand...

Somehow, I managed to keep my wits long enough to respond.

“I don't remember signing up for *this*. We're supposed to be business partners, not...”

Rex moved closer. I backed up. He continued. I bumped into a wall, my retreat frozen.

Shit.

“Tell me you don’t want it,” he said, his gaze locked on me. “I’ll stop.”

I hung on by a thread. Swear to God.

If not for the fact that we were still in a public place, it might be all over for me. His cockiness aside, or maybe because of it, I couldn’t come up with a single reason to disagree.

“No, I never said I wasn’t enjoying it,” I began, shaking my head. “I just, I don’t want to lose control. I can’t.”

With a couple of slow nods of his head, Rex leaned in toward my hair.

Oh no. Please no.

Trembling, I felt my skin electrify with the human equivalent of an alarm system. Goosebumps formed, erupting across huge swaths of my skin and betraying my desire. I braced myself against the wall with my palms, struggling to stay upright.

Rex nuzzled his nose beneath my hair, moving in like a hungry beast. Waves of pulsating need radiated from the center of my body.

Yeah, it wasn’t a question of whether or not I’d lose it but *when*.

My eyelids flickered, struggling to stay open when he stopped, his lips brushing against my flesh one last time.

“Never forget,” he began, each word a whisper of hot breath against my earlobe. “I am one-hundred percent in charge. One-hundred percent.”



THE ENTIRE LOCATION WAS QUIET, only the occasional sound of a door slamming in the distance entered my consciousness.

Time slowed.

There were no more walls between us, I was tired of trying to hold them up in my mind. If he wanted to have me here, backstage at a red carpet event, I wouldn't resist.

Why? For what? Appearances?

There was no one here!

"It's time to go," he said, placing his hand in the small of my back.

"Go?" I replied. "Where?"

"My place. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I want you."

"That's not what I meant," he said, leaning in and kissing me on the forehead.

"I know. What I meant is, I can't wait. I don't want to. I've waited long enough."

Rex moved close. I looked up into his eyes, the blue pools now holding me in a state of near hypnosis.

"Don't tempt me," he said. "I built my entire life on restraint. But where you're concerned, it's a different story. I won't hesitate to take you, right here, right now."

A feeling of calm came over me. Getting up on

my toes, I kissed him on the cheek.

“Then don’t.”

No sooner had I finished speaking than a smile came to the corner of his mouth. Rex bent down and snatched me up, hoisting me over his shoulder like a caveman. I shrieked, a mix of surprise and desire in my voice.

“Rex!” I exclaimed in a loud whisper. “What are you doing? What if someone sees you?”

He continued to lumber along, with every step I felt the impossible hardness of his chiseled torso supporting me.

“I don’t care,” he grunted. “Do you?”

Before I could respond, he stopped, forcing his way into a suite used by celebrities during award shows. Rex lifted me from his shoulder, placing me on the ground. Almost as soon as he’d done it, he began to look around.

“No, no. This won’t do,” he began, shaking his head.

“Why?” I asked. “We’re together. What’s the difference?”

He passed by me walking toward the door. He stopped and turned in my direction again.

Rex looked at me. “The difference is you deserve better. End of story.”

I wasted no time. Stepping up to him, I reached toward his cock and cupped it in my hand.

“Better than this?” I asked, curling my fingers

for emphasis. “Not possible.”

Oh. My. God. How huge is this thing?

I swallowed a massive lump at the idea of it. Just getting my hand on it and getting a hint of its size, sent an overwhelming surge of lust through me.

“Fuck,” Rex moaned, leaning against the door. “Cherry.”

I held on, moving closer and whispering a reply, “Yeah?”

Rex rocked in place, his eyes closing. I licked my lips and reached for his belt. With fingers flying, I unfastened the buckle and then focused on his pants, unzipping them and grasping inside like I’d been possessed.

Even though my gown made it almost impossible, I dropped to my knees in front of him, eager to get a glimpse of his gift. Rex reached for the top of my head, wrapping his fingers around the back of it. While he did, I grabbed a hold of his pants, hooked my fingers around the edges and started to pull on them, when his lean and powerful thighs appeared.

My lips drifted apart with every inch of flesh I uncovered until at last, his pants fell to the ground, draping around his feet. Wordless, I returned my focus to his boxer briefs, the impossible size of his cock barely restrained by the fabric.

Jesus.

Rex slid his fingers through my hair, an animalistic groan sputtered from his lips.

I glanced up to see him looking down at me. A haunting shadow stretched across his face, tracing every chiseled angle. Licking my lips, I returned my focus to his underwear while at the same time sensing the unrelenting wetness of my own.

Sucking in my lower lip, I reached for the waistband of his briefs and began to inch them down. While I did, I heard Rex let out a deep exhale the instant his dick popped free, hard as stone and more immense than anything I'd ever seen.

Wow. Oh wow.

Reaching for the shaft, I began to curl my fingers around it. The touch of my hand against it sent a shock through Rex, the taut muscles in his thighs flexed. While I closed my hand, I imagined his hard legs pumping against me, thrusting, *fucking*.

Rex moaned again when I reached for his huge balls, cupping them with my free hand. Looking at the tip of his cock, I noticed it glistening with pre-cum, so I stroked the full length of his shaft, determined to coax more of it out.

His fingertips meandered through my hair, twisting and gliding their way between the strands. I never lost focus, continuing to make long, slow pulls along the full length of his dick and teasing

him by circling my thumb over the bulbous head.

I looked up at him again and our eyes met. Without breaking contact I inched closer toward the tip and popped it into my mouth, curling my tongue along the edge of it. Rex groaned and curled his fingers, swallowing my hair into his fists.

“Shit,” he said, rocking in place and dropping his head backward. “Goddamn it.”

My eyes never left him.

Instead, I continued to look up, swallowing as much of him as I could. The immense girth and impossible hardness took some getting used to but it was worth it. Inhaling the scent of his musk sent a feral urge through my body, stoking my desire.

Sucking and licking, I moved my head up and down his shaft, while Rex held on, daring me to take more of him in my mouth with each stroke. He looked down at me again, his gaze fixed on my every move. Feeling powerful, I took as much of him as I could, filling my mouth.

With each pull, my fingertips moistened, lubricating his cock and causing it to grow each passing second. Now that it was harder and fuller than ever, I got another taste of him, a sign of what lay ahead.

“Mmmm,” I hummed, the flavor rolling across my taste buds.

Jerking faster, I released his dick from my mouth.

“Are you ready?” I asked, tugging the shaft once more and looking at him. “Do you want to cum?”

Rex shook his head. Releasing his hands from my hair, he helped me to my feet.

“Thong?” he asked, gesturing toward my dress.

I nodded.

“Take it off.”

I glanced at his still hard, huge cock.

Oh hell.

Snaking my hand underneath the fabric, I reached for my soaked-through thong, sliding it down my thighs and stepping out of it. Once I had, Rex wasted no time, hoisting me in the air while I pulled my dress up around my hips, cool air licking against my exposed folds. I hooked my feet around his backside, digging into the hard muscles of his ass and began to lower myself.

It wasn't long before I felt the massive head touch me. I reached toward his chest, clutching him and readying myself. With his free hand, Rex moved his dick into position and slid it inside of me with a single, long thrust.

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

I am not even kidding when I say it took my breath away. My fingers turned to claws and I dug my nails into his chest, emitting a deep, low moan.

“Unnnhhhh,” I grunted.

Rex filled me, claiming me with his entire

length. Within seconds, I adjusted and began to grind my hips up and down, delighting in the mind numbing feel of at last being taken by him.

Rex held me there, steadying me when our eyes met. Arching my lower back, I crawled my fingers up his chest and joined my hands behind his neck with a lazy embrace. I leaned in and our lips met, two hungry mouths that still hadn't gotten their fill.

Swirling my tongue inside, I savored every second, darting and flicking while increasing the speed of my hips. Rex thrust inside me, a heated puff of air flared from his nostrils, driving my cravings higher.

Our lips separated and I broke free, leaning back. Safe in his embrace, I started to grind and before long, bounce up and down on top of him, determined to get what he wouldn't give to me on my knees minutes earlier. With each passing second, he grew harder and longer, reaching further inside of me until at last, I sensed my own needs gathering deep inside.

I flung my hair back, strands flipping in all directions. "Oh shit!"

Rex let out a sinister chuckle.

Half-dazed, I lifted my head again, hair encircling my face. Through the strands I could see him looking at me, *through me*.

"Move your hair." He commanded. "I want to watch your face when you cum."

Oh Jesus. Jesus. Oh God.

I sucked in my lower lip and nodded at him. Rex tightened his grip and I gasped, trying to get air into my lungs. Pulling my hair aside, I refocused.

“Like this?” I asked, licking my lips.

But before Rex could respond, there was a loud bang from the hallway, followed by the sound of a vacuum cleaner.

“Oh shit!” I said, startled, my voice just above a whisper. “What is that?”

His eyes never left me. “Dunno,” he began, driving into me with another mighty thrust. “Cleaning crew?”

Oh man. Uhhhhh.... That cock.

I tried to focus on the vacuum again. “What are we going to do?”

A smile came to corner of his mouth. “Keep fucking.”

No sooner had he said it than I heard the distinct sound of a set of keys clank against the door.

“Who’s in there?” the voice said.

Oh my God! Oh no!

Rex never slowed, not for an instant. Horrified, I looked to see the door knob start to twist and turn while whoever it was fumbled to find the right key.

This was insanity!

I wrinkled my face into an expression of panic. He had to stop, we had to stop before...

Just when I thought the door would open, a different voice erupted in the hallway.

“Alex!” the person yelled. “Need you here for a sec!”

While Rex continued to thrust, I held my breath. The keys clanked against the door.

“Coming!” he called back.

I returned my attention to Rex, smacking him across the shoulder.

“Are you crazy!” I whispered. “What if that man hadn’t been called to come by that person?”

“Speaking of cumming,” he said, arching an eyebrow. “Do it baby. Now.”

I don’t know how it happened, or why. With those simple words, Rex obliterated my anxiety, transforming me into a raving lunatic, possessed by need.

“Oh shit, I...” I grunted, pinching my eyes shut. “R-R... Rex, Rex, uuuhhhh...”

His command unleashed a blistering stream of desire through my veins. Releasing my feet from behind him, I kicked my heels against the door with a thump and clamped down on the full length of his shaft.

Every muscle in my body fired at the same instant, orgasm consuming me with wave after wave of torrid, almost unbearable, climax. I bounced up and down, enjoying the primal sensation of his dick filling me, consuming my

entire being. The ecstasy had only started to let go of its grip, when I sensed Rex freeze beneath me.

My heels fell away from the door, making their way around his backside once again. Rex dug his hands into my flesh, burying his full length inside of me with a vicious single thrust. My body went limp and I held on with my arms and legs, punch-drunk with need for every drop of him.

Rex arched backwards, banging his head against the door.

“Fuck,” he grunted. “Fuck. Fuck.”

I lurched toward him, pinning my upper body against his.

“Yeah, fuck that pussy,” I hissed. “Fuck it.”

His head snapped up and our eyes locked on each other. Without a word, he gripped me harder than ever before and jammed his cock further inside than I thought possible. His entire expression froze, like a statue of living stone, while he erupted.

My breathing stopped, trapped in the middle of my chest. I felt his dick pulsing inside of me, lacing my insides with warmth. The entire time, his gaze never left me, not so much as a single blink. I stared into his eyes, almost hypnotized, while he claimed me, taking everything he desired.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and enclosed his face in a swath of my hair. We kissed. For several seconds I felt the final remnants of Rex’s climax, his dick continuing to pulse and flex

within me. We broke free from our kiss and I leaned away, looking at him again.

“Okay!” the man named Alex yelled. “I have to finish vacuuming down here. I’ll meet you at the truck in ten minutes.”

Still straddling Rex, I slapped my hand across my mouth.

Rex wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Ready for round two?”

“Uh!” I whispered. “No!”

But yeah really, I was. However, it wasn't happening here!

In flash, we separated. Rex pulled his pants up and I stammered backwards, snatching my thong and struggling to look presentable. I stood up straight, flipping my hair away from my eyes at the last instant.

Just then, the door clicked open and a man appeared.

Alex.

He froze and looked at us, a frown framing his face. Not speaking at first, he looked around the room before returning his attention to us once again.

“Umm,” he began, hooking his keys on his belt. “No one’s supposed to be in here. I’m going to have to report this to my manager.”

While the man spoke, Rex reached into the pocket of his pants, producing a thick fold of bills. I

was too far to know what they were but they had Alex's attention. Rex peeled off ten of them and gestured for the janitor to take them.

"You sure about that?" Rex asked.

Alex took the bills, his eyes wide. He looked at Rex again, folded the money and stuffed it in his pocket.

"You folks have a nice evening."

Still stunned, I walked toward Rex. He waited for me to pass before following behind me.

"Enjoy round two." Alex said.

Oh God.

Mortified, I looked at Rex.

He winked.



I HADN'T SEEN or heard from Rex since we'd been together.

It was probably for the best. Not because I didn't want to see him but more because I didn't feel like answering a bunch of questions from my family.

Luckily, prep for the Masters order kept everyone busy but sooner or later, the topic would come up - I had no idea what I would say, hell, *should say*.

It just happened.

Deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling it shouldn't have.

Whenever I wasn't overwhelmed with work, I found myself thinking about it - *about him*.

I wondered... Was he doing the same?

Whether he was or not didn't change the fact we had a lot to do. Between finishing the Masters order and adding the new lip gloss products to our line, there was plenty to keep me busy. And with Rex coming by later in the day, we had a lot to do to prove to him we were on track.

It was early afternoon when he arrived. My dad and I had just finished a late lunch together when Rex walked toward us.

Ugh, he looked *incredible*.

Great.

Meanwhile, I'd been at the warehouse for the better part of three days straight... it showed. I'd barely had time to shower and get ready each day, let alone glam out.

The joys of being a business owner.

"Hey, Frank," Rex said, stopping and shaking my dad's hand while looking at me. "Where's your mom? Emily?"

"They had to run a couple of errands."

After shaking my dad's hand, Rex walked over to me.

"There's been a change of plans," he said. "I need to speak about it with you, in private."

Change of plans? I didn't like the sound of that.

After entering my office, Rex closed the door.

I looked at him. "What's going on? What did you mean by change of plans?"

He walked toward me. "The red carpet event generated a lot of excitement for us. It's time to capitalize on that buzz and there's only one way to do it."

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about? I don't have time to do anything else right now. Between the new products and the Masters order, I'm totally swamped."

Rex waved me off.

"You're going to have to leave that to your family and Sam to get handled. We've got more important things to do."

Ugh. Another curve ball.

"Rex," I began, pointing in the direction of the warehouse. "Nothing is more important than finishing what we've started. I..."

"That's where you're wrong." He snapped, interrupting me. "What you're doing out there has nothing to do with the future of the company. We've got to look beyond the short-term."

Rex went on to tell me he'd be taking me on what's known as a "roadshow".

We'd be heading to New York City for face-to-face meetings with other major retailers from

around the country. Using Rex's connections, we'd pitch the new product line to them and hopefully lock up tens of millions in new sales after the exclusivity contract with Masters expired.

"So," he said, wrapping up his explanation, "it's time to pack your bags. Masters is only the beginning."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing!

Every time I turned around, he always had something new for me to do. While I didn't think it was a bad idea to meet with new customers, I hated the idea of leaving my work undone. It was time to tell him as much.

"Rex, I don't have a problem with any of that but why can't we wait? What's the rush?"

"It's time for you to learn how to be a business owner," he replied. "You need to spend less time working in the business and more time working on the business. Do you understand the difference?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Basically, it comes down to delegation - learning how to free your time by having your employees do less valuable work while you focus on doing the most important. Now, you may not like the idea but I'm not taking no for an answer. We're going on the roadshow and that's all there is to it."

More *orders*. More *commands*.

I was getting sick of it.

It's like he was completely unwilling to listen to me and inflexible when it came to any ideas that weren't his own.

What kind of partnership was this?

It was time to fight back but before I could say anything, Rex switched subjects.

“Where's the coconut oil? It's been a couple of weeks since I've gotten any updates from you.”

Shit.

Between the red carpet event and the chaos in the warehouse, I'd forgotten to tell him.

“I'm sorry about that, it slipped my mind.”

Rex's face held a mix of disappointment and frustration.

“Slipped your mind? That's an unacceptable answer. What if giving you two-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars slipped my mind? How would you feel?”

I felt bad enough. This wasn't helping.

“Forget it,” he said, continuing. “Just forget about it. What's the latest?”

“Um, well, it's here but it's been delayed at customs.”

“I see,” he replied, nodding his head. “Is that a normal occurrence?”

I shook my head. “No, but it does happen from time to time. Usually, it gets resolved in a couple of days. I've already talked to Dave and he's working on getting it released as soon as possible. I'm in

regular contact with him and as soon as it gets released, I'll let you know.”

The answer didn't seem to change his mood much. Rex still seemed annoyed.

“Okay, moving on. Where's the MSDS from the supplier. I'd like to see them. Now.”

I frowned at him. *MSDS?*

“What's that?”

The expression on his face turned from annoyance to anger. My stomach sank.

“Material Safety Data Sheets - they are standard documents, Cherry,” he said, exhaling in frustration. “Any company supplying products that wind up on a person's face needs to have them. Your supplier should be able to give them to you.”

Rex brought his hands together in a prayerful gesture and raised them to his chin.

“Please tell me you know what I'm talking about. This is important.”

I hesitated, worrying how he would react when I told him the truth.

“Cherry?”

“No, I... I don't know what they are. I've never asked for them. Dave's never offered them. Why do they matter?”

Rex broke eye contact with me, lifting his chin toward the ceiling and letting out a deep groan.

“Christ, Cherry.”

“What? I...”

He cut me off. “It’s real simple. Unless you can get the MSDS from them, you need to look for a new supplier, and do it as quickly as possible. It’s that serious.”

MSDS or not, there was no chance I’d cut Dave off.

“No, no way. Dave’s been sourcing raw materials for me since the day I started. I can’t just cut him off. I won’t.”

“Calm down,” Rex replied, taking an extra second to gather his thoughts. “I’m not saying you have to do it right away. What I’m telling you is that without the MSDS, your supplier can’t guarantee the conditions under which the coconut oil is produced. Bottom line, if there’s any chance it’s made in an unclean facility, that could expose us to consumer liability. If you think losing the order with Masters Mercantile is bad, wait until you’re in the middle of a class action lawsuit because one of the ingredients in your product wasn’t safe for people to use.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. That wasn’t possible.

“I understand what you’re saying but I’m not worried about it. My customers, friends and family have used these products for years without a single issue.”

Rex looked at me in silence before straightening his tie.

“This isn’t negotiable. Get the MSDS. If you don’t or they won’t provide them, I will intervene and fire them myself. Get it handled. Do I make myself clear?”

Biting my lip, I turned away from him, walking toward my desk.

“I’ll be in touch with details about the roadshow,” he said. “I’ve got to go.”

Stopping, I turned to see him walking toward my office door. Part of me wanted to tell him not to let it hit his backside on the way out. He left without another word.

“Ugh,” I groaned, plopping down in my crappy chair and looking up at the ceiling.

Okay, I mean, I understood his concern about the MSDS but that stupid roadshow thing, I had no interest.

Why did it seem like every time things were smoothing out between us, something popped up and set us back?



A COUPLE OF HOURS PASSED.

In spite of being frustrated by Rex’s insistence I get the MSDS from Dave, I did as he asked. Unable to reach him, I left a message explaining what I wanted. I wasn’t optimistic about the answer I’d

probably get.

If he couldn't come through, what then?

It's not like Rex would just drop it. No, he'd do exactly what he promised - fire Dave. While he might've been right about proper documentation, he was way, way wrong in thinking it would be easy to replace the coconut oil.

It took so long to find the perfect one. Switching out the formulation might completely alter the gloss. I shook my head.

Standing from my desk, I reached up and ran my hands through my hair.

It wasn't just the coconut oil, it's like Rex wasn't satisfied with anything.

Ever.

We'd done what he wanted - re-building the product line from the ground up but it still wasn't good enough.

I mean, I know I agreed he'd be in charge but that didn't mean he was *always right*.

I continued to pace across my office.

And what the hell was I thinking? *Sleeping with him?!*

Just then, there was a knock at my office door. It cracked open and my mother poked her head inside.

"Hey, what's up?" I said. "Do you need something because I'm kind of... busy."

My mother closed the door behind her.

“I do need something,” she said, walking toward me. “I need to know how you’re doing. What’s wrong?”

I frowned at her. “What are you talking about? Nothing’s wrong.”

My mother reached toward me, rubbing my upper arm.

“Cherry, you can’t fool me. After all, I raised you. Whatever is going on you can tell me.”

Hah! I wish!

She continued, “I’m not leaving until you do. So you may as well start.”

There was no chance of trying to explain any of this.

Zero. Zilch.

Hell, even if I wanted to there wasn’t enough time. But I knew her well enough to know I had to say *something*, otherwise she wouldn’t drop it.

I shrugged. “I dunno. I guess it’s just that with everything that’s going on, I’m feeling like maybe I made the wrong decision.”

My mom continued to rub my arm.

“Well, honey, you made the best decision you could with the information you had at the time. I’m surprised to see you so upset. Don’t you think things are going well?”

“Yes and no.” I replied, letting out a deep exhale. “It’s hard to explain.”

A soft smile came to my mom’s face. “I’m sure

it is. Your father and I are proud of you. We're so grateful for all you've done."

Her words got to me. A hard lump formed in my throat. Still, this was no time to get gooey.

"Thanks," I whispered, trying to keep my tears at bay.

I guess my mom picked up on it.

"Something you said... just a second ago. When I asked you if things were going well, you said 'yes and no'. What did you mean?"

"It's a few different things," I replied. "But if I had to sum it up, I just don't feel like this is my company anymore."

My mom nodded at me. "Are you sure that's the only thing that's bothering you?"

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Well, after what happened between you and Rex at the red carpet event don't you think I'd be curious?"

Great. Perfect. Yep, this is exactly what I need right now.

"Curious about what exactly?" I asked, crossing my arms at my chest.

My mom raised her hands in front of her body. "Listen, if you don't want to talk about it, then..."

"Things are getting crazy right now," I began, turning and walking away from her. "This is too much."

"You're an adult, Cherry. Your personal life

isn't any of my business but if what's happening between you and Rex affects the company, well, I'm just worried."

"There's nothing going on, okay? I'm just really stressed out trying to get everything done and make everyone happy."

I hated lying to her but I really didn't feel like I had a choice. If I came clean about it, they might lose respect for me. No matter what, I would find a way to work with Rex and get through all of this.

"Cherry."

I turned around to see my mother standing in front of me.

"No one's judging you. Okay? The most important thing is sticking together as a family and getting through this. We're here for you."

She opened her arms and I leaned in, hugging her. "Thanks, Mom."

After we separated, my mom turned and walked toward the door, stopping and looking at me one last time.

"We all believe in the decision you made to partner with Rex. Look how much he's helped us accomplish already. With any luck, we will be able to continue to grow and achieve our goals."

Smiling at her, I didn't respond. Up until a few hours ago, I would've agreed with her.

I wasn't sure anymore.

SOMEONE TO COUNT ON (REX)

I picked up my phone and dialed Sam's extension.

“Hey, Rex.”

“You got a minute? I need to talk to you about something.”

“I need to wrap something up first. Can you give me ten?”

I nodded. “See you then.”

After hanging up, I stood from my chair and walked toward my office windows. It was another beautiful goddamn day in Beverly Hills.

But then again, when wasn't it?

Looking down, I noticed women walking along Rodeo Drive, swarming shops up and down the street.

I slid my hands into my pockets. “Customers as far as the eye can see.”

Looking up, I shifted my gaze into the distance and my thoughts to our problems.

How had I missed it?

Something as basic as the goddamn MSDS. The fact I'd overlooked something so simple, it bothered the hell out of me. Sure, Cherry should've known better but I botched my own due diligence.

"You're slipping, March," I said, letting out a deep exhale. "Get your head out of your ass."

If we were lucky, we could get the situation resolved before long. We had no choice because no way in hell would I risk a lawsuit.

Wasn't happening.

From behind, I heard a knock on the door. "Rex?"

I looked over my shoulder to see Sam standing there. "Is this a bad time?"

Turning to face her, I shook my head.

"Nope," I said, gesturing toward a chair across from my desk. "Come on in and have a seat."

After returning to my desk, I sat down and looked at her.

"We haven't talked about Cherry in a while. How is everything going with the two of you?"

"Fine. Yeah, it's going well. Everything looks to be on track for the new gloss and the Masters order."

I leaned back in my chair and dropped my hands into my lap.

“About the order, we need to talk.”

Confusion wrinkled her brow. “Okay? What’s wrong?”

“Well, during a visit to the warehouse, I came across an issue which could present a serious problem.”

Sam shifted her body, sitting upright. “I don’t like the sound of that. Is it something I’ve done?”

“I’d say more like something we both did, or didn’t do, in this case.”

“Well are you going to tell me or are you just going to keep me in suspense?”

I went on to explain to her how I’d asked Cherry for a copy of the MSDS from her coconut oil supplier. Not only could she not supply it to me but she had no idea what I meant.

Sam covered her heart with her hand. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think to ask. I...”

“I’m not blaming you, Sam,” I said, waving her off. “That’s not why you’re here.”

“It isn’t?”

I shook my head. “No. If there’s some good news it’s that we managed to catch this before any product shipped.”

“That’s true.”

I leaned forward in my chair, narrowing my eyes at her.

“This supplier of hers... I need you to find out everything you can about them. My guess is they

won't be able to supply the documentation we need. To make matters worse, Cherry's too attached. She's likely to drag her feet, and that's not something we can tolerate."

"I understand," she said, nodding at me. "But, with her at the warehouse, I'm going to have a hard time getting the information you need."

"No," I replied. "That's not going to be a problem. I've arranged some meetings for Cherry in New York City. You'll have plenty of time to get the job done."

"Okay, I understand," she said. "Anything else?"

I thought about her question for a second.

"Just don't leave anything to chance. I don't exactly have a crystal ball but I can see the future path Cherry is on here. It's not a good one. The last thing we need when trying to re-launch this brand is a frivolous lawsuit. It's not a matter of if it happens, but when."

While I spoke, Sam scribbled on a piece of paper, taking notes. "Okay, I think I've got everything. How long will you be gone?"

"It shouldn't be more than a few days, plenty of time for you to get everything organized."

With that, I stood from my desk. "I've got some calls and some prep to do ahead of the trip. I'll keep you in the loop."

Sam gathered her things and stood as well. I

looked at her. “Let me know what you find out as soon as possible.”

She nodded. “I will.”

ROAD WARRIOR (CHERRY)

I'd arrived in New York City - on a red eye, of course.

Rex offered to have the corporate jet take me but I refused.

I know. Smart, right?

Now, waiting in the lobby of the hotel where we were scheduled to have our meetings, I cursed myself. Struggling to stay awake and halfway through my third cup of coffee, I started to regret not taking him up on his offer.

Rex insisted I come unprepared. He wanted to coach me on what to expect and what to say. Since he was the one who'd do all the talking, that was fine by me. I think I checked my cell phone every minute on the minute for the last hour waiting for him to arrive.

Just then, I noticed a limousine pull up in front

of the hotel entrance. The door man approached it and opened the rear door.

Rex emerged, looking incredible as always.

Seeing him, I took a deep breath and stood, smoothing the lines of my dress. He walked inside and stopped, pausing to look around.

I almost raised my hand to signal to him but hesitated.

Now when I saw him, I felt things I didn't want to but somehow, couldn't help. After the last argument we had I hoped I could shake those feelings but looking across the lobby at him, I knew I hadn't.

If anything, *they'd grown*, encircling my heart like thorny vines.

Our eyes met and he headed straight toward me.

Standing straight, I watched Rex approach, knowing my resolve would be tested. It wasn't his fault - it was my own crap.

He didn't hesitate, coming right up to me and leaning in for a kiss. I flinched and leaned away from him.

Stay strong. You can do this.

“Cherry? Is everything okay?”

Reaching up, I tugged a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yeah. Why?”

“Um,” he began, studying me for a reaction. I wouldn't give him one. “No reason. You ready to

get started?”

Without realizing it, I'd held my breath. When Rex took a quick look at his watch, I blew out two lungful's of air.

Rex turned and gestured for me to follow him. “Come on. Let's go. We've only got a few hours to get you ready.”

I'd only taken a handful of steps. “Wait. Get me ready? Ready for what?”

A look of confusion came to his face. “The meetings with the retailers. Remember? What we discussed in your office?”

I tightened my grip on the strap of my bag. “I thought you were the one who was going to make the pitch to them.”

Rex chuckled and shook his head.

“No, these are going to be your deals to win or lose. Don't worry though, we've got plenty of time to go over the game plan. Plus, I'm going to be there with you. You trust me, don't you?”

Funny.

Of all the thoughts and emotions he stirred inside of me, *distrust* wasn't one of them. Yes, he could be difficult, demanding and borderline impossible at times but I never questioned my trust in him.

“Yes, of course I trust you. But what does that have to do with me making the pitch to all the retailers?”

He smiled at me.

The next few hours flew by. Rex coached me on exactly what to say. He promised me as long as I stuck to the talking points he'd given me, he had every confidence we'd walk away with orders worth millions.

I wasn't so sure.

Rex looked at his watch. "Okay, they'll be here in about ten minutes. Do you have any questions?"

Yes, can I go home now?

Wishing that's what I could've said, I shook my head instead. "No."

"All right then. Let's go to the lobby."

Taking a deep breath, I stood from the chair and started to walk toward the exit. On the way, we passed by a full-length mirror.

I stopped and made one last attempt to look presentable. Rex followed and stopped behind me, looking over my shoulder at the reflection of us.

I reached up and slid my fingers into my hair, pulling it off my shoulders and exposing my skin. Before I could react, Rex moved his mouth to my neck and kissed it.

I went limp.

Oh man. Not what I needed...

Without thinking, I pulled my fingers free of my hair and reached for him. Somehow, the will to fight and resist I had earlier vanished. Spinning my body toward his, I lunged for his mouth, pressing my lips

hard into him.

Rex reached for my waist, curling his fingers around it and holding me close. I don't know how long it lasted, I didn't care. Soon though, he pulled away from me.

"I missed you," he said, reaching toward my face and stroking my hair.

I smiled at him but didn't respond, worried I might say something I would regret.

"I know you're nervous but you've been through worse," he said. "Remember the red carpet event?"

Smiling at him, I nodded. "How could I forget?"

Rex leaned in and kissed me on the lips. "I believe in what we're doing but most of all, I believe in you. Now, come on. Let's go kick some ass."

TIME TO SHINE (REX)

S*hit.*

I figured she'd be nervous but I hadn't expected her to be quite this bad.

My instinct to protect her took over, I had to help her find the confidence needed to get the job done. *Talking about it* wasn't getting us anywhere. There's a time when action trumps all. She left me with no choice but to put my lips on hers, to let her know how unstoppable she could be.

Holding her close sent a charge through my body. If we didn't have a meeting scheduled in minutes, there might have been a different outcome, probably on the goddamn conference room table.

We took the elevator down, going over the high points of my goals for the meeting. If Cherry stuck to the coaching I gave her, we'd get orders and *big*

ones.

Reaching the lobby, the elevator doors opened and I put my palm into Cherry's lower back, guiding her. We weren't walking for long when I saw Jonathan and Marissa, the team from Rode Beauty - the largest independent chain of cosmetics retailers in the country.

My company had a long-standing relationship with them. It was the only reason this meeting took place. After exchanging pleasantries, we made our way to the conference room where I spent a few minutes setting things up.

Now it was time for her to shine. "With that, I'll step aside and turn things over to Cherry."

She smiled. "Thank you, Rex."

Cherry stopped and looked toward Marissa and Jonathan. "And thank you again for agreeing to meet with us today. It's a huge honor."

Jonathan looked at Marissa. "Would you like to go first?"

"Sure," she said, reaching for a pen and preparing to take notes. "Rex has talked about you to me, non-stop, for a while now. We know how he feels! I think I speak for both of us when I say I'd like to hear from you. Tell us why Cherry's Berries is a good fit for Rode."

I glanced at Cherry.

Stick to the script, baby. You got this.

She stammered, "Um, right, okay. Well, you

know, I started making the products by hand, like, when I was a freshman in college. One thing led to another and my friends started using it and really liking it. So I figured hey, why not try selling it? You know, just to make a little extra money.”

Shit. She's drifting.

I studied Jonathan and Marissa.

So far they still seem to be listening but if Cherry didn't turn it around soon, they wouldn't be for long. Fighting my instinct to jump in, I decided to let her try and work her way through it.

She continued to bore them.

“So anyway, that kind of went on, you know, while I was in college. Then, after graduation I sort of had a decision to make. Should I go and get a job somewhere or try and see if I could grow the business. I mean, I had job offers. It's not like I *had* to do this, you know?”

Christ.

Neither one of them took notes. Hell, I wouldn't either. Jonathan started to tap his pen on the pad in front of him while Marissa shifted in her chair.

If I didn't do something, and quick, this meeting would be over before it started.

I jumped in. “I think what Cherry is trying to say is that she started her product to solve a problem. Somewhere along the way that changed from wanting to fix her own issues into a passion

for helping others.”

I glanced at her and nodded. “Wouldn’t you agree, Cherry?”

Her eyes were round, like little moons. It didn’t matter, we’d sort it out later. For now, I had to find some way to salvage this. Her “deer in the headlights” frame of mind wasn’t going to get any orders signed.

“Speaking on behalf of Cherry and her family, we feel Rode would benefit by offering your customers an all-organic, boutique lip gloss line. It’s not available on the mass-market and it’s our goal to keep it that way. We want partners who, like us, are committed to fair trade, sustainable cosmetics.”

That helped. But not much.

Over the next few minutes Jonathan and Marissa asked me a handful of questions. By now, Cherry’d frozen up, leaving me to try and close the deal.

And you know, if it were my own products, it wouldn’t have been a problem.

But power players like this want intimate relationships with their suppliers. They want to know what makes them tick, why they do what they do.

Unfortunately, Cherry wasn’t up to the task.

Not long after, Jonathan and Marissa ended the meeting early. I can’t say it surprised me because it didn’t. They were polite about it, promising to get

in touch with me soon.

Translated though - it meant *no order*.

After saying our goodbyes, I closed the conference room door and looked at Cherry.

“Do you want talk about it?”

Her skin was pale-white, like she’d seen a rat run across the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” she began, hanging her head. “I’m just not cut out for this.”

In my life, I’d been in plenty of big meetings that imploded. It’s a temporary setback, at most. We’d get another chance with them at some point.

“It’s not a big deal,” I replied. “It happens to the best of us. Anyway, we’ve got another shot tomorrow.”

Cherry turned her back on me and exhaled a deep breath.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked.

She walked away from me. “I don’t know. I just feel like it’s not my company anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I replied, frowning. “Of course it’s your company.”

Cherry froze and turned to face me.

“But it isn’t though. Can’t you see that? Since you’ve gotten involved, everything has changed. I mean, all new products, insane deadlines, this whole thing here in New York City. It just goes on and on.”

Cherry stopped talking and rubbed her forehead

with her hand.

She caught me by surprise. Still, if that's how she felt it was better to get it out in the open rather than let it fester.

"What did you expect?" I asked. "All these things you mentioned... That's how you grow the business. It's how you take a part-time hobby and turn it into a worldwide brand."

She glared at me but didn't respond.

"Would you rather go bankrupt, Cherry?"

"No." She snapped. "Of course not."

"Good. Because that's where you were headed until I came along."

She turned away from me again and walked to the corner of the room. There was a small service area there with drinks and snacks. While she poured herself a glass of water I walked over toward her.

Cherry took a long drink from the glass and then looked at me.

"Let's just forget about it. Drop it," she said, putting the empty glass down. "I'm sorry about the way things went earlier. I promise I'll do better next time."

Only her body language didn't match up with her pledge. I moved closer to her, reaching for her waist.

"Please, don't," she said, pulling away from me. "I can't. I'm just really confused."

Getting a read on her was proving to be difficult. I decided not to push it. We had important work to do.

“Hey,” I said, backing away and putting my hands in my pockets. “It’s time for you to start believing in yourself. Even though I’m here, I can’t do it for you.”

She looked up at me. “I know. I know.”

“Listen, forget about today. If we have to stay up all night to get ready for tomorrow, then that’s what we’ll do.”

She didn’t respond.

SHOT AT REDEMPTION (CHERRY)

After the disaster of the previous day, my confidence was, well...
Crap.

On top of that, trying to sort through my feelings about Rex made things more complicated, not less.

Still, for the first time in a while, I felt like he'd listened to me. I appreciated it and the last thing I wanted to do was let him down again. And so, we spent most of the night working together, honing my pitch so we could salvage something out of the trip.

It was a few minutes before noon. We had a meeting with the world's largest online cosmetics retailer - Haute Beauty. The founder, Clarice Benson, was only a few years older than me and worth more than a billion dollars.

When she arrived, Rex was his usual charming self, complementing her and introducing us to each other. We headed to the same conference room where the disaster with Rode took place. I hoped for better luck today. After a night of coaching, I thought I'd be ready for anything.

That is, until she asked her first question.

"I heard Rode turned you down?" she asked, looking straight through me. "Do you know why?"

My stomach fell, like the sensation of the first massive drop on a roller coaster. I glanced at Rex, his expression never changed.

You can do this. You can do this!

"Um," I said, gathering my wits. "I think so. The truth is I'm new at this and I didn't do a very good job of... No. Wait. I did a *terrible* job of helping Jonathan and Clarissa understand what my product could do for them. I promise I won't make the same mistake with you so long as you give me a chance. Would you be willing to do that?"

"Good answer," she said, smiling. "Of course I'm willing to give you a chance. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

A few hours later, Rex and I sat in the hotel bar.

Between us, a two million dollar order. I found it difficult to sit still, adrenaline still pumping through my veins. I am not kidding - my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. I picked up the order and waved it back and forth in front of Rex's face.

“Can you believe it? Can you believe I did that?”

Rex laughed, leaning back in his barstool. “Yes. I’m the one who said you could do it. Remember?”

Of course, I’d gotten the Masters order on my own but this was different somehow. With Masters, it was all on me to make it happen. While it felt great, the celebration was lonely.

I looked at the order again and smiled. No one believed in me quite like Rex. I guess more than anything it felt great to share the victory with someone who cared about it as much as I did.

He stood from his chair. “Be right back.”

I watched him walk down the hall toward the restroom until he disappeared from view.

Just then, my phone rang. Reaching inside of my purse, I pulled it out and looked at the number to see it was Dave calling. We had a lot to discuss - the delayed shipment and the MSDS. With any luck, some good news from him would make today a day to remember for a long time to come.

“Hey, Dave!” I chirped. “I bet you’re calling with good news, aren’t you?”

He didn’t hesitate, sniping a response at me. “Good news? Hardly! I’ve been fired!”

Huh?

“Hang on, what? What are you talking about?”

Dave ignored my response, continuing his rant.

“All the times I had your back... Remember?”

The early days, when I floated all those invoices for you. And this is how you repay me? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Me? Dave, I don't even know what's going on. I didn't fire you!"

He continued to blow me off. "You know what the worst part is? You didn't even have the decency to pick up the phone and do it yourself. You had one of your employees do it!"

"Dave, slow down," I replied, confusion clouding my brain. "You aren't making any sense. You said someone called you... Who? No one has the authority to fire you. Who was it?"

Dave sputtered an exhale. "Some woman, called herself Samantha."

What!

Just then, I noticed Rex on his way back to the bar.

"Dave, trust me when I tell you, you aren't fired. Okay? I promise to get this whole thing sorted out. I just need some time."

Without a word, he hung up on me. Just when I jammed my phone back in my purse, Rex sat in his stool next to me.

"Hey beautiful. Miss me?"

Ignoring him, I snapped my head in his direction. "Who gave Sam the authority to fire Dave?"

Rex didn't acknowledge my question, instead

gesturing for the bartender.

“Rex,” I growled. “Answer me.”

The bartender approached and Rex turned toward me. “What would you like?”

“Uh! Nothing!”

Rex looked at the bartender. “I’ll have a double whiskey. Neat.”

I glared at him, too furious to form a sentence. After the bartender walked away, Rex turned in my direction.

“I made it clear to you I wouldn’t deal with any company delivering unsafe raw materials. Anyway, you’ve got nothing to worry about, I’ve already lined up another supplier who meets my criteria.

My mouth dropped open. “What! I don’t want another goddamn supplier!”

Rex reached for my forearm but I yanked it away before he could touch me.

“Cherry,” he began, shaking his head. “Calm down. It’s not a big deal. Trust me when I tell you you’re better off without them. Any company in their position that isn’t willing to put the most basic of safety precautions in place is not one I want to deal with going forward. It doesn’t surprise me they were constantly late with deliveries. They never would have been able to keep up.”

My spine stiffened. This could not be happening. No way.

“No, you listen,” I said, pointing my finger at

him. “I need this product because it’s better for the skin than anything else available. That’s all I care about. This is more important than the bottom line, it’s about doing what’s right. Why can’t you understand that?”

While I berated him, the bartender returned with Rex’s drink. Rex reached for it and took a slow pull before setting it down and looking at me.

“It’s that kind of thinking that got you in trouble in the first place.”

I flattened my palm and slapped it on the bar. “Look, I’m not going to argue dollars and cents with you but when it comes to the things that go into my products, I’m not willing to compromise. Hell, I’d rather go out of business first.”

Rex didn’t respond right away. He picked up his glass, and swirled the golden liquid around before taking another drink. After, he placed the glass on the bar with a thud.

“Look at me,” I said. “This is important! I need you to back off and give me a chance to get things worked out.”

He continued to stare straight ahead for a few more seconds before swiveling his head in my direction.

“Okay, Cherry,” he said, reaching for his glass and giving it a slow spin. “I’m willing to give you another chance where the supplier is concerned.”

“Thank you, I...”

Rex lifted his hand, extending his index finger.

“I’m not finished. There are *three* conditions attached. One, they have to be able to keep up with demand. Two, they do not cause delays in production and shipping. And three, they supply the goddamn MSDS. If they don’t do all those things, they are out. If you don’t like it, then I’m out. If you want to put everything on the line with them, that’s your choice but there will be consequences if it goes bad. I am not interested in dealing with those consequences. Do I make myself clear?”

I couldn’t believe how far we’ve fallen from the high of closing the deal. I glanced at the order once again.

“Well?” he said, arching an eyebrow at me. “What’s it going to be?”

“Fine. I’ll take care of it.”

“See that you do.” Rex reached for his drink and lifted it to his mouth, slamming the rest of it back.

He stood from his stool and pointed at the order. “Congratulations again. You did a great job.”

I wanted to thank him but then again, I didn’t. I couldn’t believe he’d gone behind my back like this.

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

“Had something come up,” he said, checking his watch. “I’ve got to fly out last-minute but I’m not headed to Los Angeles.”

I looked at him while he buttoned his coat and straightened his tie.

“However, I can arrange for my jet to come back through New York and pick you up tomorrow morning. Unless, of course, you’d like to come with me.”

Oh hell no.

He must be *out of his mind* if he thinks I’m going anywhere with him right now.

I shook my head. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll just take the commercial flight I’ve already booked.”

“Why are you acting like this?” he asked, frowning at me. “After closing this huge deal, it’s a time to celebrate.”

Celebrate? That’s the last thing I wanted to do.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I lied. “The last couple of days caught up to me. I just need a little time to myself.”

He didn’t bother to try and kiss me.

I didn’t bother to care.

BUSY BODIES (REX)

“I’ve decided to give her a chance to work things out with the supplier,” I said, leaning back in my chair. “Gotta say, my gut is telling me it’s probably a bad idea.”

Sam sat across from me, frowning.

“What’s with the look?”

She shrugged. “Nothing.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “It’s something. Come on, out with it. If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

Before answering me, Sam crossed her arms and legs. “I’ve never seen you act like this before. That’s all.”

“Come again? Act like what?”

Sam pursed her lips.

“Well, it’s just that once we determined the supplier would be nothing but a problem, the

solution seemed simple. Fire them and move on. That's what you wanted me to do, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I replied. "But Cherry made a solid argument for another chance. After landing the Haute order, I felt like I owed her another shot."

"I bet you did." Sam scoffed.

I had no idea where this was coming from and I didn't like the direction it was headed.

"What are you getting at?"

"Just this," she began, thinning her lips. "I don't remember getting any special consideration from you when you acquired my company. Why are you treating Cherry differently?"

Ah, okay. Here we go.

I leaned forward. "Are you jealous of Cherry? Because I'll tell you, it sure as hell sounds like it."

No sooner had I said the words than Sam's face wrinkled with anger. She jumped to her feet and started to storm out of my office.

"Hey, hey!" I said. "Where do you think you're going? We're not done here."

Sam ignored me and continued to march toward my office door, nearly running into my mother. I leaned back in my chair again and watched the two of them exchanging words, just out of earshot for me. A few seconds later, Sam walked away and my mother entered.

While she walked inside, I thought about what Sam said - about how I'd treated Cherry different

than her. While I disagreed with her, she did have a point about one thing, whether she realized it or not.

My guess was she did. Jealousy between women is a helluva thing.

Until I'd gotten involved with Cherry, I managed to keep my cock out of the boardroom.

Let's get real. It's not like I couldn't have done the same thing with Sam.

I knew how she felt about me - then and now. But sticking to my "one rule" meant not having to deal with messy drama.

I'd let the genie out of the goddamn bottle where Cherry was concerned. If I wasn't careful, a jealous fit from Sam would be the least of my problems. Anyway, I'd deal with Sam's issues later.

I looked up from my desk.

"Mother, good to see you," I said, getting up from my chair.

I walked around my desk and kissed her on the cheek. "How have you been?"

She didn't answer me but instead returned my question with one of her own. "Why are you and Sam fighting?"

"As far as I'm concerned, we aren't," I replied with a shrug. "She's just being temperamental. It'll blow over."

I turned away from her. "Frankly, I think she's jealous."

“Jealous? Of who?”

“Cherry.”

Rounding my desk, I heard my mother let out a sustained groan. I slid into my chair and frowned at her.

“What’s that all about?”

My mother stood there with her arms across her chest, shaking her head.

“I don’t know, I just don’t like her.”

“I see,” I replied. “Care to tell me why?”

My mother ignored me and instead gestured in the direction of my office door.

“What about Sam?”

“What about her?”

She looked at me again. “The two of you are made for each other, *perfect*. Can’t you see that?”

Easing back into my chair, I looked up at her and chuckled. “All I see is a mother with too much time on her hands.”

She shot me a nasty look. Before she could say anything, I finished my thought.

“Now, do you need anything in particular or did you just come into my office to create drama?”

She glared at me.

TRUST ISSUES (CHERRY)

After I got home from New York, Rex called and asked me to have a sit down with Sam.

Honestly, after the whole blowup with Dave, it was the last thing I wanted to do. Still, there was a lot of work to be done and in spite of what she did in firing him, Sam had been a big help to us. And anyway, Rex was the one behind the firing. Sam was just doing as she was told.

That didn't mean I wasn't angry with her.

To be honest, the whole situation had me rattled. If I wanted to find some way to work with Sam, I'd have to keep my cool and stay focused on the big picture.

I only hoped I could.

Just then, there was a knock at my office door.

"Come in," I said, readying myself.

Looking up, I watched Sam enter. When I saw her face, I tightened my grip on the pen I held in my hand.

Stay cool. Stay calm.

Sam closed the door behind her and walked toward my desk. “Hi, Cherry.”

“Hello,” I replied, knuckles whitening from my death grip.

“Mind if I sit?” she said, pointing at a chair across from my desk.

“No.”

“I, um, I have something to tell you,” she said, sliding into the chair. “Really, it’s like a confession.”

Huh?

That’s not what I expected her to say. “Okay?”

“Rex is the one who gave the okay to fire your supplier,” she said, kind of blurting it out. “I didn’t go behind your back.”

I mean, I already *knew* that. She *had to know* I did. Even so, it was nice to hear her admit it.

“Okay, well, thanks for being honest with me.”

Something about the fact she admitted what she’d done... I dunno, it made me feel like she wasn’t just going to do whatever Rex wanted.

“Believe me, I understand how difficult it is to deal with Rex. After all, I was pretty much in the same position as you are not so long ago. I was working hard, just trying to make my company

successful, when he swept in with his bag of money!”

I raised my eyebrows at her comment.

She continued, “I wanted to say something else, about you.”

“Okay.”

Sam shifted her position, sitting upright at the edge of the chair.

“I really respect the stand you’re taking by insisting on using the raw materials you believe in - no matter how he feels about it.”

This was not how I expected our meeting to go.

Not even close.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to decipher the meaning in her words. “You’re right. Rex can be hard to get along with sometimes but, to his credit, at least he’s willing to give me another chance to fix things.”

“That’s true,” she replied. “Where you’re concerned, he’s flexible.”

Where I am concerned?

I didn’t know what to make of her change in behavior. Was it legitimate? She seemed sincere enough but for now it would have to wait. On orders from Rex, we had business to discuss.

“Hey,” I said, changing subjects. “I’ve got some good news.”

“Really? We could use some of that right now.”

I picked up the customs release form from my

desk and passed it to her.

“Just got the official notice. The coconut oil will be here this afternoon.”

“Great news!” she exclaimed, taking the paper from my hand and scanning it with her eyes. “Have you told Rex yet?”

I shook my head. “No, I was about to call him when you walked in.”

“What about the rest of it?”

“The MSDS, is that what you’re talking about?”

She nodded her head. “You know how focused he is on that documentation.”

Gee, no, hadn’t noticed.

“I know. Dave swears he’s working on it and will get it to me as soon as he can. I realize I’m taking him at his word and everything but there’s not much else I can do. If I’m being honest, I’d rather ask for forgiveness than permission at this point.”

“I could see that,” she began, crossing her legs. “Well, with the coconut oil arriving later today, we should be able to get up and running.”

I rolled my eyes. “If only that were true.”

“What do you mean?”

I went on to explain we’d had problems with some of the new equipment Rex had installed. It malfunctioned a few times a day, at least. Every time something went wrong, we’d be down for a couple hours.

Technicians would be there later in the day to troubleshoot it. With any luck, they'd get the bugs worked out and we'd be able to get on track for the Masters order.

Sam shook her head. "What a headache. Why didn't you let me know? I'm here to help in any way I can."

The last thing I'd wanted to do after getting back from New York was to talk to her. Maybe that was a mistake. I'd wasted a lot of time on the phone trying to get the technicians to come out.

"I didn't want to bother you."

"Please don't feel that way. That's what I'm here for. Okay?"

"Thanks. I know."

Ironically, when Rex got involved, I believed there would be nothing but blue skies ahead for us - all the way into Masters Mercantile and beyond. But between the drama around the MSDS, equipment problems and the time I wasted dealing with everything, it seemed like we were back at square one in many ways.

"Cherry, you seem like you're... Exhausted?"

Well, that's what eighteen hour workdays will do to ya.

As much as I hated to admit it, I'm sure I did look beat.

"I am, a little bit," I replied. "Everything is catching up to me, I guess."

Sam smiled, then said something I never expected.

“How about a hug? I give the world’s best.”

A hug?

I shook my head. “Um, I’m not much of a hugger. Thanks, though.”

Sam didn’t say a word but instead, stood from her chair. I watched her walk around my desk, spreading her arms wide.

“Come on,” she said, gesturing for me to stand. “I promise it will help you feel better.”

I hesitated, but it didn’t look like she was about to give up anytime soon. The zip ties and duct tape strained as I pushed myself into a standing position. After, I opened my arms and we embraced for a few seconds.

“There,” she said, leaning away from me. “You see? Didn’t I tell you I give the world’s best hugs? I told you it would help.”

To my surprise, it kind of did. When she’d walked into my office earlier, hugging her wasn’t on my to-do list. Hell, I almost threw my pen at her. Now, here I am hugging her?

What is going on?

Sam stood there looking at me. “Have you tried to talk to Rex about some of the things that are frustrating you?”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “It won’t do any good. You of all people would know that.

Whenever we talk about something now, he tells me to get it handled or work with you to solve the issue. He's, I dunno, distant?"

"Hmm, I'm sorry to hear that. He can be hard to handle."

I kind of waved her off.

"I'm not trying to turn this into a pity party. I'm grateful for a lot of things that have happened, including being able to talk to you. It's nice to have someone else around who understands Rex. Even so, things are beginning to take a toll on me."

"What do you mean?"

I reached up and ran my fingers through my hair. Having this conversation was helpful but I had a sudden sense of doubt. Sam seemed to be sincere enough but Rex was still her boss. Uncertainty crept into the back of my mind again.

"You know what? Never mind. Everything will work itself out. I'm just a little tired right now."

"Don't feel like you have to say anything to me," she replied. "I'm here to listen and help but I realize earning your trust will take time."

I studied Sam, letting her statement sink in.

"I mean it," she said. "I don't want you to share anything with me unless you're one-hundred percent comfortable."

I smiled at her.

"Well, I should probably get going. If you don't need me, I'm going to head back to the office and

let Rex know we've talked."

I nibbled on my lip.

Should I? Shouldn't I?

"Cherry?"

I felt like I had to get things off my chest. No one else would, or could, understand me quite like Sam. Still, trusting her came with risks.

Could I afford to take them?

Could I not?

"I mean," I began, taking a deep breath. "I guess I'm not sure if this deal with Rex is the right one for me, for my family. But you know, it's not like I'm actually going to go back on my agreement with him. I don't know, it's just been weighing on me."

"I realize this is hard," she said, maintaining eye contact with me. "Believe me, I do."

"I know."

Sam cleared her throat. "You probably won't believe what I'm about to tell you but I swear, it's true."

She had my attention. "Try me."

"It's just that, well..." she began, hesitating. "If I had to do it all over again I, um, I wouldn't have gotten involved with Rex."

What?

I must have been hearing things. The look on my face told her as much because she immediately tried to smooth things over.

“Look, a lot of good things came out of it but I *lost myself* in the process. My only regret is I didn’t fight for what I wanted, fight for doing things on my own terms. Unfortunately, nothing’s perfect, Cherry.”

Sam had a faraway look in her eyes. From the tone of her voice to the expression on her face, it was easy to see she meant every word of it.

I looked at her. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Anything.”

Taking a step back, I sat down on the edge of my desk. “So let me get this straight. If you could go back in time and do it all over again, would you...”

She interrupted me, finishing my sentence. “Not do the deal with Rex? Is that what you’re asking me?”

I nodded my head.

“No, I wouldn’t,” she replied without hesitation. “That’s the truth.”

Just then, my cell phone rang. I glanced at the number.

“It’s Rex.”



SAM RAISED her hand toward her ear, mimicking the shape of a phone.

“Call me,” she mouthed.

I nodded at her and swiped my cell phone on.
“Hey.”

“Hey yourself, beautiful.”

Ugh, not what I needed to hear. Come on, Cherry. Stay strong.

I knew right then and there talking things over with Sam was the right decision. My path ahead was clear. Did I have enough strength to see it through?

I wasn't sure but I *had* to try.

“I'm just calling in for an update,” he said, a tone of urgency in his voice. “Want to know how things are going between you and Sam.”

It was now or never. After hearing Sam's confession, I worried there was only one outcome for my company - *whatever Rex wanted it to be.*

Closing my eyes, I filled my lungs with courage. Then, summoning every bit of confidence I had, I blurted out a reply.

“Rex, I can't keep doing this,” I began, trying to keep my voice steady. “Don't get me wrong, I appreciate everything you've done. I really do but it just isn't working out.”

No sooner did I finish talking than I closed my eyes, pinching them shut. I half-expected him to yell at me through the phone but that's not what happened, far from it.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” he said, calmness in

his tone. “Is there anything in particular that’s caused you to reach this decision?”

Gee, let’s see...

Firing my supplier, developing all new products with no budget and no staff, making a public spectacle by kissing me in front of everyone I know, micromanaging every single aspect of the business, and on, and on.

No. Nothing in particular.

Except everything.

“I guess it was just a bunch of little things,” I lied.

“Uh huh,” he grumbled. “Well, I have to be honest. I’m surprised to hear you want to give up, especially considering how close we are to an incredibly successful lip gloss line. Seems to me you’re quitting right at the finish line.”

Still measuring my breath, I took an extra second before responding.

“You see, that’s where you’re wrong. I’m not quitting. Not at all. I’m just going to be finishing without you.”

“I see,” he replied. “Is there anything I can do to change your mind? After all, I think the least you could do is give me the courtesy of ending things between us face-to-face, if that’s what you intend to do.”

The *last thing* I wanted to do was meet with him.

No matter how much I tried to pretend, I wasn't myself when he was around. I had no interest in testing my resolve because deep down I worried I wouldn't be able to go through with the decision. It was better to remove the temptation than try to fight it.

"If it's all the same, I'd rather not meet with you."

"So it's just like that then, is it?" he asked.

A hard lump formed in my throat. Even though I had every right to end the agreement, a part of me felt like I'd let him down.

I know that sounds crazy. It's true, though.

"Yes," I replied, pushing through the last bit of resistance in my mind. "It's just like that."

Rex cleared his throat. "Well, I'm sorry things couldn't work out between us but if that's the way you want it to be, I'm not going to fight you on it."

"Thank you."

"Of course, you realize you still owe me the two-hundred and fifty-thousand as agreed to in the purchase agreement."

"Yes," I replied. "I'm aware and will repay you."

"Yes, you will," he said without hesitation. "That much I can promise you."

The tone in his voice never changed, Rex stayed calm the entire time. In a way, I almost would have preferred to have him yell at me. Far

from being angry or threatening, every word he spoke dripped with “matter-of-factness”.

“Look, I... I have to go,” I said, wanting to end the conversation. “There’re some things I have to take care of on the manufacturing floor.”

“I understand,” Rex replied. “Good luck to you, Cherry. I wish you nothing but the best.”

I hung up and then promptly proceeded to *get absolutely nothing done* the rest of the day.

The hours wore on until I was the last one at the warehouse. A few hours earlier, my dad had some issues running diagnostic software on some of the equipment. I told him not to worry about it, just to go on home and I’d take care of it before I left.

And so I sat there, troubleshooting and hoping against hope I’d be able to get out of there and crawl in bed before midnight when I heard the door to the warehouse open.

“Dad, I told you I’ve got...”

The heavy door slammed shut. I snapped my head toward the noise.

Rex stood there.

Shit.

MY TERMS (REX)

If I've learned one thing in business over the years, it's to never let the other guy know what you're thinking. No way in hell was I going to let Cherry just walk away from our deal with a five-minute phone call.

And if I got my way, there wouldn't be an end to the deal at all.

She's just not getting it.

She should know better. If I had to be the one to teach her that lesson, so be it.

I snapped my suit coat at the elbows and walked straight for her. Cherry scrambled from the chair she sat in, getting to her feet and pointing at me.

"Stop!" she yelled. "I don't want to talk to you about anything. I'm not changing my mind!"

I didn't hesitate. Nothing would stand in my

way.

She'd been working in a corner of the warehouse, leaving her no way to escape. Cherry was going to listen to me, whether she liked it or not.

“Rex!”

By now only a few feet separated us. I stopped and waited, giving her some time to calm down. While I stood there, I looked around the warehouse. A lot had changed since my first visit there.

“Things look to be coming together nicely,” I said, turning my attention to Cherry again.

She ignored me. “Whatever you have in mind - it's not going to work. I can't keep doing this with you. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be.”

While she spoke, I took a couple of steps toward her. She shook her head and extended a hand.

“Stop, please,” she said, her outstretched fingers trembling. “I meant what I said. I want out.”

I kept moving until her hand touched my chest. Reaching up, I wrapped my fingers around her wrist and pulled it away. Cherry struggled to break free but I didn't let go right away, holding her firm for an extra second.

When I did, Cherry snapped her hand back to her side and glared at me.

“Get out.”

I straightened my spine. “I’m still an owner of this business. I’m not going anywhere until we talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you. Leave.”

Goddamn if she didn’t look sexy as hell.

The fire in her eyes lit my fucking fuse, man, driving my cock to a near instant erection. What I wanted, more than anything, was to sink my dick into her sweet, sweet pussy - right here, right now.

Fuck the “one rule”.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, snapping me out of it.

I ignored her question, allowing my eyes to roam up and down her body, thinking about having her again. She wore a simple white t-shirt and jeans that hugged every delicious curve.

It’s not like I tried to keep it a secret.

Hell, why would I? As far as I was concerned, we *were* fucking.

End of story.

“No way,” she said, without a word from me. “That is *not happening* under any circumstances. Forget it.”

However, her t-shirt told a different story. Cherry’s nipples peaked in an instant, showing me everything her mouth contradicted.

I locked eyes with her. “You sure about that?”

Her mouth dropped open and Cherry snapped

her arms across her chest, scowling at me.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

I took a step forward. “Me either.”

Her eyes widened. Cherry forced a swallow down her throat.

“So, I guess,” she stammered. “One of us is wrong.”

“Let’s find out.”

I stepped right up to her. Cherry flinched, holding her breath. But she held her ground, keeping herself closed off from me, determined to have it her way.

“I am *not* sleeping with you,” she said, digging in once more. “Not now. *Not ever.*”

I nodded at her. “You’re the most beautiful liar I’ve ever known.”

“I am not lying!” she screamed, closing her eyes and balling her fists.

Once she’d finished, I looked at her. Cherry grew more agitated by the second.

“Prove it,” I said. “Kiss me.”

“No! I don’t have to prove anything to you!”

Anger radiated from her body. Cherry stood there, almost shaking. I studied her a few seconds, giving her plenty of time to leave me standing there alone - if that’s what she wanted. She could walk away, it was up to her.

Instead, she remained frozen in place, staring at

me.

“What do you want from me?” she said at last, her voice not much louder than a whisper.

I moved closer. “Isn’t it obvious? Everything.”

Cherry looked away, her reply quieter still. “I can’t give you that. Don’t you understand?”

Extending my hand, I touched my fingers beneath her chin and curled them in my direction. Cherry resisted at first, but soon looked toward me.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “I don’t understand. I’ve moved mountains for you and I’ll continue to do so. Nothing will stop me from helping to make your dreams come true. Haven’t I done enough to prove that to you?”

Cherry looked away from me again, rubbing her upper arms with her hands. While she did, I removed my suit coat and walked toward her.

She flinched and pulled away. “I’m fine.”

“Shut up,” I said. “We can disagree but I’m not going to stand here and watch you shiver to death.”

She grimaced but didn’t resist when I flung the jacket around her shoulders. In fact, once I had, she pulled it snug across her body.

“Better?” I asked.

A small smile came to her face. “Yes. Thank you.”

Before she could react, I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. Cherry shot a glance at me.

“Why did you do that?”

“Simple,” I replied with a shrug. “I wanted to.”

“Like you always do,” she said, shaking her head.

Her tone carried a *weariness*, like she’d shouldered some great goddamn burden by having me in her life. Whatever urges I’d felt when I got there withered away *in an instant*. I didn’t need to stand there and tolerate nonsense like that from her.

I turned away, flicking my wrist. “Keep the coat.”

I hadn’t gone far, maybe ten or fifteen feet, when she called out.

“Where are you going?”

I stopped and turned to face her. “I’m leaving. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Cherry shrugged. “I don’t know anymore. I mean, I want you here but I just... it’s hard to explain.”

I grimaced. “I’m an open fucking book. I’ve made it clear I’m in your corner but you’ve decided that’s not what you want. When I try and leave, you don’t want that either.”

She averted her eyes while I continued.

“I don’t have time for goddamn games. You’ve got my money and my attention, something every entrepreneur would kill to have. I’m not sure what else I’m supposed to give to you. Shit, what else is there?”

Cherry looked at me.

Without speaking, she walked in my direction, closing to within a foot and dropping my coat to the manufacturing room floor.

Reaching for my face, Cherry had a distant look in her eyes, a kind of sadness. I watched her move even closer, bringing her lips toward me. As bad as I wanted to hold her, touch her, taste her - *this wouldn't do*. When her eyes flickered closed, I touched her with my palm, stopping her.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Cherry opened her eyes. “What do you mean? Isn't it what you want?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I groaned. “I can get pussy anywhere, twenty-four seven. That's not why I'm here. There's more to it. I'm here for you, to fight for what we have. Isn't that what you want as well?”

Looking into her eyes, I noticed a glassy sheen. The edges of her eyelids pooled with moisture and then, a single tear dribbled down, leaving traces of it on her t-shirt.

“Yes,” She replied. “But not right now. I need *you*. Just you. Not the billionaire Rex. Just Rex, the man.”

Damn.

Hearing those words from her lips sent a fucking bolt of lightning through my soul. No woman had *ever* said anything like that to me. For a second, I didn't have a goddamn response, I just

stood there floored by what she'd uttered.

"Fuck me, Rex," she began, reaching toward my ear and tracing it with a soft caress of her nails. "Fuck me."



CHRIST!

Before I could react, Cherry leapt toward me, wrapping her arms and legs around my body. She crashed her lips into me, devouring me like a fucking crazed animal while her words still lingered in my goddamn brain. She broke free, the words escaped from her mouth with a breathless urgency.

"I need your cock. Fuck me. *Hard.*"

My rational mind abandoned me, leaving me to the primal urges of my libido. Cherry wasted no time, climbing off, stripping away her clothes and tossing them aside.

No good. No. No. No.

I wasn't about to come here and *just fuck her*, not without making sure our deal didn't change. As much as I wanted to pin her down and have my way, I had to keep my wits. If I didn't, *man*, I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to hold out.

While I tried to get my thoughts straight, Cherry disappeared from view. In a flash, she was on her knees, *naked*, with my cock in her mouth.

Holy hell, how did that happen?

I glanced down getting an eyeful of her femininity. The curves, the perfect skin and hair, not to mention the most sensual pair of lips I'd ever kissed - now wrapped tight around my dick.

Goddamn!

Having that smooth, silky mouth on my shaft was hard to overcome. She worked me like a woman possessed, jerking up and down my length with virtuoso precision. The part of my brain that *wanted her* started to take control. Reason seemed like the dumbest fucking idea on earth. I battled against my testosterone-fueled urges with every suction-filled pull of her lips on my stone-hard cock.

Shit, March! Wake up! Don't blow your fucking load!

I sensed a familiar urge building, gathering power from between my thighs. Sensory overload had my brain on full-fucking-tilt and watching her do her thing got me no closer to my goal. My cock pulsed, mere seconds separated me from the utter ineffectiveness of orgasm.

Cherry sensed it.

The lengths of her strokes increased. Her head bobbed from side-to-side, the suction enough to bring any man to his knees. And then, she almost put the dagger into my heart when she moaned and popped my cock from her mouth.

“Give me that fucking cum,” she said, a look of wanton desire in her eyes. “Cum on me. Cum in my mouth. Wherever you want.”

Fuck!

Somehow, somehow, I managed to grab hold of the last bit of rational awareness I had. Reaching for her, I grabbed her by the arms.

“Stop, baby. *Fuck,*” I said, trying to steady myself. “Stop.”

With one last long pull Cherry released my shaft from her lips. Looking up at me, she continued to stroke it.

“Why?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong?

Let’s see... an incredible woman with curves that won’t quit sucking my dick like her life depended on it. Technically, nothing was wrong but that wouldn’t get me any closer to where I needed to be.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I replied, my cock reaching a level of painful hardness in her grasp. “I have to talk to you. It can’t wait.”

The look on her face said it all.

Are you insane?

Maybe I was. Few men would have had the ability to exercise restraint in a situation like this. But with the heat of her mouth no longer tempting me, my wits started to return.

“Kinda busy,” she said, my dick still in her

grasp. “What do you want to talk about?”

I didn’t waste any more time. “I can’t give up on this deal. It’s not happening.”

Cherry began to stand, gliding her hand toward the base of my shaft. She stood there looking at me for a few seconds, eyes still glassy with desire.

“I don’t care,” she said, pausing and standing on her toes. She leaned in toward my ear. “I don’t want to talk about the company or our deal. I already told you... I need to get fucked, as hard as possible. By you. Now.”

I wondered if my mind was playing fucking tricks on me. Opening my mouth to respond, Cherry placed her index finger against my lips and shook her head back and forth.

“No more talk.”

With that, she turned her back on me and headed toward the lonely chair she sat in when I entered the warehouse. Hypnotized by her every move, I watched Cherry climb into the chair onto her knees. When she finished, she turned her head, flipping her hair across her back and looking at me over her shoulder.

I didn’t waste a fucking second, kicking free of my clothes in a flash. Striding toward her, I grabbed hold of the base of my cock, the desire she kindled in me making it hard as a diamond. Cherry’s gaze never wavered. Her eyes remained locked on mine until the last instant, when I positioned myself

behind her and grabbed hold of her ass cheek with a hard squeeze.

“Mmm,” she purred, her eyelids fluttering. “Yeah.”

I broke eye contact with her, looking at my cock. The fucking thing swelled, bulging so much I thought it might burst. I gripped the base again, guiding the pulsing shaft toward her wet folds.

Cherry watched me, sucking her lower lip.

Moving straight toward her, I pushed the head inside of her tight opening, savoring the sensation. Cherry inhaled a sound, like a moan and a whimper before she spoke again.

“Fuck me. Cum in that pussy.”

With a decisive thrust, I plunged myself all the way inside of her. Cherry’s body shook and she cried out, her voice echoing in the silence of the warehouse. She looked away from me, gripping the edges of the chair and hanging her head over the back of it.

After what she’d done to me earlier, blowing my load wasn’t far off. It didn’t matter to me though - fucking her was the only thing on my mind for at least the next twelve hours.

Without wasting any time, I tightened my grip on her and unleashed hell, cracking my thighs against her ass with thunderous slaps. Cherry’s body bucked beneath me, grinding and twisting, while I gave her everything she wanted.

Before long, her grunts turned into a rhythmic chant. They started low and throaty, keeping perfect time with the pace of my thrusting. But as I accelerated, pounding away at her with an unrelenting hardness, she began to cry out, her hair thrashing, draping itself across her backside.

“Shit!” I yelled. “Baby, I-I I’m cumming!”

“Uuuuhhhnnn,” she grunted, thrusting her hips into me.

Out of nowhere, her body began to shake, vibrating with violent convulsions. I grabbed hold of both her hips, thrusting and driving my cock into her harder than ever.

“Rex!” she screamed. “Ah! Fuck! Ahhhhh!”

Cherry bucked into me, slamming her ass into my pelvis and taking the full length of my cock inside of her. She clawed at the chair, mewling like a wildcat while I continued to thrust, seconds away from my own release.

The tremors left her and she turned her head, looking at me over her shoulder again. The look in her eyes... it was enough to send any man over the edge, which is right where I found myself. Cherry reached toward her ass, gliding her fingers across its perfect roundness.

That was it for me. No fucking way.

I reared back and hammered my cock inside of her.

“Fuck!” I yelled, my voice thundering.

She set my cock ablaze and I came so hard, I almost lost my fucking balance. The orgasm clawed at my insides. I pulsed again and again, until at last, I stopped, exhaling the most satisfying goddamn breath of my life.

Cherry glanced up at me with an expression of pure bliss on her face.

Looks like we were back in business.

NO RETURN (CHERRY)

A couple of days later, I sat in my office still struggling with my decision.

I'd fought my feelings and lost, *again*, unable to hold my ground and end the agreement with Rex. The more I searched for a reason, the more uncomfortable I became with the answer. I hadn't wanted to face it, let alone deal with it but pretending wasn't getting me anywhere.

The truth is I was starting to fall for him.

It worried me because while I wasn't at all certain I wanted to be in a business partnership with him, I did want to be *with* him.

Ugh, what a mess.

Speaking of messes, I'd promised Rex an update on the situation with the MSDS. There was no time left to spare. I had no doubt Rex would insist on firing Dave if he didn't supply them and

do it today.

Picking up the phone, I dialed Dave's number.

"Please," I muttered. "Just once..."

He answered, "Cherry. I was just about to call you."

"Oh really?" I asked, desperate for any good news from him.

"Yeah," he began, the tone in his voice turning apologetic. "I've been really bogged down on my end with some things. I haven't made any progress on the MSDS. I want you to know I'm doing everything I can but it just hasn't been a priority."

My head fell back, bumping into the headrest on my chair. I closed my eyes.

This wasn't happening.

"Dave, how can you tell me this hasn't been a priority for you? I don't think you understand how serious the situation is. If you can't get me the MSDS like, *today*, it could end our relationship for good. I'm being totally serious. That's not what you want, is it?"

"I know that," he replied. "Believe me, you've made it very clear. Like I said, I'm doing everything I can. I promise I'll eventually get you the information you're asking for but as of right now, I don't have it."

"So that's it?"

"Fraid so."

A few seconds later I hung up, leaving the

future of our relationship uncertain.

I took a while to gather my thoughts before calling Rex. I already knew how the conversation would go. As much as I wanted to defend Dave, he wasn't doing much to help me.

"Crap," I muttered, reaching for the phone and dialing Rex. "Here goes nothing."

Rex picked up. My stomach sank.

"Hi," I said. "You got a minute?"

"I always have time for you."

There was something different about his tone. It sounded, I don't know, *affectionate*? I shook my head. I had to be imagining it.

Refocusing, I continued, "I'll keep it short because I know you're busy. I..."

Rex interrupted me. "Any more problems with the diagnostic software?"

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the other night," he said, his tone deeper. "When I had my way with you. The businessman in me wanted to make sure no permanent damage was done... To the equipment, of course."

Bad, *bad* man.

"The 'equipment' is fine," I replied, a smile stretching across my face. "Thank you for your concern."

Rex chuckled. "Just trying to protect my investment."

“Oh, is that what this is all about? ROI?”

“No,” he said. “This has nothing to do with getting a return on my investment and everything to do with *fucking you* into near unconsciousness.”

An intense blast of heat overcame me, sending a wave of sizzling desire across every square inch of my skin.

This was not the phone call I was expecting.

“Rex,” I whispered. “I need to talk business with you. As much as I’m enjoying this, it’s not helping.”

“Okay,” he replied, a deep laugh booming through the phone. “Have it your way.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying to get my smut-filled mind back on track. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure thing. All right, I’m assuming you’ve got an update on the MSDS for me. Do you have them or not?”

Between his distracting dirty talk and discussion of the MSDS, I preferred the former. However, I had to take responsibility for the situation. We had no more time for delays.

“I um, don’t have them,” I began, exhaling at the same time. “I’ve been going back and forth with Dave over this. It seems like forever now. Anyway, he’s promised to keep working on it but I have no idea how much longer it might be.”

Rex grunted in disapproval. Before he could say anything, I continued.

“Can we skip it this time? Just once? I’ve never had any problems, not one, with their coconut oil. Can’t you be a little bit flexible?”

The playful tone in his voice from a few minutes earlier vanished. In its place, seriousness.

“Not a single product goes out the door without those sheets. Under no circumstances am I willing to risk a lawsuit.”

I clenched my jaw. “So now what? What are we supposed to do? Just stop working on the Masters order altogether?”

“No. I never said anything about stopping work on the order. That work needs to be completed. What I am telling you is that until those sheets are available, you aren’t going to send Trent anything.”

While he talked, I sat there shaking my head.

“Sam’s just come in,” he said. “I’ll have to call you back.”

Without saying goodbye, I disconnected the call and slammed my phone on top of the desk.

“Asshole!”

Jumping from my chair, I marched back and forth across my office for at least a minute trying to calm down.

I had an impossible situation.

Dave wouldn’t supply the MSDS in time - we’d have the order finished and ready to ship in a matter of days. Rex seemed unwilling to do anything unless it was his way. Even with a finished

order, he wouldn't let it out the door.

“Why?” I groaned. “Why did I give in to him again?”

With each step I took, I realized my options narrowed.

No matter how Rex made me feel, *it wasn't enough*. I'd come so far trying to make this company a success and I'd done it *without his help*. He didn't know everything and I was tired of being told he did.

I looked at my phone.

He left me with no choice.



EVEN THOUGH I'D made up my mind, making it happen wouldn't be as easy.

Everything inside of me *screamed* to get out of the deal. But aside from the momentary satisfaction of telling him off, what came next wasn't so clear. Several questions popped into my head, each one of them demanding an answer...

Where am I going to get the money to pay him back?

I didn't have two-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars and without cash from the Masters order, I had no way of getting it.

Where am I going to get money to keep things

going?

We needed the one million dollars from him to grow and expand. Without it, how would we achieve our goals?

What was going to happen to all of the relationships Rex helped me build?

Would Masters and Haute Beauty turn their backs on us once they found out Rex was no longer in the picture?

And, finally, what about my family?

Even though they were hesitant about the deal with Rex at first, having him involved boosted everyone's spirits. Not only that, but it helped to take some of the pressure off of me. If I told them I'd backed out of the deal, I didn't know what that might do to morale.

I crossed my arms. A hollow sensation surfaced from deep inside. Most of all, above everything, I wondered what this meant for Rex and me.

It's not like we were *together* or anything but if I pushed ahead and broke things off, then whatever existed between us would be finished.

Chewing on my lip, I realized the last point surprised me the most.

I couldn't deny my feelings any longer. After all, they were hurting my ability to think, to do what I needed to do. I had to get control of them before it was too late.

My phone rang.

I turned and walked to my desk, picking it up and looking at it. Taking a deep breath, I swiped it on and answered.

“Hey,” I said.

Rex didn’t waste a second. “We don’t need to take a lot of time with this. I know how I feel and what I want. The bottom line is if you don’t want the same things for the company then there’s nothing left to discuss. You...”

I cut him off.

“You see, right there!” I snapped. “That’s the problem! You never want to *discuss* anything. All I ever get from you are orders. You’re always *bossing me* around but I’m not your employee, I’m your partner!”

“I never said you weren’t!” Rex fired back. “Where is this coming from?”

This conversation was a waste of my time, and breath.

“Look, it’s hard enough just to talk to you about this. I don’t want to drag it out any longer. I really appreciate everything you’ve done but it’s just not going to work. We need to break it off. Okay?”

For a split second I wondered how he might interpret what I meant by “break it off”.

He didn’t leave me in suspense for long.

“Fine. I have no interest in going back and forth with you over this. I’ll have my attorney draw up

the necessary paperwork and get it back to you.”

There wasn't a hint of emotion in his voice. We'd come full circle, *strictly business*.

My stomach sank.

“Thank you,” I muttered, searching for the right words. “I'm sorry.”

Rex's tone was short, his reply gruff.

“Me too.”



I BARELY SLEPT.

No, that's a lie. I didn't sleep - *at all*.

Never before had a decision I made been so right in my brain and so wrong in my heart. The entire night I wrestled with how to go on and what to do next. As darkness turned to light, I realized there wouldn't be an easy answer.

Ugh.

Dragging myself into work, I passed by my mother on the way to my office.

“Cherry, honey?” she said.

Ignoring her, I kept walking.

She called out again. “Cherry!”

Sooner or later I'd have to tell them everything but now wasn't the time. I needed a few hours to gather my thoughts, evaluate where we were and try to come up with a new way forward. I'd been in

my office less than thirty seconds when there was a knock on the door.

“Go away!” I yelled. “I don’t want to talk to anybody right now!”

My mother wasn’t having it. The door cracked open and she peeked inside.

I shook my head.

“Mom,” I moaned. “Didn’t you hear what I said? Not right now, please. I need to get to work.”

She continued to ignore me, entering my office and closing the door behind her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said. “I’m not leaving this office until we talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because I don’t,” she replied, walking toward me. “Now, you may be the owner of the company but that doesn’t change the fact I’m your mother and I can see you’re upset.”

I let out a deep exhale and plopped into my chair.

No sooner had I done so than one of the arms snapped loose, sending me crashing toward the ground. I screamed and the chair flipped over on top of me, almost banging me in the head.

“Cherry!” my mom yelled, running toward me.

I laid there for a second, wincing in pain. My mom appeared from around the corner of my desk, reaching toward me.

“Oh my God! Are you okay?!”

Holding my head, I grabbed her extended hand and began to get up.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I think so.”

My mom pulled the chair to one side. The duct tape and zip tie had reached its limit. The arm hung loose from one side, dangling like a fractured appendage. I looked at my mom to see her look of concern had changed - a smile crept to the corner of her mouth.

“Not funny!” I growled. “I love that chair!”

Unable to help herself, she raised her hand to her mouth, stifling her laughter as best she could. I watched as her shoulders bounced up and down, keeping time with her hysterics.

“I’m serious! Quit laughing, I...”

But the longer she did it and the more I looked at the chair - I couldn’t help it.

Look at that thing!

I don’t know whether it was the lack of sleep or the stress but something inside of me gave and the next thing I knew, I howled right alongside of her.

“I could have... hah, hah, hah... killed myself! Hah, hah, hah!”

My mother didn’t say anything, just headed toward me with her arms open. We hugged for a while, long enough for the laughter to subside. At last, she pulled away from me.

“I’m sorry, honey. I really didn’t mean to laugh.

It's just that when I came around the desk and saw you there. Ohhhh, you and that chair..."

My giggles gave way to a smile. "It's okay. I know. I think I was more startled than anything."

"I'm sure."

Pulling the chair aside, I frowned at it. "Not sure I can repair the damage."

"Let's hope not," my mother replied, wiping a tear from her eye.

If anything good came of the momentary distraction, it's that I got my mind off the mess with Rex. No sooner did the thought occur to me than my angst returned. Of course, my mom picked up on it right away.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me. You know you can trust me with anything."

I rolled my eyes. "I know that, Mom. This has nothing to do with me trusting you. It's just something I have to handle on my own. Why can't you just accept that and let me..."

She interrupted me. "Because, like it or not, whatever you're going through affects all of us. If it's a personal issue and you really don't want to talk about it then I guess I can accept that but if it has something to do with the company, that's not a secret I'm willing to let you keep."

I broke eye contact with her and looked up to the ceiling.

"Okay," I said, exhaling a deep breath. "Fine."

My mother sat down and I looked at her. “I, um, I broke things off with Rex. I ended the business partnership.”

My mother didn’t say anything, just stared at me, nodding.

“Anyway, things haven’t been good between us for a while. It just wasn’t working out.”

“So what now?” my mother asked.

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “Well, now that you’ve gotten what you want, what are we going to do? What’s next for the company?”

“Good question,” I replied, pointing underneath my eyes. “See these bags? I was awake all night asking myself the same thing.”

“I don’t understand. Why did you break it off with him in the first place?”

How much time do you have?

“That’s not an easy question to answer, Mom. I guess if I had to sum it up I’d say I got tired of feeling like he didn’t listen. He always wanted to do things his way. Period, end of story.”

“Uh huh,” she replied, a hint of skepticism in her tone. “Well, to the best of my memory, Rex did tell us he was one-hundred percent in charge and you agreed to that deal. Didn’t you?”

I scoffed at her. “Wait a second. Whose side are you on?”

“Don’t give me that, Cherry. I’m always on

your side. But it seems to me this isn't about picking sides so much as it is about keeping promises."

I couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth.

"Keeping promises? What are you talking about?"

My mother paused, staring at me.

"What?" I asked. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It's pretty simple," she began, shaking her head. "From where I sit, Rex has done everything he promised and more. What about you?"

"Uh, what about me, Mom? Are you saying I'm not keeping my promises to him? Because I'll tell you, I am."

A few minutes in and I was already over this conversation.

"You know what?" I said, waving her off. "You can leave anytime now."

My mom didn't budge but instead sat there frowning at me. "Don't you see what you're doing?"

"No."

She paused and sat forward in the chair.

"You keep going on and on about how controlling Rex is and how he only wants to do things his way. But look at you right now, how you're treating me. You're acting the same way. It's

no wonder the two of you are fighting, you've got a lot in common."

This was getting ridiculous.

"Please!" I snapped. "We are *nothing* alike."

My mother didn't say anything but instead got up from the chair and started to walk away.

"Thanks for the support, Mom. Really appreciate it."

She stopped at the door, wrapping her hand around the knob and turning to look at me over her shoulder.

"Honey, you know I support you in everything you do. I'm not even saying you did the wrong thing by breaking off the agreement with Rex. After all, this is your company. What I am saying is that all of the problems we have aren't going away. And now, with Rex out of the picture, you're going to have to find a way to solve them on your own."

I stared at her, unable to come up with a response.

"I love you," she said, opening the door. "If you need anything, you know where to find me."

With that, she closed the door and I stood there, staring off into space. Even though I'd wished she'd been more sympathetic, I hated to admit she made some good points. Rex had kept his promises. However, if she'd been in my situation I know she would've felt different.

Still, it didn't matter now.

I'd made my decision and had to live with it.

One way or another, I had to find a way out of this mess.

And soon.

LEFT QUESTIONING (REX)

I sat there staring at it, trying to figure out how we'd reached this point.

It had been a few days since I talked to Cherry. As promised, I had my attorney draft the dissolution agreement. A couple of signatures and that would be the end of our time together.

I picked it up.

Where had things gone wrong?

I never doubted my business instincts but where she was concerned, I did find myself questioning. After all, she was the only woman I'd ever broken my unbreakable "one rule" for, so if I tried to dismiss this as a business deal gone bad, I'd only be fooling myself.

There was a knock at my door. I looked up to see Sam standing there.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked.

I'd been so deep in thought about the situation with Cherry, I'd forgotten I called her.

Snap out of it, March! Goddamnit.

I stood from my chair, straightened my tie and gestured for her to enter.

"Close the door. Would you, Sam?"

Once she took a seat across from me, I picked up the dissolution agreement and looked at her.

"Do you know what this is?"

Sam wrinkled her brow. "No. Should I?"

I spent the next few minutes telling her about the conversation I'd had with Cherry. I told her Cherry requested an end to the partnership and I agreed. Our deal together was no longer.

"Of course, that also means your responsibilities with Cherry have come to an end."

When I finished speaking, I noticed Sam force a hard swallow down her throat.

I frowned at her. "Is something wrong?"

She glanced up at me, shaking her head. "No. Why?"

No sooner did Sam finish talking than she looked away from me. I suppose it was possible Cherry told her what happened between us. But even if she did know, something about her behavior seemed strange, almost suspicious.

I had a sudden hunch about something.

Having the deal with Cherry fall apart left me with a bunch of goddamn questions. Maybe Sam

held the key to unlocking the answers to some of them.

It was time to find out.

“Question for you,” I said, waiting for her to look at me. “How did you feel about the deal I made with you to buy your company?”

Sam’s eyes went round. She shifted in her chair.

“Fine,” she stammered. “Good, I mean.”

I didn’t say anything right away, just stared at her, studying her face and body language for deception. While it was pretty obvious she was uncomfortable, that didn’t mean she was lying. My silence got to be too much for her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

While she spoke, I sat down on the corner of my desk and shrugged.

“Maybe I don’t listen to people enough. Maybe if I took more time to try to understand what they mean when they say the things they do, I wouldn’t be in this situation. With Cherry or, with you...”

Sam’s eyes never left me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. What situation with me?”

I didn’t have to ask, the look on her face told me everything I needed to know. She wasn’t happy with our deal either. However, that ship sailed long ago. Sam got a fair price for her company.

I knew it and she knew it.

I changed the subject to Cherry again. “You spent a lot of time with her. Do you think there’s

any chance I can salvage this partnership?”

She shook her head, not even pretending to want to answer the question.

“I’d prefer not getting involved. After all, that’s something between the two of you. I feel like it should stay that way.”

When it became clear I’d gotten all I could from her, I stood and began to walk toward my chair.

“You’re free to go.”

While Sam stood, I continued, “I appreciate everything you did with Cherry while we were working together. To the extent we were successful, I owe a lot of that to you. Thank you, Sam.”

She flashed a polite smile at me. “You’re welcome. I was happy to help.”

After watching her exit the office, I sat down in my chair and pulled out a pen. With the flick of my wrist, I signed the dissolution agreement and pushed it aside. It was a tough fucking loss but hey, that’s business.

I eased back in my chair and thought about Cherry.

As to how I felt about her, that wasn’t something I could so easily sign away.

FROM BAD TO WORSE (CHERRY)

Using my fingernail, I traced the lines on the dissolution agreement making up Rex's signature.

It was all there in black and white. I had ninety days to come up with the two-hundred and fifty-thousand or Rex had the right to come after enough of the company's assets to satisfy the debt. Otherwise, when I countersigned the agreement, that would be the end of our business relationship together.

Ugh, just sign it already.

Before I lost my nerve, I reached for a pen and rushed my signature on to the page, pushing it away when I'd finished.

"Moving on," I muttered.

No sooner had I done it than there was a knock at my half-opened office door. I looked up to see

Sam standing there.

“Hey,” she said, leaning her upper body inside. “I know I didn’t call or anything, I hope it’s not a bad time...”

Even though we’d gotten to be friendly, I didn’t expect to see much of her after ending things with Rex. Still, if anyone could empathize with me, Sam could.

“No, um, it’s totally fine,” I said, waving her inside. “Come on in.”

I got up and walked around my desk to greet her.

“Hug?” she asked.

I chuckled at her. “Sure. Why not?”

After we separated, I leaned away. “What’s up? How come you’re here?”

“So, I heard about something...”

I nodded and turned away from her, walking back to my desk. After picking up the dissolution agreement, I looked at her again.

“Let me guess,” I said, holding it up.

A sheepish grin came to Sam’s face. “Worst kept secret in town, I’m afraid.”

“It is what it is.”

She took a couple of steps in my direction. “I know you’re trying to put a good face on things, keep moving forward but something’s been bugging me.”

“Okay?” I replied. “What is it?”

“Well, I’m just wondering,” she began, crossing her arms in front of her body. “Did you decide to go ahead and break things off with Rex because of what I said?”

“No,” I replied, shrugging at the same time. “But, hearing about your experience helped. I don’t want you to worry though. Things were going in the wrong direction. It was only a matter of time.”

Sam smiled at me and tugged a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Is that the only reason you’ve come by?” I asked.

“No, there’s something else,” she said, glancing toward the open office door. “Do you mind if we discuss it in private?”

“Not a problem.”

With that, Sam walked over to my office door and closed it, turning around to face me when she finished.

“Why are you acting so mysterious?” I asked. “Just tell me.”

While I spoke, Sam approached me. “Okay, all right. So anyway, this may be too soon but when you’re ready, I think I can help you.”

I frowned at her. “Help me? What are you talking about?”

No sooner did I respond than Sam waved me off. “Forget it. You know what? I shouldn’t have said anything.”

What the hell?

I didn't know what she meant by "help" but if it got me closer to paying Rex the two-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars I owed him, not to mention extra cash to keep the lights on and the operation running, I was all ears.

While I stood there, Sam walked over to my office door and cracked it open, peeking outside.

"What are you doing? Why are you acting so strange?"

Sam closed the door and turned around.

"So, before I start, I just want to say I know how difficult it is to deal with Rex. I can tell you from personal experience with my own merger, it's not easy."

I interrupted her. "Yeah, that's true but it takes two, you know? I made the decision to get involved with him. And besides, it's not like he didn't keep up his end of the bargain. It's just that what we want for this company - they aren't the same thing."

"Oh no, no, I get that," she replied, raising her hands in front of her body. "That's not really what I'm talking about. There's no question Rex can open doors. After all, he did that for me. But it came at a price. My company was never the same after he got involved, *ever*."

Hearing those words caused a lump to form in my throat. Something about her company "never

being the same” resonated with me.

“Well, if it wasn’t going the way you wanted, why didn’t you just end the deal?”

Sam didn’t waste any time in responding.

“Because I don’t have the guts you do. That’s why. Even though our situations were similar, when push came to shove, I couldn’t break things off with Rex.”

She hesitated for an extra second. “I lost my nerve.”

“I appreciate you saying that, it means a lot,” I replied. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out the way you hoped, but I think our situations are different. If you’d been in my place, I’m sure you would have done the same thing I did.”

“No, that’s where you’re wrong, I wouldn’t have,” she replied, shaking her head. “But anyway, I didn’t bring this up to talk about myself.”

“Okay then, why? What are you trying to tell me?”

Sam approached me with a serious expression on her face. “Let’s just say I know someone who might be willing to step in and help.”

What?

Not only did her statement confuse the hell out of me but I hesitated at the idea of getting involved with someone like Rex March again. The last thing I wanted to do was get into a worse situation. Still, her offer had me curious.

“What are you talking about, Sam? Who’s this mystery person?”

“Peter Grimes.” She said.

She had to be kidding.

“Peter Grimes?”

Sam didn’t hesitate. “I know it sounds crazy, believe me. But before I signed my deal with Rex, I almost made one with Peter. It would have been easy, too. Peter’s worth billions, just like Rex.”

I remembered my brief introduction to him at the red carpet event. I knew one thing for sure, Rex *hated his guts*.

I looked at Sam again. “I don’t understand something. Why would you recommend I do a deal with Peter when you didn’t take one with him yourself?”

Sam kind of shrugged. “What can I say? Rex charmed me.”

Charmed her?

I thought back to the first night I’d met Sam. Even then, I wondered if she and Rex hooked up. Knowing him, I’d assumed they did but at this point it probably didn’t matter. If they had, it looked to be ancient history by now.

But, *why Peter?* The suggestion seemed crazy.

Still, I felt like I was running out of time and options. On the other hand, whatever was going on between Rex and me would be over the second he found out I’d taken a deal with his rival. Furious

didn't begin to describe how he'd react.

At least Sam offered me a ray of hope, a chance to keep going. I felt like I had no choice.

"How soon can we meet?"

"That's up to you," Sam replied. "Give me the word and I'll make the call."



AS PROMISED, Sam arranged a lunch meeting the next day between Peter and me. In spite of being a nervous wreck the entire morning, I managed to get there early, arriving at *Bistro Bistro* ten minutes ahead of time.

On the down side, I'd signed my deal with Rex there, as well. It would be just my luck to have him show up for a casual lunch while I made another deal for my company's future with his most hated enemy. Luckily, I'd avoided the lunch rush, which meant I didn't have to turn my beater over to the valet again.

No thank you!

Instead, I circled the block a couple of times, at last managing to parallel park while the car sputtered and lurched.

"Come on," I groaned. "Please don't stall."

Mercifully, I managed to get it parked without any drama. Grabbing my things, I jumped out and

headed for the restaurant. After arriving, I walked inside and scanned the room, seeing Peter seated at a table ahead of me.

Even though I wanted to have an open mind, I kept my guard up. After all, my only interaction with Peter was through Rex and it hadn't gone well - to say the least. He seemed oblivious to my approach, texting away on his cell phone.

After standing there for a couple of seconds, I cleared my throat.

“Peter?”

“Sorry about that,” he said, looking up and standing from his chair. “Just putting out a couple of fires.”

I smiled at him. “I thought people in your position didn't have to worry about fires.”

“You're right, I don't. In my situation, they're always infernos.”

“Please,” he said, gesturing toward a chair. “Have a seat.”

After the way Rex fumed about Peter, I'd pretty much expected him to be awful, *a real ass*. However, he was far from it. Instead, we spent the first fifteen minutes or so talking and getting to know each other. I found him polite, complementary and charming - not to mention honest, especially when it came to Rex.

“I won't kid you, Cherry. I dislike Rex for many reasons. That said, I do think he has good

business instincts.”

“Anyway,” he said with a casual flick of his wrist. “We didn’t come here to talk about Rex. We came here to talk about you, about Cherry’s Berries.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me.”

While I talked, he reached inside of his suit pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, unfolded it, and slid it across the table to me.

I looked at it. The title read, “Non-Disclosure Agreement”.

“What’s this?” I asked.

Peter interlocked his fingers and placed them on the table.

“Before I invest in any enterprise, I insist full disclosure from the business owner. In other words, you’re going to have to tell me everything that’s been happening. Inevitably, that always includes a good amount of proprietary information.”

He paused and tapped on the document with his finger.

“This protects both of us. The truth is, I don’t want you to feel compromised in any way. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah sure,” I replied.

Wow.

I hadn’t seen that coming. Just the fact he’d do

something like this... I felt a sense of trust toward him. Picking it up, I read it through once. I'd signed plenty of NDAs in the past few years. Nothing looked out of the ordinary with this one.

When I finished, I looked at him. "I'll sign it. Do you have a pen?"

Peter nodded and reached inside of the same pocket he'd gotten the agreement out of moments earlier. Pulling a pen out, he slid it across the table to me. We each took turns signing it. Afterwards, he folded the paper once more and slid it into his suit coat.

Once he had, he looked at me. "Now, how can I help?"

Hmmm. A huge pile of money would be nice.

Seriously though, I didn't hold anything back, basically telling him everything that happened between Rex and me. Even though it was a huge risk to be so transparent with him, in spite of the non-disclosure agreement, I felt like I had no choice.

If I wanted him to invest, I had to be honest. If I tried to cover anything up, sooner or later he'd find out about it. That's not a chance I wanted to take. The last thing I wanted was to have him feel I'd deceived him in any way. Once I'd finished, Peter eased back into his chair.

"And so, the issue with the MSDS," he began, drumming his fingers on the table. "That was the

proverbial straw between you and Rex?”

I nodded at him. “Yes. Well, I mean, it was the biggest one.”

He continued to drum his fingers, *thinking*. After a few seconds he looked at me.

“I don’t think we’ve discussed it yet. How much do you owe him?”

“Two-hundred-fifty-thousand.”

No sooner did I give him a number than Peter sat up, interlocking his fingers again and placing his hands on the table.

“I’m prepared to make you an offer.”

Wait. What?

“Just like that?” I asked, reaching for my bag. “I mean, don’t you want to see the financials? I’ve got them right here for you.”

He waved me off. “No. If it’s good enough for Rex, it’s good enough for me. I know him well enough to know he’d never put a penny into a business with a shitty balance sheet.”

I didn’t know what to say. Even though he had me confused, I was interested.

“I’ll be giving you two-hundred-fifty-thousand to satisfy your debt with Rex. In addition, I’ll also supply you with another five-hundred-thousand to shore up any cash flow issues and expansion needs you have.”

I let the offer sink in, knowing I’d probably have to give a vital organ in return for the money.

“In exchange for what?” I asked.

“Well, I think you’ll be surprised by my demands,” Peter replied in a nonchalant tone. “Especially when compared to the equity Rex demanded.”

I nodded in reply. “Try me.”

Peter went on to tell me he’d be willing to invest the full seven-hundred-fifty-thousand for a thirty-percent ownership stake in the company. Even though it was less money overall than Rex agreed to put in, his ownership demands meant I stayed in charge, and by a lot.

I had a sinking feeling there was more to it. But what?

“Okay,” I said, trying to work things out in my head. “What else?”

Peter had a confused look on his face. “What do you mean by ‘what else’?”

“I mean, I don’t understand why you don’t want controlling interest. Rex insisted on it. Why are you comfortable...”

Peter cut me off, raising his hand in the air.

“Cherry,” he said with a chuckle. “I don’t expect you to understand. Basically, I have so many investments in so many businesses I simply don’t have time to be hands on in every single one of them. I much prefer to trust my managers to do what’s in their best interest, and by extension, my own.”

While he spoke, I nibbled on my lip.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” he asked. “You want to do what’s in the best interest for yourself and your family, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

Peter raised a finger in the air. “Which reminds me... Speaking of your family, I think they need to have an ownership stake going forward.”

I couldn’t disagree with him. That was one of the things I regretted most about the deal I made with Rex. If nothing else, this would be a chance to get them what I’d always promised.

“Yes, I agree. How much of my seventy-percent equity are you proposing I give up?”

“Zero.” He said, shaking his head. “It will come out of my ownership stake. I’ll have my attorney handle the equity distribution once we agree here today.”

As much as I wanted to jump at the offer, especially when it meant helping my family, I couldn’t shake the feeling it seemed somewhat generous - *too good to be true*. On the other hand, maybe he had reasons of his own, not the least of which rubbing Rex’s nose in it once we became successful. Unfortunately, I didn’t have any time to sit around and guess.

“So, what’s it going to be?” Peter asked. “Do we have a deal?”

My mind ran through all of the traps, all of the

hurdles I'd been through with Rex.

“Um, what about the MSDS?” I asked. “Aren't you worried about legal liability? Like Rex?”

Peter hardly moved. “Would you intentionally put your business at risk?”

“No. Of course I wouldn't.”

“That's good enough for me.” Peter sat forward again, looking me in the eye. “I trust your judgment. So I'm going to ask you again. Do we have a deal?”



“OKAY, Dan. Thank you for looking this over.”

“It's my pleasure, Cherry,” my attorney replied. “I hope for your sake this partnership works out better for you. I know you've got a lot going on right now. Hopefully, Peter can bring some stability to the situation.”

I looked down at the agreement Peter handed to me at lunch.

Ugh, me too.

“I hope you're right,” I said, picking up a pen from my desk. “After this is signed, I'll have a copy sent to you.”

Hanging up, I let out a deep sigh. I know it sounds crazy but I couldn't help feeling a little guilty. It's not like I didn't want things to work out

with Rex. In the end, he left me with no choice. Picking up a pen from my desk, I signed the agreement.

No turning back now.

With that, I stood from my desk and headed toward the warehouse. It was time to tell my family what I'd done and what that meant for us.

For the most part, we'd stick to the plan Rex designed for us. After all, we really didn't have much choice. We were so far along with the Masters order and the new glosses, making drastic changes would be a nightmare. Besides, it wouldn't be long before the Masters order was ready.

Even better, because of Peter's generosity, my family would be able to benefit from that success as owners in the business. I hope they could see things in a positive light, as well.

"Everyone!" I called out, approaching them. "I need to talk to you for a minute."

They gathered around and I didn't waste any time.

"I've got an announcement to make, followed by good news and *great news*." I said, pausing for a second. "The announcement concerns Rex. We have reached a mutual decision to no longer pursue our partnership, effective immediately."

My family exchanged nervous glances with one another.

"However, I've already secured funding from a

new investor. His name is Peter Grimes. The good news is this means there won't be any interruptions to the work we're doing. We're still going to move ahead with the Masters order and get it completed as soon as possible."

My dad started to say something but I waved him off.

"I'm almost finished, Dad. I'll answer any questions you guys have after I'm done. Now for the great news. The thing I'm most excited about with Peter is what it will mean to you guys. He's agreed to give each of you equity in the company."

The looks of anxiety changed. Smiles spread across their faces.

"How much?" Emily asked. "When?"

I shook my head. "I don't have all of the details yet, but once I do, I'll let you know."

I finished speaking and looked at my dad. "Did you have a question?"

"Yes, I do," he said. "The Masters order... I'm assuming you received the MSDS and it's safe to go ahead. Is that what you're saying?"

"No," I replied. My dad bought into Rex's caution - hook, line and sinker. "I'm not concerned and for that matter, neither is Peter. He trusts me, *us*. He knows we're going to do what's right, what's in our best interest and ultimately, in his as well."

"Cherry, this is a big mistake," my dad said. "If Rex is right and something was to happen, we could

possibly lose everything and...”

“I’m not discussing this,” I replied, interrupting him. “As the majority shareholder in the company, the final decision is mine. We’re going ahead with the order. Nothing is going to happen. The coconut oil is completely safe and I am not worried in the slightest.”

While I spoke, my dad crossed his arms and scowled at me. He might’ve been pissed but once we started doing well at Masters, he’d get over it.

“Now, if there’re no other questions, I’ve got some calls to make.”

I waited for a few seconds and then began to head toward my office. My dad called out from behind me.

“Cherry! Wait...”

I slowed down enough for him to catch up.

“Dad, I told you I don’t want to talk about this right now. You need to drop it because I’m not changing my mind.”

“This isn’t about the MSDS,” he replied.

I stopped and looked at him. “Okay. What then?”

“It’s about your new partner, Peter,” he said. “Do you feel like you can trust him?”

“Dad,” I began, frowning at him. “You asked me the same thing about Rex. Remember?”

“Yeah, I do. This whole thing though... It seems like maybe you rushed into it. I’m just concerned,

as any father would be.”

I flipped my hair away from my face. “I mean, yeah, it was more rushed than I would have liked but I didn’t feel like I had much choice. And anyway, this deal with Peter got you guys the equity you always wanted. I would’ve thought you would be more excited.”

“Of course we’re excited,” he replied. “But, and I think I speak for your mother and sister, we want to do what’s best for the company over the long run. Taking unnecessary risks doesn’t seem to be the best decision.”

“I understand your concern about the MSDS,” I began, turning to walk away. “I promise I will do everything I can to keep working on it. I don’t want to leave the company exposed any more than you do. But in the overall scheme, it’s a small risk to take.”

My dad’s face showed surrender. I know he wasn’t happy about it.

A part of me wasn’t either.



ONCE I GOT BACK in my office, I hurried over to my phone and picked it up. My family weren’t the only ones who needed to know about my deal with Peter. While I knew they’d be happy, I couldn’t say

the same thing about him. I dialed the number and while the phone rang, I nibbled on my lip.

Please, please.

“Mr. Masters’ office, how can I help you?”

“Yes,” I said, clearing my throat. “May I speak with Trent please?”

“And you are?”

“Cherisse Clements.”

The secretary made a humming sound, like she was thinking.

“Let me see if he’s available. Please hold.”

As much as I didn’t want to have the conversation, I figured it was a matter of time until Rex gave Trent the news. I just hoped he’d take it well and that I’d beat Rex to it. I didn’t have to wait long to find out. The line clicked when he picked up.

“Cherry, I was wondering when I was going to hear from you.”

Oh crap.

I swallowed hard. My mouth went dry. While I searched for a drop of moisture, Trent continued.

“Had a brief phone call with Rex. He told me about what happened, the deal falling apart.”

Uh oh. Too late!

My mind raced.

What else had he said?

What if he’d told Trent about the MSDS? If Masters canceled the order, what would that mean

to my new partnership with Peter? Even so, I didn't have time to come clean about it. I just had to hope Rex didn't say anything, and Dave would get the sheets to me before we shipped the order.

"Um, well," I stammered. "There're two sides to every story. I..."

Trent cut me off.

"There's no reason to be concerned. Rex wanted to let me know he was no longer part of the picture over there. But, he said he still has full confidence in you and expects Cherry's Berries to be a big success for Masters."

I didn't know what to say. Rex could have really caused damage. He didn't.

Hmm.

"Have to be perfectly frank with you. The fact that Rex is no longer involved does not give me a great deal of confidence."

Left with no choice, I had to say something to change the way he felt.

"I completely understand," I said, walking across my office. "But you've got nothing to worry about. In fact, I've already lined up a new investor in the company."

I can't believe I'm telling him this.

"Interesting," he replied. "Anyone I know?"

Umm, yeah.

I hesitated. Trent and Rex were close. If I told Trent about Peter, how long would it be before the

news got back to Rex? With everything else I had going on, getting into a big fight with Rex over Peter wasn't something I wanted to do.

However, it was probably a matter of time before Trent found out the truth. I'd rather have it coming from me than the rumor mill.

"Trent, I really, *really* need your order, okay? It's everything to our company. If you're willing to keep the information I give you private, then I'll tell you who my new investor is."

"Okay," he said. "I understand your need for confidentiality. You have my word. It will stay between us."

Before I lost my nerve, I blurted it out. "It's Peter Grimes."

"Peter?" Trent replied, a hint of surprise in his tone. "Really? Wow."

"Yes. Is that a bad thing?"

Trent went silent.

Not good.

"Umm," he hummed. "Interesting. That's the word I'd use to describe it. Interesting."

Interesting, good? Interesting, bad?

I didn't have time to try and decipher it.

"Okay, well," I replied, stammering at the answer I might get. "Are you going to work with us? Can we still count on Masters for the order?"

"Cherry, I placed the order for your product *before* Rex was in the picture. So long as you make

good on it by delivering on time, there won't be any problems between us."

Thank. You. God.

All in all, that went about as well as I could've hoped. Disaster averted, I was about to the end the phone call when Trent said something that caught me by surprise.

"Not that it's any of my business but at some point, you should probably come clean with Rex about Peter's involvement."

I did agree with *part* of what he said - *it wasn't any of his business*. But there was *no way* I'd say that to him. I had no intention of doing anything to blow this deal.

"Yes, of course," I lied. "Once things settle down, I'll have a talk with Rex."

"I'm gonna hold you to that."

I *hated* having to say that to him but I felt like I had no choice. I thanked Trent again and we hung up.

Unfortunately, a face-to-face with Rex was probably inevitable. However, if we could get the order for Masters completed and get the product selling like we hoped, it wouldn't matter how upset he got at me about Peter. We'd be on our way and there'd be nothing he could do to stop us.

The very thought of it sent a surge of adrenaline pumping through my body. Everything came together that afternoon. I had a new partner I could

trust, money to run the business and only one thing to focus on - getting the Masters order out the door.

I would prove Rex wrong!



IN A LITTLE LESS THAN two weeks after my conversation with Trent, the first shipment of Cherry's Berries arrived at Masters Mercantile stores.

I mean, yay!

I'd gotten through all of it - the shipping delays, headaches at customs, equipment problems, squabbles with my family and of course the failed partnership with Rex. But, with Peter's support and the product in Masters stores at last, the future looked bright.

And by the looks of things, I had good reason to feel that way.

Thanks to an aggressive marketing effort by Trent's team, the product *exploded*. It sold faster than any of us could have predicted, breaking every record at Masters for its product category.

Double yay!

If nothing else, it proved I didn't need Rex to become a success. To celebrate, I wanted to arrange a small party at the warehouse and invite everyone who helped us to get ahead, especially

Trent. Excited, I called and his secretary put me right through.

“Cherry! Good to hear from you.”

“Hey, Trent!” I said. “Do you have a couple of minutes? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“For the brains behind the hottest selling product at Masters... Are you kidding? Take all the time you need.”

The smile on my face spread so wide it made my cheeks hurt.

“Thank you for that, it means a lot coming from you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s my pleasure. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I want to have a little get together here at the warehouse. You know, to kind of celebrate everything. None of it would be possible without your help, so I was hoping you might be able to come. That is, if you have the time.”

I expected him to say ‘no’. He was probably the busiest person I’d ever met.

“Um, when is it?”

“This coming Friday, eight o’clock.”

“Just checking something here,” he said, the sound of shuffling paper echoing in the background.

“Yeah,” he said, at last. “That sounds like a great idea. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yay! Awesome!” I shrieked. “I can’t wait to tell everybody.”

Trent chuckled. “Terrific. Thanks for the invitation. I’ll see you then.”

After hanging up, a thought occurred to me. Since things were going so well with Masters, maybe I could coax a new order out of him at the party. It was definitely worth a shot.

A few days later, the night of the party arrived.

My family and I were there along with a few of our closest friends when the warehouse door opened and Trent appeared. Smiling at him, I excused myself from the group and walked toward him.

“Hey!” I said, waving. “I’m so excited you made it”

Looking handsome as always, Trent smiled at me and then looked around the warehouse.

“Surprised it took me this long to make it over here.”

“I know,” I said, turning and gesturing toward the partygoers. “Would you like a tour?”

“Love one.”

Trent and I spent the next few minutes walking around the warehouse, checking out the manufacturing equipment and meeting with my family. After, he leaned in toward me. “I don’t have a lot of time, but there is something I need to discuss with you.”

I nodded at him. “Okay. Where?”

“How about your office?”

I had no idea why he pulled me aside. I hoped for good news but braced for bad, just in case. Trent walked in behind me, closing my office door.

“I have to say I’m impressed with how well your product’s been selling. My team had high hopes for it but I don’t think even they could have predicted what’s happened. It’s become a phenomenon.”

Every word from his lips stirred butterflies inside of me. Trent walked in my direction.

“That said,” he began, pinching his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Your manufacturing operation... It has me concerned. I’m worried you won’t be able to keep up.”

Uh oh, that didn’t sound good.

“What do you mean? We got the last order done for you. True, we had some hiccups along the way, but we’ve worked out the kinks in our system. I promise you won’t have any problem filling an order like the last one.”

Trent stared at me. “See, that’s what has me concerned.”

“But why?” I replied, my happiness fading with every word he spoke. “We’ve already done it once. We can do it again. Why are you concerned?”

While I spoke, Trent reached inside of his coat and pulled out a piece of paper, unfolding it.

“This is why,” he said, passing it to me.

Frowning at him, I took the paper and with shaking hands, started to read it. My eyes scanned the page, darting back and forth.

It couldn't be true.

No, no, no!

Lowering it away from my face, I looked at Trent only to see him staring at me.

“Is this...” I said, trying to get the words out. “Is this for real?”

Trent’s expression didn’t change. “Afraid so. Can you see why I’m concerned?”

Without a word, I squealed and jumped toward him, wrapping my arms and legs around his hulking torso in a bear hug. Even worse, I managed to embarrass myself even more when I kissed him on the lips before jumping off of him. Horrified, I covered my mouth with my hands before begging for an apology.

“Oh my God, Trent, I am so, so, so sorry!”

Trent reached up and dragged a finger across his mouth. “Passion fruit?”

Before I could say anything, Trent waved me off and chuckled.

“Forget about the kiss,” he said, pointing at the paper in my hand. “Are you going to be able to handle that?”

I looked at the paper again, still in disbelief. But there it was in black and white, an order for all 157

worldwide locations of Masters Mercantile worth ten million dollars.

Oh. My. God.

He continued, “I don’t expect an answer from you tonight but I do expect one. I want that product, one way or another.”

“Okay, I understand,” I said, trembling from head to toe.

Trent gestured toward the order. “If you agree to it, the order is going to come with a stipulation. I want to extend exclusivity rights for a period of one year.”

“All right, anything else?”

“Yes, there is. Have you had a chance to talk to Rex about your partnership with Peter?”

Crap.

“No. I haven’t had time. That’s the truth.”

Trent exhaled. “Well, I’m not going to hold this order hostage over it. But, for the sake of everyone involved, I think you’d be smart to go ahead and get it over with, sooner rather than later.”

I understood his point of view but I still didn’t think it was any of his business. On the other hand, I didn’t want to jeopardize the order. So between lying to him and getting it or telling him the truth and risking losing it, I chose the former.

“I’m just waiting for the right time.”

“Okay, that’s up to you to decide,” he said. “Now, if you have an answer for me on the order,

I'd love to hear it before I leave here. That is, unless you need time to think about it."

The huge smile returned to my face.

"There's nothing to think about. We'll find a way to make this happen. I promise."

Trent turned, gesturing toward my office door. Well, let's go tell everyone the good news."

Walking with him across the manufacturing room floor, I glanced at the order again, realizing how far we'd come.

Nothing would stop us now.

Nothing!

THINGS AREN'T ADDING UP (REX)

Since my discussion with Trent informing him of the end of my partnership with Cherry, I'd been keeping tabs on her through the media.

Needless to say, I was goddamn mystified at how she'd managed to keep going. Early on, I assumed she used the two-hundred-fifty-thousand to stay afloat but that wouldn't get her very far. By my math, she should have run out of money by now.

On a hunch, I decided to summon Sam to my office. I knew she and Cherry were close before I stepped aside. Whether or not they still were, I was about to find out for sure.

I picked up my phone and dialed her extension.
“Hey, Rex. What's up?”

At that instant, I chose to switch tactics. Rather

than have her come to my office, I decided on friendlier, more neutral territory.

“Are you free for lunch?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied, enthusiasm in her tone. “Absolutely.”

“Great, meet me in the lobby in fifteen minutes.”

In the limo ride across town, I kept the discussion with her light and free from anything involving Cherry. There’d be plenty of time for that at *Bistro Bistro*. I figured I’d have my answer within the hour.

“We’ll have a bottle of the Richebourg Grand Cru,” I said to the sommelier hovering close by.

“Excellent choice, Mr. March.”

He turned to walk away and Sam leaned across the table.

“Wine at lunch? What’s the special occasion?”

Shrugging, I eased back into the chair. “Tuesday?”

Sam smirked at me. “Hah, hah.”

Half an hour later and half a bottle gone, I decided it was time to start digging. But Sam beat me to it.

“So, why am I here?”

“Do I need a reason?”

Sam arched an eyebrow at me. “Rex.”

“Okay, okay,” I began, taking another drink. “I know things didn’t work out between Cherry and

me. But I wanted you to know how much I appreciate all the hard work you put in to try and make the company successful. I know I mentioned it before but I felt like doing something special for you.”

Sam put her wine glass on the table. “Thank you for that. I mean, I did what I could. It was a difficult situation for everyone involved.”

“Yes, very true,” I replied. “Even so, I’ve been impressed by how well she’s done in spite of our falling out.”

“Well,” she began, hesitating a bit. “Cherry’s very tenacious.”

I studied her expression. So far, she hadn’t given much away. It was time to see if my hunch was right or wrong.

“How about the two of you?” I asked.

Sam leaned away, frowning. “What do you mean?”

I took a few extra seconds between bites.

“Well,” I said, raising the napkin to corner of my mouth. “It seems to me you’d gotten to be, I don’t know, close with each other? Friends even?”

I wasn’t sure if I’d pushed her too far. Judging from her body language I was right on the edge.

“Um, we’re friendly. You know, like coworkers are.”

“Mm, hmm,” I replied, another sip of wine gone. “Have you been talking to her since the

partnership was dissolved?”

Sam didn't look at me but shifted in her seat.

Now I was getting somewhere.

“Yes.”

I didn't say anything, just raised my eyebrows expectantly.

“What?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Is there anything you want to tell me? Specifically, anything you might know about how she's managed to keep going?”

That one, it hit a goddamn nerve.

Sam's tone took on a hint of defiance. “Well, that's information between friends. I don't think Cherry would feel right about me discussing her business with you.”

Bingo.

“Oh, I see. Is that a fact?”

At this point, Sam moved around so much, I thought she might fall out of her chair. It was clear... I'd pushed things too far. She started to get up from her seat.

“I think I should probably get going. There's something I've got to take care of at the office.”

I motioned for her to sit.

“Forget about it,” I replied. “Relax. Whatever is at the office, it can wait. After all, I own the goddamn company.”

Sam hesitated, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Okay,” she began, easing into her chair once more. “I’ll stay on one condition. Don’t ask me any more questions about Cherry.”

I shook my head at her. “Not a problem.”

I meant it. I didn’t need to badger her anymore. I had more than enough to go on.

It was pretty clear Cherry had a backer, someone who stepped in and filled the void I left behind. Now it was just a matter of figuring out who it was and why they were doing it.

Game on.

SPILLING THE BEANS (CHERRY)

Glam Global - the world's largest cosmetics trade show.

Before Rex and I ended things, he insisted the company attend it to increase awareness of the new product line.

In the immediate aftermath of our separation, my emotions got the better of me and I debated not going at all. But, considering how well we'd done at Masters, I figured it was worth the effort.

It turned out to be a smart decision.

From the instant the show started we had a constant inflow of potential new customers, coming and going in our booth. Not only that, but less than four hours into the first day, a familiar face made an appearance.

"Look at you," Trent said, walking up to me. "I've done a lot of these types of things over the

years but you take the cake.”

I smiled at him. “What do you mean?”

Trent continued to look around, taking in the activity.

“Well, it’s just that you look right at home in the middle of all this busyness and craziness. Most people can’t pull that off, or even pretend to. Congrats.”

Even though I hadn’t thought about it, he had a point. For whatever reason, I did feel “at home”.

“Thanks!” I chirped.

Just then, Trent leaned in close, nudging me and pointing in the distance.

“Looks like you have some company.”

I followed the line of his finger with my eyes.

Rex.

Trying to hide my shock, I looked away. It was the first time I’d seen him in person since we broke off our deal.

Of course, *Rex being Rex*, he didn’t deviate.

Instead, he walked right up to us and extended his hand toward Trent.

“Good to see you again, man.”

The two of them exchanged a firm handshake. Next, Rex looked at me and without hesitating, he leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

Ooof.

“You look beautiful as always,” he said, the appearance of his dimples sending a shock straight

through me.

Yeah, um, no.

It was worse than a “shock”.

My body lit up like a freaking Christmas tree!

Much to my disappointment, his charms still had immense power over me.

Even worse, I realized how much I missed this part of his personality. As much as I could do without the overbearing and controlling Rex, the charming and easy-going man in front of me was hard to resist.

Don't give in, keep your guard up.

I smiled at his compliment, regaining my composure and avoiding a complete disaster.

“Thank you,” I said.

Before I could say anything else, Trent chimed in, clapping his hands together.

“Well, I guess just about everyone is here.” He paused and looked around. “Right?”

Still in a semi-haze from Rex’s kiss, I looked at Trent.

“Hmm?” I replied. “Everyone?”

At the same time, Rex looked at Trent, wrinkling his brow.

“Yeah,” Rex added, “Everyone? What are you talking about?”

Then, it hit me like a bolt of lightning.

Oh no, oh no, oh no! Please don't say it!

Yeah. He did.

Trent looked at Rex. “Peter, I mean...”

I’d started to shake my head back and forth, hoping he’d get the hint. It was too late. Trent glanced in my direction, realizing he’d spilled the beans.

“You didn’t tell him?”

A hollow feeling came to my stomach. “No, there just wasn’t time.”

Meanwhile, a look of budding rage twisted Rex’s face into an angry mask. In a matter of seconds, if not sooner, he’d blow his stack.

“Well,” Trent began, clearing his throat. “I guess you two have a lot to talk about. Sorry about that, Cherry.”

I frowned at him but there wasn’t much I could say. I hadn’t run out of time, I’d just hoped I could avoid it. Anyway, it is what it is.

Once Trent walked away, I looked at Rex.

“Peter?” he scoffed. “Really, Cherry?”

I started to respond when it became obvious to me we’d created a bit of scene. All conversation in the trade show booth came to a screeching halt. While Rex waited for a response, I looked up to see a couple dozen pairs of eyeballs staring right at me.

Perfect.

“Can we discuss this somewhere else?” I asked.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks!” He fired back. “They can all go to hell as far as I’m concerned.”

“Great, awesome,” I snapped, turning my back on him and starting to walk away. “Really great seeing you too.”

I stormed out of the booth, trying to make my way through a horde of people, not knowing how he’d react.

It didn’t take long to find out.

After walking maybe twenty feet or so, he spoke. “When were you planning on telling me?”

I didn’t bother to turn around. Picking up my pace, I replied, “Obviously never!”

Just then, the crowd of people thinned. I stopped, pivoting in place and looking right at him.

“Why do you even care, Rex?” I said, snapping my hands to my hips. “What difference does it make? You’ve got tons of businesses and billions of dollars. What’s one more?”

Without a word, Rex took one huge step in my direction. He grabbed me by the upper arms, pulling me close.

“Because none of them involve you,” he said, his brilliant blue eyes looking right through me. “That’s why.”

At that instant, the frenzy of the trade show activity faded away in the periphery of my vision. I didn’t care whether it was the fire of rage or the heat of desire causing him to act this way. It thrilled me to be in his hands again, everything else blurred into a swirling mass of color and humanity.

Swallowing a painful, hard lump down my throat, I fought every instinct inside of me to crush my lips into his. I had to resist, this was the absolute worst place possible to give into my urges.

Wake up, damn it! Wake up!

With a grunt, I yanked myself free of his grasp.

“It didn’t have to be this way, you know,” I said. “It’s not like this is what I really wanted.”

Rex stood there, shaking his head at me. “If that’s the truth, you have a goddamn funny way of showing it.”

While he spoke, the fuzzy state of mind he brought about in me disappeared. The sharp reality of the trade show came into focus again.

A few months ago, when we were still just getting by, I wouldn’t have cared so much about this kind of public display but things were different now. The product was growing and like it or not, I was becoming more and more recognizable.

The last thing I needed to do was make a huge spectacle. I wouldn’t just be embarrassing myself but the entire company.

Unblinking, I looked at him. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

Rex leaned away from me, straightening his suit jacket and snapping it at the elbows.

“Who said we were fighting?”

“Well, that’s what it feels like to me.”

The look on his face turned from one of

frustration to disappointment.

“Mark my words,” he began, straightening his tie. “You are going to regret ever getting involved with Peter Grimes. When the shit hits the fan, *and it will*, I can promise you he won’t be there to pick up the pieces.”

Rex turned and started to walk away but before I could say anything, he stopped and looked at me over his shoulder.

“And neither will I,” he said. “Good luck. You’re going to need it.”



I STOOD THERE, letting his words sink in while he walked away.

Having not expected to see Rex, the encounter left me rattled - in more ways than one.

Of course, having my agreement with Peter exposed was something I’d hoped to avoid for as long as possible, preferably forever.

I watched him turn a corner at the far end of the aisle, disappearing from view.

Rex reacted more or less like I thought he might. Part of me wanted to dismiss his threat, the one where he’d warned me about Peter and about how he wouldn’t be there for me when it mattered most.

Was he lashing out, acting jealous?

The truth was I had rushed into the deal with Peter. I knew that. I'd taken Sam's word, based on the fact she'd almost done a deal with him herself.

Was there something Rex knew that I didn't?

I nibbled on my lower lip...

No, no, no. Don't do this to yourself!

Before another negative thought popped into my head, I put one foot in front of the other and began walking back to my booth.

Of course, I wasn't happy about the way things had turned out between us but I couldn't afford to waste any more energy on the situation.

No matter what he thought about what I'd done, I had a business to run, suddenly a *very successful* business to run.

I couldn't let him affect my partnership with Peter. It was too important to the survival of the company. Besides, his issues with Peter *weren't mine*. I'd had zero problems, *none*, with Peter since we signed our deal. In fact, things had only gotten better once I'd broke things off with Rex for good.

With each step I took, I walked with a little more purpose, holding my head a bit higher.

By having success at Masters, I'd already proved what I could achieve, in spite of all Rex's warnings and controlling behavior. I was determined to keep going, no matter what.

There was too much at stake to let him get to

me now, including the ten million dollar order I received from Trent and the two million dollar order from Haute. Once we completed it, nothing would stand between us and skyrocketing success - especially not Rex March.

I continued to meander through the throng of people, making my way back to the booth, when I noticed Emily, cutting through the crowd and heading in my direction. She moved quick, almost running right up to me.

“Oh my God,” she began, panic in her tone. “Oh my God, Cherry...”

I froze in place. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I...” she stammered, turning in the direction of our booth.

Reaching for her, I wrapped my hands around her upper arms.

“Emily! What’s wrong?”

She snapped her head toward me, her eyes huge and round.

“I don’t even know where to start.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, exasperated. “Spit it out!”

She spent the next minute or so giving me the bad news. It seemed Masters had been flooded with returns of our product. People were complaining their lips were breaking out in hives and rashes.

What! This can’t be. I must be hearing things.

“Uh, that doesn’t make any sense,” I began,

still trying to wrap my mind around what she said. “Trent would’ve told me.”

“No, that’s the thing,” she said, shaking her head. “It just *exploded* in the past few days. It’s been working its way up through the chain of command over there. They’d hoped it wasn’t going to turn into a huge deal, but it has. One of the reps just broke the news to me in the booth.”

This still didn’t seem real, let alone possible.

Hives? Rashes?

Emily’s panic escalated. “Cherry, what are we going to do?”

“Um, I don’t know right now. Is Trent still here somewhere?”

“I... I don’t know,” she replied, shakiness in her voice. “He was in the booth but I haven’t seen him for a while. The sales rep I talked to is off looking for him now.”

I guess it was a bit of good luck. He would find out sooner or later, if he hadn’t already.

I looked at my sister. “Come with me. Tell me everything you can.”

We raced to the booth. Emily filled me in on what little she knew. I mean, it wasn’t good. In fact, it sounded like a nightmare in the making. Grimacing, I bit my lip, every word she spoke causing me to dig deeper into my flesh with my teeth.

Goddamn him!

In the span of a few minutes, I'd gone from thinking Rex knew *nothing* to realizing he'd been right the entire time!

He warned me again and again, saying it would come back to bite me, but I was too stupid or stubborn to listen.

I swallowed hard.

How was Trent going to take the news?

What would he do?

My mind raced. The rash outbreak didn't make any sense to me. I never had a single person breakout from using any of my products.

Ever!

We arrived at the booth. Emily stopped, reaching for my forearm and squeezing it tight.

"Are we going out of business?"

I looked at her with the most confident expression I could.

"No, I promise," I replied. "I'm not sure how we'll get through this but we will, together, as a family."

In spite of my reassurance, Emily had a look of fear in her eyes.

I couldn't blame her.

SOMETHING'S ROTTEN (REX)

I sat in a lounge chair on my penthouse balcony overlooking Beverly Hills.

It was a stunning goddamn sunset, not a cloud in the sky - the perfect atmosphere to mull over what a shit show the day turned out to be. I'd downed two vodka tonics and was working on my third. Lifting the glass to my lips, I hammered back a swallow and winced.

Seeing her today, *goddamn*.

What I felt when I touched her, the sensation it unleashed inside, took me by surprise even though it shouldn't have. I didn't think I'd been fooling myself, telling myself lies about the way she made me feel.

The thing is, I really didn't have a choice.

It would've been easy to be a selfish prick and keep seeing her, exploring the possibility of what

might be after we'd broken off our arrangement.

What sane man wouldn't at least consider it?

Cherry had it all - beauty, ambition, a quick wit and a body that would stop traffic on the 405 in rush hour, during an earthquake and shit, throw in a tsunami for the hell of it.

I reached for the vodka, topped off my dwindling reserve and wondered if what was left in the bottle would be enough to take the edge off. After placing my glass on a nearby table, I leaned back in the chair and my thoughts turned to Cherry again.

Somewhere between her telling me she wanted to put an end to things and my attorney drafting the dissolution agreement, I decided pursuing what we had wouldn't be fair to her. I had no choice but to step back from the situation and let things play out. Success in business means being able to think clear and make shrewd decisions when it counts the most.

I respected everything she'd built and the last thing I wanted to do was be a source of stress and worry for her. If I was, and it had negative impacts on the business, shit...

I didn't want to think about it.

Of course, that's what I deserve for breaking the "one rule".

I reached for my glass again, wrapping my fingers around it. After taking another drink, I

placed it in my lap.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Great work, March. Top-fucking-notch asshole.”

I never should have gone to the trade show even though it pleased me to see she’d had the good sense to go ahead with it. While I wasn’t involved anymore, my fingerprints were all over their recent success.

Deep down, I knew Cherry was aware of that fact.

Sure. It would be easy to be a dick and say, “See? I told you so.”

But what the fuck would that accomplish at this point?

Nothing. That’s what.

Still, there’s no arguing with results and even though I was no longer involved, I took pride in how far they’d come under my leadership.

That visionary thinking, the kind it takes to move mountains, not a lot of men have that.

I do, and I’m not ashamed to say so.

Anyway, like I said, not all men have that skill, especially not Peter Grimes. No, he made his fortune not by *building* empires but by *destroying* them.

Peter specialized in reverse mergers and hostile takeovers. He loaded companies with debt, siphoned off their wealth and then lined his greedy pockets and those of his investors. That is, until

he'd later turn around and screw them as well but hey, those are just some of the rumors you hear in my world.

Maybe they're true, maybe not. The only thing I cared about is what it meant for her.

I guess my point is I didn't know what his goddamn game was with Cherry. Even so, there was no doubt in my mind - *he had one*.

It was bad enough to torture myself by putting my hands on her again, but this whole thing with Peter...

I never saw it coming.

For the past few hours, I'd racked my brain, trying to figure out why I'd failed to make the connection. Looking back on it, the list of possible investors with deep pockets and industry ties wasn't all that long.

Swinging my legs over the side of the lounge, I stood and walked toward the edge of the balcony.

I took another drink. "Doesn't make sense."

As far as Trent was concerned, I didn't have any hard feelings. By the sound of it, he'd wanted Cherry to come clean with me.

Of course, she didn't.

In the moment, I felt a lot of anger toward her, disappointment as well.

I began walking along, taking in the city view while day turned to night.

Something *nagged* at me.

I couldn't shake the feeling there were other people involved in bringing Cherry together with Peter. Other than the night of the red carpet event, she hadn't had any contact with him.

There had to be a middleman or middlemen.

But *who*?

And for that matter... *Why*?

I hated seeing her mixed up with that bastard. One way or another the whole situation would come crumbling down, of that much I was certain.

It killed me to have to say what I did to her.

Every fiber of my being wanted to protect her but in the end, it was her decision to partner with him. She was going to have to live with the consequences.

I hammered back the rest of my drink.

“Damn it, Cherry.”

BAD TO WORSE (CHERRY)

The tremor from the trade show had turned into a full-blown earthquake a couple of days later. What I'd hoped would be an amazing celebration of our success at Masters turned into anything but that.

Almost since it ended I'd spent half my time trying to put out fires at Masters and the other half of my time trying to figure out what in the hell happened.

In the meantime, the rash outbreak continued to get worse.

Amid an *ocean* of returns and complaints, Trent pulled the product from his shelves. He wasn't happy to say the least but he'd given me some time to try and get to the bottom of everything and come up with a solution.

Back at the warehouse, we were in full-blown

panic mode, myself included, finally able to get Dave on the phone after nearly two days of phone tag.

“What do you mean by rashes?” Dave asked. “I’m not understanding how it has anything to do with the coconut oil we supply to you.”

“Well, I’m not sure that it does,” I replied. “That’s the thing, we’re trying to step backward through the entire manufacturing process and figure out how something like this might have happened.”

“I supply you the coconut oil, that’s it. End of story.”

“Right, I get that. However, we don’t have any ingredients in our products that would have caused something like this.”

“Okay, so, why are you assuming it’s us?”

I reached for the collection of papers on my desk.

“Well, because I have the MSDS for the raw material runs from my other suppliers. I have the chemical breakdowns in front of me. All of the substances are inert, they couldn’t have caused this problem.”

“Oh,” Dave began, his tone turning suspicious. “I think I understand now. I’m the lone wolf, right? We can’t supply the MSDS, so naturally we’re the bad guy.”

I exhaled. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say that but it’s a process of elimination. I know what’s in

everyone else's product, I don't know what's in yours."

"That's ridiculous!" He snapped. "I've been supplying you this product on an uninterrupted basis for almost a year."

"You're not listening," I replied, keeping my tone calm. "I'm not accusing you of anything. But, I've got a list of ingredients that I know the properties of versus one I don't."

Dave went silent for several seconds. "So what is it you want from me?"

"I don't know, maybe ask yourself some questions?"

"Like what?"

Propping my elbow on my desk, I lowered my head into my hand and rubbed my forehead.

"Well, for instance, *a freaking typhoon hit the Philippines,*" I grumbled. "I know you said there weren't any issues at the facility, but *how can you be certain?* Maybe there was a loss of power, leading to a situation where contamination could occur. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Flustered, Dave let out a withering exhale.

"Yeah," he said. "I do, but I'm telling you right now, the Filipino facility is secure. Nothing happened there either before or after the typhoon which would've led to a product contamination."

We weren't getting anywhere. I had to try a different tactic.

“Here’s the thing,” I began, concentrating on the next few crucial words coming from my mouth. “If this gets any worse, *it’s going to put me out of business*. If it does, then the orders I talked to you about, the one for the two million, the one for ten... Yeah, they’re gone. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Cherry,” Dave began, still tons of aggravation in his tone. “We’ve been doing business for a while now. Of course I don’t want to lose it but at the same time I don’t know how to defend myself. Again, I’m sorry, but I can promise you our product is pure and you have nothing to worry about.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, too.”

After I finished speaking, I stared across the room, uncertainty descending on me.

“Cherry?” Dave asked. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here,” I replied, energy leaving my body. “Listen, we um, we can’t continue to do business with you. I really appreciate your support, but at this point you’ve exposed me to tremendous liability. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I can’t even say I won’t be forced to come after you legally at some point. I’m just being honest with you.”

He didn’t hesitate. “I don’t want to have to lawyer up against you but I will. I promise you’ll lose because I haven’t done anything wrong. I’ll ask one last time. Is there any way we can make

this work?"

I shook my head. "I mean, the only way - assuming my company survives - that we can move forward, is if you improve your quality control and documentation, which includes the MSDS. It's just as simple as that. But if I'm being honest, we're a long way from having that discussion."

"I understand," He replied.

Not long after, we hung up, leaving the status of our relationship in limbo. I slid my fingers into my hair. Looking up at the ceiling, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

I thought about Rex again.

I kept hearing his voice, telling me over and over about the chances I took shipping the product to Masters without the MSDS.

"Uhhhhh!" I groaned.

God, all of this could've been prevented if I'd only been just a little more... *patient*. Hell, who knows, maybe Rex could even have bought us a little more time with Trent. We wouldn't have had to rush everything to get product on the shelves at Masters - contaminated product, no less!

Shit!

No sooner did I hang up the phone than it started to ring again. I looked to see it was my corporate attorney, Dan Marlowe.

"Please no more bad news, please," I grumbled, swiping the phone on and raising it to my ear.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” he asked.

I leaned back in my chair. “I guess that depends on what you’re calling about.”

“Mmm, hmm,” he replied. “Well, you have good reason to be concerned.”

Closing my eyes, I reached for my forehead, rubbing it. “Okay, just get it over with. What’s wrong?”

Dan went on to explain he’d been contacted by a lawyer representing a group of plaintiffs who were filing a class action lawsuit against my company. In addition, they were also seeking an injunction to stop all sales of the product in retail stores as well as on our website! The reason given for the injunction cited consumer health concern and false labeling.

Oh my God. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.

When he finished, I sat there in silence for a few seconds, trying to come to grips with everything.

“Cherry, do you understand what I’ve explained to you?”

Numbness settled in on me.

“Um,” I began, remembering something he’d said. “You mentioned something about false labeling. What does that mean?”

I heard him shuffling paper on his desk. “The plaintiffs’ attorney provided me a series of

independent lab results. According to these results, your product contains very high levels of methylparaben.”

I shot to my feet.

“That’s impossible!” I exclaimed. “We don’t use any preservatives in our product, none! There must be a mistake.”

Dan didn’t hesitate. “Well, I’ve got the results right in front of me. If you’d like, I’ll email you a copy so you can see for yourself.”

Holy shit! What the hell is happening?

My mind raced. How in the world did methylparaben get into our product?

“Cherry,” my lawyer said, snapping me into attention. “Lab results aside, you understand what the injunction means, don’t you?”

“No.”

“If the judge grants it, you’ll have to stop selling your products and pull them from all retail locations.”

“Well,” I began, shaking my head. “That’ll be easy. Masters Mercantile already pulled them.”

“Okay. What about your website? Are they still available for purchase there?”

“Yes. Why?”

“It’s probably time to address that,” he said. “I’d recommend removing them sooner rather than later.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It didn’t

seem possible.

“Can a judge really do that?” I asked. “Force me to pull everything?”

“Yes,” Dan replied. “But, even if you were able to avoid it, you have to ask yourself an important question. Do you want to keep selling this product, or would it make more sense for you to voluntarily remove it? As your attorney, I can tell you I would advise you to do the latter. Follow Masters’ lead. At this point, you’re doing yourself far more harm than good by continuing to offer the product for sale.”

Nausea overwhelmed me. The room started to spin.

Dan continued spewing doom. “Further, I’d advise you to go back and revisit your entire manufacturing process from the ground up. You’re going to need more rigorous documentation, quality controls, independent lab inspections, etc. All of these recommendations presuppose you’re able to get through this somehow - which at this point is in doubt.”

I felt paralyzed, unable to form a clear thought.

Just then, Dan informed me the plaintiffs’ attorney was calling him. He’d have to call me back. Hanging up, I tossed my cell phone on my desk with a flick of my wrist.

My family.

How the hell was I going to explain this to them? How would they react? Unfortunately, I

didn't have any time to waste. I took a deep breath and headed toward my office door.

I still couldn't shake the methylparaben issue. It made no sense whatsoever.

How is it possible?

How? How? How?



DRAGGING myself out to the manufacturing floor, I dreaded the conversation ahead.

"Everyone!" I said, gesturing for them to gather around me. "I've got something to tell you."

"You're pale as a ghost," my mother said, a frown coming to her expression. "This can't be good."

A hard lump gathered in my throat, the heat of tears coming to the edges of my eyes.

No, no, no! This is not the time to break down.

I took a deep inhale and waved my hands in front of my face.

"You're right. It's not good news," I blurted out. "In fact, it's terrible. I'm trying not to melt down here, so just let me explain everything and get through it."

I spent the next few minutes telling them what Dan said and what it would mean for us. I also explained the lab results that showed our product

contained methylparaben. Judging by the stunned expression on their faces, they were every bit as shocked as I'd been by the news.

Once I'd finished, my dad spoke. "I don't understand. How is it possible methylparaben got into the product?"

"I have no idea," I replied, shrugging and shaking my head. "Dan says he has a lab report with conclusive proof. I'm waiting to get it from him to see for myself."

Before another question was asked, I heard the sound of my cell phone ringing in my office.

"That's probably Dan calling back," I said, turning away from them. "I've got to get it."

After running back to my office, I picked up the phone.

"Hi, Dan," I began, tugging my hair behind my ear. "What's going on?"

My attorney explained that the plaintiffs intended to take the case to trial. However, their attorney offered the opportunity for me to settle and avoid going to court. Pacing across my office, I stopped.

"Settle?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"In essence, when settling you agree to pay monetary damages. In exchange, the plaintiffs agree not to go to trial."

I nibbled on my lower lip.

"Okay," I said, swallowing hard. "How much

do they want?”

“Five million dollars,” Dan replied without hesitation.

“Five million! That’s insane! I…”

He interrupted me with even more shocking news. “They are seeking fifty million in damages should the case go to trial. I would advise you to consider settling.”

The nausea I’d experienced earlier returned with a vengeance.

Fifty million?

“Well,” I muttered, trying to reason my way through it. “What’s the difference really? If I settle, I’m guilty. If I go to trial and lose, I’m guilty. I mean, is there any chance I could win in court?”

“With these lab results? No,” He replied. “I’m afraid not. That is, unless you have overwhelming evidence to the contrary of the claims. Again, I would advise settling the matter.”

“Dan,” I said, groaning in response. “I don’t have five million dollars lying around. Even if I did and paid them, that would still ruin the brand.”

He went silent for a few seconds.

“Um,” he began, piecing his thoughts together. “That’s not necessarily true. If you were to settle but demonstrated a complete overhaul of your manufacturing process, it’s possible to overcome situations like this with time. Other brands have done it, you can too.”

I sputtered a deep exhale.

What a nightmare...

“I mean, I guess that’s good news. Whatever. But I still have no idea where I’m going to come up with five million dollars.”

“Well, your partner is a billionaire,” Dan replied. “I’m sure if he’s interested in the long term value prospects of the company, he’d be more than willing to listen to reason. However, that’s a discussion you have to have with him. We’ve got seventy-two hours to let them know if we plan on settling. Otherwise, the case will move on to the trial phase.”

“What!” I snapped. “Seventy-two hours?! Can’t I get some more time?”

“No, afraid not. My hands are tied.”

I didn’t want to wonder if this problem could get any worse.

Of course it would because why not???

“Anything else?” I grumbled.

“No. If there are any material changes, I’ll be in touch.”

I thanked him for his advice and hung up soon after. Holding the phone tight in my fingers, I looked down to see my hand shaking.

Please, just keep it together.

While my hand quivered, I dialed Peter’s number. His secretary put me right through.

“What’s the latest?” he asked.

I took a deep breath.

“Um,” I muttered. “Unfortunately, a lot has happened today. I’d rather not talk about it over the phone. Is it okay if I come to your office so we can discuss it in person?”

“Sure,” he replied. “If you come right now, I’ve got some time to talk.”

“Okay,” I replied exhaling in relief. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

No sooner did we hang up then I grabbed my bag and car keys.

My family would have to wait.



AFTER ARRIVING at Peter’s office, his secretary took me to a conference room.

She opened the door and at the far end of a long table I saw Peter sitting there with another man I didn’t recognize.

“Go right in,” Peter’s secretary said, gesturing for me to enter.

Passing her by, I smiled. “Thank you.”

After I walked inside, she closed the door and the two men stood up. For some reason, the presence of the guy I didn’t know made me uneasy. I approached them and Peter spoke.

“Cherry,” he began, nodding in the direction of

a stranger. “This is my attorney, Milton Rosenstein.”

The man extended his hand and I took it in mine, shaking it.

“Is this a bad time?” I asked, looking at Peter. “I can wait in the lobby if you’re busy, I...”

“No, timing is fine,” Peter replied, interrupting me. “Milton is here to make sure there aren’t any misunderstandings.”

I leaned away, frowning at his comment. “Misunderstandings about what?”

“Allow me to explain,” Milton said. “What Mr. Grimes is trying to say...”

Peter cut him off. “Milton can be a bit too lawyerly for his own good.”

I felt an uneasy smile come to my face. Something wasn’t right.

“Milton has spoken to your lawyer,” Peter said, gesturing toward his attorney.

“What? When?”

Peter waved me off.

“I pay my legal team an enormous sum of money to stay ahead of any and all issues, including the one you’re facing.”

What the hell is going on?

I took a step back.

“Anyway,” Peter said. “Milton’s already conveyed the message to your lawyer that I’m about to give to you.”

I crossed my arms at my chest. “What’s that?”

“I have no interest in settling.”

While I struggled with the idea that he’d gone behind my back, a new realization hit me.

“So what are you saying?” I replied, frowning at them. “You want to go to trial instead?”

“No. I’m not saying that either.”

Total confusion overcame me. None of this made *any sense*.

“Well,” I began, shaking my head. “If you don’t want to go to trial and you don’t want to settle, then why are we here? Look, I need your help. After all, you are my partner in this business.”

Peter nodded a couple of times and then leaned forward in his chair, bracing himself against the edge of the table.

“Actually Cherry, I own next to nothing in this business any longer.”

“What are you talking about? You own thirty percent of the business!”

No sooner had I finished talking than Milton cleared his throat, jumping into the conversation.

“Yes, well, Miss Clements, my client felt his ownership position in the company put his financial interests at far too much risk.”

“So what does that mean? What are you saying exactly? *In English*.”

“What Mr. Grimes is saying is that his current holdings in your company amount to one percent.

The remaining percentage of his equity position, twenty-nine percent, was divided between your family members several weeks ago.”

Huh?

I mean, I knew Peter planned on giving them some of his equity, but almost all of it?

And why hadn't my family mentioned this to me?

The more Milton talked, the more confused I became.

“Wait, hang on,” I said. “None of them told me about this. Why wasn't I notified?”

Milton reached for his glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose.

“In exchange for the share distribution, Mr. Grimes required nondisclosure agreements from your family members. That said, there was no intention to conceal this information from you. You were to be informed at the appropriate time.”

Appropriate time! NDAs?

My head swam... What is going on? I couldn't help but feel a little betrayed by my family.

“In any case, as a minority shareholder, Mr. Grimes has no interest in being forced to settle the class action suit with five million dollars of his own money. Again, he feels, and rightly so, that this puts him in an overly risky financial position.”

“Uh!” I scoffed. “Well, if we don't settle then they will take us to trial. If we lose, which sounds

like a good possibility, it'll bankrupt the company!"

I snapped my head in Peter's direction. "You don't want that to happen do you?"

Without speaking, Peter and Milton looked at each other.

"Right?" I said, jumping in to fill the silence. "You don't want me to go bankrupt?"

No sooner had I said that than Peter stood from his chair and looked at me.

"Well, good luck to you, Cherry. I wish there was more I could do to help."

"What!" I said, slapping my hand on the table. "What do you mean? What are you talking about? Good luck to me? You're part of this!"

While I berated him, Peter passed by me, eventually exiting the conference room without another word and leaving me alone with Milton. I sat there in total disbelief, staring blankly across the room.

After a few seconds, Milton cleared his throat.

"Miss Clements, do you have any questions for me at this time?"

I shot to my feet and glared at him. "Go to hell."

Climbing into my beater, I slammed the door and screamed at the top of my lungs.

"Motherfucker!"

Soon enough, the momentary rage subsided. I had to do whatever it took to get this situation

fixed. I snatched my cell phone from my purse and called my attorney. I explained everything they'd told me, hoping he could provide me some much-needed clarity.

"I understand you're in an unusual position," he said. "However, according to the agreement you signed with Peter, he's well within his rights to dilute his shares however he sees fit, and further, to do so without informing you of his intentions. I should remind you that you were aware of his intention to give some of the equity to your family and..."

"Okay, yeah, but not all of it!" I snapped, interrupting him.

"Here again," Dan replied. "It's his equity. It's his choice as to when and how he disperses it."

Closing my eyes, I banged my head into the head rest.

"I cannot believe this is happening."

"Mmm, hmm," Dan replied. "I'm afraid that's not all."

"Of course it isn't," I muttered. "Of course."

He continued, "You've got no recourse to demand any additional funds beyond what he'd offered to you in the original purchase agreement. If he doesn't wish to participate in the defense of the company, that's his choice."

I knew I was too young to have a heart attack but the growing pain in my chest told me otherwise.

“So,” I began, lifting my head and opening my eyes. “What are my options here? Just give up? Go bankrupt?”

“Hmm,” he said, mulling over the next words out of his mouth. “No, you can always find another investor to come in and help you. That’s one option. However, in this circumstance, I don’t think it’s likely to be a productive course of action.”

I raked my fingers through my hair, biting hard on my lip.

“You know what? I need to think. I’m sorry, I have to go. I’ll call you back.”

“I understand,” He replied. “Whenever you’re ready to discuss things, I’m available. If...”

I just hung up and flipped my phone into the passenger seat. I mean, whatever.

None of this made any sense.

For some reason I couldn’t understand, Peter had no interest in stepping up. *Why?* He already had seven-hundred-fifty-thousand invested in the company. If we went bankrupt, he’d never see that money again!

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized my family had been manipulated by him.

It’s like he’d set us all up to fail.

Whatever his reasons were, I didn’t have a single second to try and figure them out.

If the company went bankrupt, we’d lose everything. If I tried to fight the lawsuit and lose in

court, my family and I would be destitute, paying back the fines for the rest of our lives.

Looking into the distance, I forced a hard swallow down my throat.

I only had one option left.



CHEWING ON MY LIP, I glanced at my cell phone.

Just do it already!

With reluctance, I reached for it and swiped it on, dialing his number.

After our huge blow up at the trade show, I had no idea how Rex would react or if he would even answer my call. To my surprise, he picked up after the third ring.

I sat up in my seat. Hearing his voice hollowed out a pit in my stomach.

“Hey,” I sputtered.

Rex didn’t mince words. “Sounds like you’re in deep.”

Inhaling a shaky breath, I thought about asking him how he knew, *what* he knew... But the answer to the question was pointless. Since the first day I’d met him, I learned he knew everything about the industry. Hell, he’d probably had a dozen conversations with Trent by that time.

“What do you want?” he said, his tone gruff.

“I’m busy.”

I felt him slipping away.

“I, um, I just wanted to call. You know, to apologize for what happened at the trade show. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t say a word. Didn’t utter a sound.

“Can I come by?” I asked. “I feel like, you know, apologizing over the phone isn’t enough. I’d like to do it in person. I owe you as much.”

Rex replied with terseness. “Leave now. I’ll give you five minutes when you arrive.”

I started to thank him but he disconnected the call, leaving the hollow feeling in my stomach intact. Still, I’d managed to get my foot in the door.

Minutes later, I cranked the key and the beater came to life. Backing out of the parking spot, I hoped he’d listen to what I had to say.

I’m not stupid.

The chances of him doing anything to try and help me were slim, more like none. His promise to not help me “pick up the pieces” was still fresh in my mind.

I shifted the junker into gear.

Before long, I’d find out for sure.

After arriving at March headquarters, Daphne showed me into Rex’s office. I walked inside to see him talking on the phone. Rex glanced in my direction and raised a finger at me, gesturing for me to wait.

God, as if everything else wasn't a complete disaster, seeing him again didn't do anything to help my spirits.

It'd been sooooo long since we'd been together.

I ached.

I know, I know... This was the absolute wrong time, the worst instant, to lose the focus I needed to have. If I had any hope of getting through this, of convincing him, I had to bury these feelings and do it now.

Just then, Rex hung up the phone. "Let's get this over with."

The way he said those words, the lack of warmth in his voice. I don't know, it hurt.

I guess from somewhere deep inside, for some stupid reason, I hoped he'd greet me like he always did - with a kiss on the cheek.

Things were different now, and the sooner I accepted it, the better.

"Okay," I began, walking toward his desk. "I know you're busy. I want to tell you how sorry I am about everything. I should have listened to you. I can see that now. Can you forgive me? Somehow?"

Standing across from Rex, I watched him holding a pen between his thumb and forefinger. He rolled it back and forth in a steady cadence, looking at me with an indecipherable expression on his face.

"Rex?"

“Of all people,” Rex began, exhaling a deep breath. “Peter? Am I that goddamn impossible to deal with? Name one thing, *one*, I did the entire time that wasn’t for the good of the company and for the good of your family. Go ahead, name one.”

I swallowed, not needing to think for long.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

“That’s right,” Rex replied without hesitating. “You can’t. Do you know why?”

I didn’t know what to say. So, I didn’t say anything.

“It’s because I love...” he began, stopping himself almost as soon as he started.

In a flash, he shot to his feet and threw the pen across the room. Storming away from his desk, Rex raked his hands through his hair.

“Fuck!”

Startled, I jumped back. I’d never seen him like this. It was frightening but in a strange way, thrilling. And what was he about to say? *Something about love?*

Rex turned around, glaring at me.

“I love everything about this,” he said, spreading his arms. “Don’t you understand? The product, your family, I love it all.”

The mention of love caused my heart to skip. When he didn’t use the words in the way I’d hoped, I looked away from him.

Rex headed in my direction, still talking.

“All I wanted was to help you become the best you can be and by extension, turn Cherry’s Berries into an unstoppable brand. But that looks to be an impossibility now because of the choices you’ve made. You get that, don’t you?”

His tone turned dark. “What’s Peter done?”

For a brief moment I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, gathering my courage. I spent the next few minutes telling him everything about the lawsuit and about how Peter refused to step up and do anything to help. When I finished, Rex shook his head and chuckled.

“What a goddamn snake,” he said. “Doesn’t surprise me. I’m sorry things turned out this way, I really am. I wish I could help but I can’t.”

Desperate, I wasted no time responding.

“I know I made a mistake. Hell, I made every mistake possible! I know an investment in the company is the last thing you want to do. However, I still believe in what we’re doing, I still believe in the product... It’s just been an unfortunate set of circumstances.”

“An unfortunate set of circumstances?” Rex scoffed. “Is that how you see it?”

I didn’t know what he was trying to say. I shrugged.

“None of this is accidental. All of it was preventable. However, you had no interest in listening to what I had to say, the perspective I had

on situations like this. *Zero.*”

His words split me down the middle. On the one hand, I couldn't help but feel like he was being smug but on the other, I couldn't deny the fact his predictions came true.

“Let's just get right to it,” he said, frustration in his tone. “You want me to come back in and pony up the settlement money in exchange for... what exactly?”

I opened my mouth to reply but he didn't give me a chance.

“See Cherry, the problem is,” he began, bringing his hands together and touching his chin in a prayerful gesture. “Before we had our falling out, I *already owned* a large chunk of the business. Not only that, I was completely in charge. Why would I be interested in taking a lesser position in your company now, especially in light of everything that's happening? Not to mention the fact Peter still has a stake! He'd never sell to me.”

Every word he spoke drew me closer to the inevitable conclusion. It was just a matter of time now.

“You may not like hearing these facts but put yourself in my situation. I can guarantee you would feel the same way if the roles were reversed. I'm sorry, but there's nothing you can say. Nothing is going to convince me that getting involved with your company is a good idea.”

And just like that, it was over.

Rex turned his back on me and walked toward the large bank of windows in his office. Without turning to face me again, he slid his hands into his pants pockets.

“Daphne will show you out.”

After leaving Rex’s office, I drove back to the warehouse. Looking at the road ahead, my thoughts wandered.

How had it come to this?

I’d put it all on the line - risked every penny I owned, not to mention my relationship with my family and all of it for the success of the company.

Now that neither Peter or Rex were willing to help me, it looked to me as if bankruptcy was inevitable. If we did go bankrupt, all of us would be in debt for the rest of our lives.

I shook my head, dreading the next conversation I’d have. Before long, I’d have to face my family and tell them the truth. The company was going under and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

What were the chances I’d be able to start over and be successful?

What was I going to do?

My thoughts turned to Rex.

Even though I had to try, I really wasn’t angry with him for not helping.

Yes, it hurt, but then an even worse realization

came over me. It's one I'd tried to bury, not wanting to accept.

We weren't going to be together - not now, *not ever*.

Did he *ever* feel anything for me?

I searched my emotions for any clues. As much as I hoped he did and wanted it to be true, the simple and uncomfortable answer was that maybe he didn't. Maybe when he said he loved everything about the company, the product and my family, he meant it.

He never mentioned my name.

The heaviness of that realization sunk in at last. Tears escaped from my eyes, running down my cheeks. I couldn't hide my pain any longer.

I wouldn't.

Reaching up, I brushed the moisture away from my face and grabbed hold of the steering wheel again.

With white knuckles, I held on tight, facing an uncertain road ahead.

ALL GONE WRONG (REX)

Fucking hell.

After a brutal night of no sleep, I gave up and came in early the next day. I *hated* having to do what I did, turning my back on Cherry.

As difficult as it's going to be for her to lose her company, if I got involved at this point, there'd be no chance for me to put my plan in motion. If I didn't let her fail, I wouldn't be able to acquire the trademark, formulas, and intellectual property rights for the products.

For now, I was fairly convinced that if there was *any hope* of salvaging something from this train wreck, that was it. I figured something like this would happen and now that it had, I was in the perfect position to capitalize.

But it was still too soon.

Right now, I had to have patience before

making my move.

Anyway, all the corporate intrigue, the plotting and scheming paled in comparison to the way this whole thing with Cherry churned my insides.

I wasn't even all that angry with her about Peter.

The part that got to me the most, the part I didn't understand, was why she was so blind. I always had her best interests at heart, always.

For Christ's sake, I'm her biggest goddamn fan.

It's not like I think she's incapable of getting things done without my help - *far from it*. After all the time we'd spent working together, focusing on the business and trying to grow it...

I shook my head.

Part of me couldn't help but feel like she'd done this to get back at me.

Fuck.

But, my issues with her aside, I still hadn't gotten any closer to understanding what the hell Peter was doing.

It didn't make any sense to me.

Why was he not doing everything he could to protect his investment?

Yeah, he had a long track record of pumping and dumping companies but not until they're profitable. Cherry's wasn't even close and probably wouldn't be for some time to come.

He *had to know* how successful this thing would be.

This whole thing with the coconut oil, the lawsuit, it was just a short-term distraction, a hiccup, compared to the long-term prospects of the company.

What the hell are you up to, Grimes?

I felt like I was running around in circles, every question I asked led to another. But the one I kept coming back to, over and over, was how it even happened in the first place.

I couldn't think of a time or place, besides the red carpet event, that would put Cherry and Peter together. What's more, is Peter would have had no way of knowing when the deal between Cherry and I fell apart.

None!

No one aside from the two of us and possibly her family, knew about it.

Someone brought them together... *Who?*

And then, the answer hit me *like a bolt of lightning*.

I reached for my office phone, snatching it out of the cradle and dialing Sam's extension. It rang a few times before going to voicemail. I slammed the receiver into the cradle and reached for my cell phone, calling her again.

Same thing, no answer, straight to goddamn voicemail.

I buzzed Daphne.

“I need you to track Sam down for me right away.”

“Yes sir, Mr. March,” she replied. “Is there a message you would like for me to give her?”

“No. Just tell her it’s urgent and to call me.”

After hanging up with Daphne, I stood from my chair and started pacing around my office. My mind moved a mile a minute.

How deep does this go?

Everything points to Peter - what’s his end game?

“Shit,” I muttered.

Standing around speculating wasn’t going to get me anywhere. I had to get Sam one-on-one. After all, she’s the catalyst for this whole thing.

I turned toward my office door and yelled.

“Any luck, Daphne?”

“No, Mr. March!” she yelled. “I’m still trying!”

Goddammit.

Without wasting another second, I walked toward my desk, snatched my cell phone and suit coat, making a beeline for the elevator.

When I walked past Daphne, she called out to me.

“Mr. March? Where are you going? When will you be back?”

I pressed the button for the elevator and looked at her.

“*Out.* I’ll be back later.”

Confusion spread across her face. “Would you like me to have the limo brought around for you?”

The elevator door opened behind me with a ding.

“No.”



ALMOST AN HOUR PASSED by when the taxi I’d hailed in front of my building pulled up about a half a block down from Sam’s house.

“Stop the car,” I said to the driver.

From the back seat, I peered through the front window and noticed her car in the driveway. However, she wasn’t alone. There was a limousine parked in front of her house also.

I balled my hand into a fist. “Grimes.”

Leaning back, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. Peeling off a few hundred, I passed it to the driver.

“Wait here.”

The driver’s eyes opened wide. “Yes, sir!”

Slamming the door of the cab shut, I straightened my coat and tie and headed for Sam’s front door. While I walked up the driveway, I noticed the limo driver lifting a cell phone to his ear, no doubt calling Peter to warn him. By then, it

was too late.

I pounded on the front door. “Open up, Sam! Now!”

It wasn’t long before I heard the sound of her heels on the marble flooring.

Cool it, March. Whatever is going on behind the door, you have to keep a level head.

I heard the sound of the door unlock and start to open. Sam appeared in front of me, white as a sheet.

“I’m so sorry, Rex,” she said, shaking her head and pleading with me. “I am so sorry!”

Ignoring her, I scanned the room, at last seeing Peter.

“Step aside, Sam.”

She backed away, looking over her shoulder while I entered the house.

Peter glared at me. “I wondered how long it would take you to show up. Good job, Detective.”

I stopped in place, pointing at him. “I’ll deal with you in a second, shithead.”

I turned my attention to Sam again.

“Why?” I said, opening my arms in disbelief. “Why did you do this? What did Cherry ever do to you?”

Sam’s eyes turned glassy. “I didn’t do it to hurt her! I swear!”

Sam looked away and *in an instant*, her true motivation became clear.

“I see.”

Sam looked at me, the beginnings of tears trickling down her face.

“You treated her so much better than me. I know you’re falling for her. I was jealous and stupid and I’m sorry but please believe me when I say I never meant to hurt her. Please!”

Falling for her?

The anger I felt toward Sam faded for an instant. In its place, a sense of pity. She may have acted out of jealousy but now it looks to have backfired on her. As far as I could see, she’d been played by Peter or maybe that’s just how she wanted it to look.

I wasn’t sure.

Even so, hearing her say that she could tell I was falling for Cherry. It felt like a goddamn punch to the gut. It made me realize that I was and *if it was obvious to Sam*, it was probably obvious to everyone else, *maybe even Cherry*.

Before I had a chance to say anything to her, Peter spoke.

“It doesn’t matter, Sam. You’ve served your purpose.”

Sam glared at him, firing back in response. “My purpose? What the hell are you talking about?”

While they battled, I couldn’t get Cherry out of my head.

I don’t think I’d ever been so distracted in my

life, especially in a situation like this. It's like my mind was in a fucking fog. I stood there witnessing the argument between Peter and Sam, taking it all in and wondering where it was going to lead. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

Peter pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, dialed a number and lifted it to his ear.

"Yes, it's done," he said, looking right at me. "We'll be waiting."

No sooner did he hang up than Sam yelled at him.

"This is not what was supposed to happen!" she began, pointing in my direction. "This was about getting even with Rex, not hurting Cherry!"

Peter shrugged, unconcerned.

"I know that, Sam, but what better way to get back at Rex than to destroy the thing that's most precious to him?"

That snapped me out of it.

"You were all in," I began, glaring at him. "*Backing her*. Things were going great until the rash outbreak. If your intent was to destroy her, I'd say you got lucky. Nothing more. If that hadn't happened, there would've been no stopping her."

"That's right," he said, his eyes never leaving me. "See, either way I win. If the company takes off - you lose, I win. If the company fails - you lose, I win. The three quarters of a million was a small price to pay. It was worth every cent."

As soon as he finished speaking, someone knocked at the door. I glanced at it and then looked at Peter again. He arched an eyebrow at me but didn't say a word. There was a second knock. Sam stood there, frozen in place.

I frowned at her.

"Answer it," I said, gesturing toward the door with my head.

"No," she replied, snapping her head back and forth. "Please. Please don't make me."

I glared at her. "Who's out there?"

She didn't respond, just stood there continuing to shake her head.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered, turning my back on her and walking toward the door.

I wrapped my fingers around the knob and ripped it open.

"What the fuck?"



"SON."

Squeezing the door knob tight enough to crush it in my hand, I did a double take.

It couldn't be.

I hadn't seen the son of the bitch in the flesh in more than ten years.

"What the hell are you doing here, Marshall?"

The old man shrugged. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

I clenched my jaw and turned my back on him, running my hand through my hair.

Think, Rex. Think!

From behind, I heard the sound of the door close. I glanced toward Sam who looked away from me. Peter broke the silence, walking toward that asshole.

“Glad you could make it,” he said, extending a hand toward him.

I glared in their direction, pointing at Marshall.

“I swear to Christ... You better not be involved in this. If you’ve done anything to hurt her, I promise I’ll...”

He interrupted me. “What? Bankrupt me?”

I glared at him. It took everything I had not to walk across the room and rip his heart out of his chest. However, that wouldn’t solve anything. I needed to know what the hell he was doing here. I couldn’t connect the dots - not yet anyway.

The piece of shit kept talking. “You’ve already done your worst to me. I’m still here, still standing. You...”

I interrupted, pointing a finger at him. “Old man, if you think what I’ve done to you is bad, you have no idea!”

My fingers twitched, eager to turn into a fist and settle this by any means necessary.

He laughed at me. “I see that temper of yours is still clouding your judgment.”

I clenched my jaw tight. Marshall turned and looked at Peter.

“The most satisfying part of it all is that we pulled it off right under his nose.”

“Satisfying indeed,” Peter replied, a despicable grin coming to his face. “Karma’s a bitch, isn’t it Rex? The methylparaben contamination - however it happened - is the universe’s way of settling the score with you. That supply chain of hers *was a disaster waiting to happen*. You knew it, even told her as much but she wouldn’t listen and it’s going to cost her everything.”

I was one second away from charging toward both of them until Marshall spoke.

“The methylparaben didn’t come from her supply chain.”

Peter frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Use your head, Pete,” Marshall scoffed. “Did you really think delaying the shipment at customs was going to be enough to take her down?”

“What!” I exclaimed. “That was you? You held up the shipment in customs? How?”

“You destroying my import business caused a lot of collateral damage,” Marshall replied. “Let’s put it this way, you made a lot of enemies on your way to the top, son.”

“Don’t call me that!” I exclaimed. “I am not your son, fucker!”

He ignored me. “Not everyone was thrilled to have their livelihoods ripped away from them for the glorification of your massive ego.”

I scoffed at him. “What are you talking about, you crazy old man?”

“I’ve still got friends,” he said, nodding at me. “Friends who are more than happy to see you go down in flames. Like I said, you made a lot of enemies. Trust me when I tell you they’ve got long memories - just like me.”

Peter jumped in, still trying to set things straight with Marshall.

“Hey, you two can finish this pissing contest later. You were supposed to use your connections at customs to delay the shipment. That was our deal. What the hell did you do?”

“Relax,” Marshall began, waving him off. “It was just an insurance policy. Methylparaben is not illegal.”

“Yeah, I know that!” Peter fired back. “You’re right, methylparaben’s not but tampering is! What the fuck have you done?”

No sooner had he finished talking than I leaned back and clapped my hands together, roaring with laughter.

“Serves you right, Grimes,” I said, straightening my tie. “The two of you are going to pay for this.”

Marshall shook his head. “Afraid not. The methylparaben is untraceable. No one can prove anything.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “There’s heavy surveillance and security. Someone, somewhere knows what you’ve done.”

A stupid grin came to Marshall’s face. “Like I said, I have friends. You won’t find a goddamn thing at customs, I can promise you. No one can save that girl, especially not you.”

Peter hadn’t stopped raging. “I’m not going to get fucked here. No way.”

The old man ignored him, never taking his eyes off of me. “You slipped up, son. She’s got you tied around her finger. This is all your fault.”

“Fuck you,” I snarled. “I’m done with this fucking stupid conversation.”

Straightening my jacket, I turned and started to head toward the door but not before issuing one last threat.

“You’ve slipped up somewhere, that much I’m certain about. When I figure it out, there’s going to be hell to pay.”

Before I could take another step, Sam yelped.

“Rex, please! I didn’t know! I swear!”

I looked at her, still feeling some pity. Deep down I wanted to believe she was telling me the truth. Her emotions probably got the best of her. Even so, I couldn’t help her now, she was damaged

goods.

“You’re fired.”

“No!” Sam cried out. “Rex, please!”

I walked out, slamming the door behind me.

LAST GASP (CHERRY)

I never made it back to the warehouse.

After exiting the freeway to get some gas, the beater wouldn't start. Left with no alternative, I had it towed to a nearby garage for repair.

I'd been there for about an hour when one of the mechanics walked up to me.

"Doesn't look like we're gonna get you out of here today."

I looked up at him, frowning. "Why?"

A look of puzzlement spread across his face.

"You're kidding me, right lady? You got any idea how old that car is? How hard it is to get parts for something like that?"

I rolled my eyes, letting out a deep exhale.

"Okay, um," I began, glancing at my phone to check the time. "Do you have any idea how much

it's going to cost yet?"

"Hmm," he muttered. "Not exactly, but if I had to guess I'd say you're looking somewhere north of two-thousand dollars."

"Two-thousand!" I exclaimed. "The car isn't even worth two-thousand."

"Well, if you want it fixed, that's what it's gonna run ya, give or take a few hundred."

Reaching up, I covered my face with my hands. "Is this ever going to end?"

"What's that?" The mechanic asked.

I dropped my hands away from my face. "It's nothing, never mind."

"So, you want to get this repair done, or not?"

I really didn't have a choice. Yes, the car was a complete piece of crap but at least it was paid for, and right now, I had no room in my budget for a car payment. I looked up at him.

"Do you take American Express?"

Fifteen minutes later, I stood in front of the garage waiting for a cab. Exactly halfway between the warehouse and Rex's office, I had second thoughts about telling my family, and instead, visiting Rex one last time.

I really had no idea what to say, or if anything I'd did say would make a difference. But I had to try because my life and my family's future depended on it. The cab dropped me outside of the building and I wasted no time heading straight up to

the executive suite.

Walking toward Daphne, she looked up at me and smiled.

“Hey, Cherry!” she chirped, waving at me. “Whatcha doin’ here?”

I approached her desk. “I was wondering if I could see Rex. Is he here?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “He’s out for a while. I’m not sure when he’s coming back.”

“Um, okay. Would it be all right if I waited?”

She smiled at me and nodded. “Sure. No problem.”

With that, I walked across the room and took a seat in the waiting area. Ten or fifteen minutes went by. I kept myself busy, mindlessly screwing around on my cell phone.

The elevator doors opened and I looked up, fixing my attention toward them.

I readied myself to jump up the instant Rex walked through. Only he didn’t, instead, his mother appeared.

My body went limp.

Bitch.

I remembered my initial meeting with her - yeah, not great. Before she looked in my direction, I returned my attention to my cell phone, hoping I could get by unnoticed. But no sooner had I looked away than I heard the sound of her walking in my direction.

“You’re that ‘berry’ girl,” she said. “The one Rex is fixated on. Aren’t you?”

Fixated on?

I looked up at her to see her standing there with her arms crossed at the chest, a semi-scowl aimed in my direction.

“Why are you here?” she began, disdain in her tone. “Rex isn’t interested in you. He’s told me as much.”

Without a thought, I jumped to my feet. “Excuse me?”

Gwenney didn’t flinch. Or respond.

I was in no mood to take any crap from her, not that I ever would, but still, not in the mood.

“As far as I know, my business dealings with your son aren’t any of your concern. That’s doubly true for our personal relationship!”

She ignored me, acting like I hadn’t said a word.

“You’re a fool,” she scoffed. “Rex is in love with Sam. He always has been. Always will be.”

Where the hell is this coming from?

Is she making this up or what? I’d never asked Rex about Sam, their past. While I struggled with those thoughts, Gwenney kept talking.

“I know what happened,” she said, her eyes flashing with eagerness. “How you wormed out of your deal with my son only to go behind his back and sign an agreement with Peter Grimes. You

should be ashamed of yourself!”

What!

Her accusation snapped me out of my funk.

“Wait a second,” I began, pointing a finger at her. “How do you happen to know that?”

She looked away from me. “It doesn’t matter.”

Sam!

I was a split second from unloading on her but before I could say a thing, the elevator door opened and Rex walked through it. We both looked in his direction while he approached.

“Mother. What the hell is going on?”

Gwenny looked in my direction while Rex turned his attention toward me.

“Cherry. Why are you here?”

DON'T CROSS THE LINE (REX)

These two arguing was the last thing I needed to deal with - I had to get to the bottom of Marshall's scam, *and fast*. Seeing Cherry again made me realize how urgent this task was and how little time I had to waste.

Without a word, I walked straight toward her. Cherry started to back away, bumping into one of the chairs nearby and almost falling over.

"I'm sorry for coming here again!" she said, her eyes wide. "I didn't know what else to do."

I grabbed hold of her and moved close until my mouth was inches from hers. I didn't have anything to say but I did have something *to do*. Reaching up with both hands, I brushed the hair away from her face when I noticed the beginnings of tears. Without wasting another second, I crashed my lips into hers, kissing her like my life depended on it.

Maybe in a way, it did.

The passion she stirred in me, I'd never experienced it with *any* woman. Nothing would stop me from making things right again in her life. I separated from her, looking deep into her eyes.

"Go home," I said. "I've got some things to do, but I promise you, everything will be fine."

She had the look in her eyes of someone who'd been completely beaten. Even so, she wouldn't stop fighting.

"No. I can't. I can't give up."

"I know," I replied, shaking my head. "I'm not asking you to give up. But you can't help me with what I've got to do. Now please, just go home."

She looked away from me. "Um, I can't."

I frowned at her. "Why not?"

She shot a quick glance toward my mother and then looked at me again.

"Well," she began, lowering the sound of her voice. "My car, it broke down. It's at a garage and I spent the last of my money to take a cab here."

It took everything I had not to chuckle at her and that car.

The same couldn't be said for my mother...

"Hah!" she scoffed. "How fitting..."

"Mother!" I snapped. "Knock it off!"

Cherry glared at her but didn't bother to take the bait.

"Look," I began, returning my attention to her

again. "I'll have Eduardo take you home."

"No, you don't have to do that. Really, I..."

"I'm not asking you," I replied, raising a hand in front of her face. "Okay? Just do it. Go home and get some rest. You're going to need it."

I guess the stress and exhaustion got the better of her. Nodding, she looked at me.

"Okay. Thank you. Very much."

I smiled at her and then turned my attention to my secretary.

"Daphne!" I called out. "Have Eduardo take Cherry home."

"Yes sir, Mr. March. Right away."

With that, I leaned in toward Cherry and kissed her on the lips. "I'll be in touch. Get some rest."

"Okay. I will."

I didn't waste another second, looking at my mother.

"You," I began, pointing a finger at her. "Come with me."

I walked ahead of her until we reached the entrance of my office. Once we did, I stepped to one side while she passed by me.

"What was that all about?" I asked, closing the door.

She took a few more steps and stopped in place, turning and facing me with her arms folded across her chest.

"I don't know what you mean."

I reached up and pinched the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes tight.

“Mother!” I yelled. “I don’t have time for this!”

“I’m not going to stand here while you berate me!” she fired back, anger in her tone.

I dropped my hand away from my face.

“Yes, you will,” I began, walking in her direction. “Now, tell me when you found out Peter Grimes got involved with Cherry.”

My mother had the world’s *worst* poker face. From her head to her chin, guilt consumed her expression.

I continued, “I already know Sam’s behind everything. How long have you known about it? When did Sam tell you about her idea?”

The guilt on my mother’s face gave way to a hint of anger. “It wasn’t Sam’s idea. It was *mine*.”

“What!” I exclaimed, stomping toward her. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Gotten that girl out of your life!”

I couldn’t help it. Without another word, I looked at her and laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

By then I’d turned around and started to walk to my desk. Infuriated, she kept blabbing.

“Rex... Rex!”

By the time she’d finished, I took a seat in my chair and looked at her.

“She’s no good for you,” my mother said.

“Look at how easily she ran to Peter! Can’t you see she’s...”

I banged my hand on the desk. “Enough!”

My outburst startled her, enough to shut her up.

“Mother, your actions have created a shit storm of consequences. I’ve got to find a way to undo it all before it comes crashing down on Cherry.”

She scoffed at me. “Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Leave,” I said, my fingers curling. “Now. Before I say something I can’t take back.”

She shot a final glare in my direction before turning and heading toward the door.

“Wait,” I said.

My mother stopped and looked at me.

“Peter and Sam aren’t the only ones involved here,” I began, leaning back in my chair. “Did you know that?”

“No,” she replied. “What do you mean? Who else is involved?”

I had no reason to believe she had a clue about Marshall. But I had to tell her because she needed to learn a lesson when it came to her meddling ways. She’d created a mess and left me to clean it up.

“Marshall.”

“What?” she gasped. “Your father? How?”

“Peter paid him to hold the shipment up at customs. Except, that’s not all he did. He’s the

reason for the rash outbreak. He had his accomplices contaminate the shipment with methylparaben.”

My mother stood there shaking her head, confused. “How do you know this?”

“Told me himself.”

“What!” she exclaimed. “You saw him?”

I nodded. “Yep. At Sam’s house.”

“Rex, I...” she began, flabbergasted. “I don’t know what to say.”

I waved her off, content to let her struggle with what she’d done.

“There’s nothing to say right now. However, when I get this whole thing sorted out, and I will, you will accept her as the woman in my life - *period.*”

What the hell was that?

The words came out on their own, without any conscious effort from me.

But, there they were.

I couldn’t deny what I felt for Cherry anymore. I wasn’t going to and I definitely wasn’t going to tolerate any more bad behavior from my mother. Looking at her, I could tell she still hadn’t recovered from the revelation about Marshall.

“Mother,” I said, raising the sound of my voice. “Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear?”

The expression on her face said it all. I didn’t like seeing her upset but she overstepped her

bounds this time, and by a fucking mile.

“Rex, I’m so sorry,” she said. “Can you forgive me?”

I shook my head at her. “Save your apology for Cherry.”



I WATCHED my mother until she exited the office, closing the door behind her.

Fuck, man.

I was still goddamn furious over what she’d done but I’d have to deal with her later. Right now, I had to figure out a way to nail Marshall, Peter and if needed, Sam.

Everything came down to the methylparaben.

Of course, I was familiar with the preservative. A lot of the cosmetics offered by my company used it. There was nothing wrong with it unless you happened to be allergic. Where Cherry got into trouble was with the labeling.

People who have allergies to parabens know to steer clear. Like I said, it’s not a big deal for my products because we put it on the label, but in Cherry’s case, she claimed to be preservative free.

No good.

The thing about parabens is you can’t just go to a local drugstore and pick up an amount large

enough to contaminate an order like the one for Masters Mercantile. No, the scale of that contamination meant Marshall secured a *massive* supply somewhere. What that idiot didn't realize is that the possible list of suppliers is goddamn short. In fact, *it's exactly one*, and my company happened to be one of their biggest customers.

I picked up my cell and dialed.

"Kenner Additives. This is Julie."

"Julie," I began, standing from my chair. "It's Rex March. Put Sean on the line, honey."

"Yes, Mr. March, right away."

While I waited on hold, I continued to walk across my office until I reached the bank of windows overlooking Beverly Hills and Hollywood. My mind drifted back to Cherry, how she looked the last time I saw her. It enraged me to see the toll it took on her youthful beauty and exuberance.

The bottom line is I'd let her down. I hadn't protected her like I should. *Fuck*. But nothing would stop me from making it right, no matter how long it took or what I had to do to make it happen. There was a click on the phone line, followed by a familiar voice.

"Rex," Sean, the CEO of Kenner Additives picked up. "Good to hear from you."

Unblinking, I stared off into the distance. "Sean."

"What can I do for you?"

I collected my thoughts, taking a moment to think about what I wanted to achieve.

“We’ve done business together for a long time,” I said.

“Um, yes,” he replied, my leading tone catching him off guard. “That’s true. Without March Enterprises, we wouldn’t be where we are today. Is there a problem?”

I didn’t waste any time in responding.

“Yes. Unfortunately, there is. The fact that you’ve been a reliable supplier makes what I have to say to you all the more difficult.”

The tone in Sean’s voice turned anxious. “What are you talking about, Rex? You…”

I interrupted him. “We’re going to have to let you go.”

“What?” he replied, a mix of confusion and surprise in his voice. “Why?”

“It’s simple. I can’t have March doing business with companies involved in conspiracy and tampering.”

“What are you talking about?” Sean said, flabbergasted. “You’ve known me for almost ten years. Our company’s never been involved in anything illegal. Ever.”

While he talked, I took measured steps along the huge bank of windows in my office.

“Actually, I’ve got it on good authority you have.”

Sean scoffed. “Rex, come on. You know me. What’s this all about?”

“It’s about the methylparaben contamination at Cherry’s Berries. There’s only one place I know capable of supplying it at that scale - Kenner Additives.”

“Yeah I heard about that,” Sean stuttered. “But, what makes you think we were involved? They claim the products had no preservatives?”

I nodded. “Exactly, Sean. Exactly.”

“What are you driving at?”

“Just this. Your company supplied the methylparaben used to contaminate the product.”

“Rex,” Sean said, his tone excited. “That’s crazy!”

“Is it? Why don’t you check your sales during the last six weeks? I can guarantee you will find an order in there large enough to have done this.”

“We get hundreds of orders a month. You...”

“Not like this one,” I said, cutting him off. “It would’ve been *huge*. Go on, I’ll wait.”

In spite of being skeptical, he put me on hold and went to investigate. I *hated* having to do this to him but I needed a lead. Marshall was behind the order but I still needed a way to prove it. It wasn’t long before Sean returned.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it,” he said. “Big order, about the size you’re looking for. Placed about six weeks ago. They paid in bitcoin.”

“Bitcoin?” I said, frowning. “When did you start accepting that?”

“Um,” Sean said, mulling over his response. “A few months ago. Some of our international customers requested it. It saves a ton of time and money versus overseas bank transfers.”

I wasn’t super familiar with it but I did know it was anonymous.

“Damn,” I muttered. “Untraceable, right?”

“No,” Sean said. “Well, for mere mortals, yes. You’d need some heavy help - like from the Feds. They’re the only ones with that kind of capability.”

I exhaled into the phone. “Shit.”

“But why do you care about that?” he said. “I’ve got the name of the person right here on the order. You don’t need the fucking FBI.”

I closed my fingers into a fist, pumping it.

One step closer.

“Okay, what’s the name?”

He paused. “Uh, Samantha Criss.”

“Wait,” I replied, caught off guard. “What? Are you sure? Is there a company name?”

“No, no company name, just hers. Hey, doesn’t she work for you?”

I cleared my throat. “She did.”

“What’s going on here?” Sean asked. “If she works for you, or did, how come you don’t know about this order?”

“Because I didn’t place it.”

“Rex, I don’t understand.”

I shook my head in silence for a few seconds.

“Me either. Where was it delivered?”

Sean stopped talking, looking at the order again.

“Let’s see. Um, it wasn’t. Warehouse pick up. What the hell?”

Fuck me.

“Sean,” I said, running my hand through my hair. “I need a copy of the order. Right now.”

“Not a problem,” he replied. “I’ll have it sent to you immediately. Hang on.”

The line went silent.

What the hell?

In spite of being almost certain I’d nail Marshall for what he’d done, now this? And Sam? Why was her name on the order?

Sean came back on the line. “Okay. Emailed it. Can you check and make sure you got it?”

“One sec,” I said, heading toward my desk.

Not long after, I printed off a copy. “Okay, got it right here.”

“Rex, I’m really sorry about this. If I had known this was fishy, I would’ve put a stop to it. I...”

I cut him off again. “What’s this long series of letters and numbers here?”

“All right,” Sean began, clearing his throat. “That’s the bitcoin wallet address we received the funds from. It’s like a unique identifier, a

fingerprint. If you can find the person who owns that wallet, you're golden."

"Wait a second, I thought you said these are the kinds of things that only the Feds can do."

"Yeah, if you have no leads and need law enforcement help. But you have a lead - Samantha. If that's her wallet, she's your culprit."

I raised my hand to my chin, stroking it and thinking while Sean continued to talk.

"What about our business? We good?"

I stared off into the distance, trying to connect the dots.

"Rex?"

"Hmm?" I replied, refocusing. "Yeah. Yeah, we're good."

Not long after we hung up, I stood there looking at the order. Sure enough, it had Sam's name on it, the bitcoin wallet address and to make matters worse, *her signature*.

"Damn," I muttered. "Not looking good."

When I fired her, I wasn't sure how deep her involvement went. I assumed Marshall would slip up somewhere along the way, making the path to proving him guilty pretty simple.

It hadn't been.

Marshall could've used anyone's name on this order. If he was trying to set Sam up by forging her signature and covering his tracks, that theory made sense. On the other hand, I still didn't know what to

think about Sam.

Maybe she *was involved*, the signature was *damn convincing*. If she was, she'd be aware of the bitcoin payment, the warehouse pick up, *all of it*. Even though my gut told me she had nothing to do with the methylparaben order, without talking to her, I couldn't be certain.

I paused and looked out the window again. How could I get her to tell me the truth without revealing what she knows about the order?

What would prove her innocence or guilt *immediately*?

Think, March, think!

I snapped my fingers.

“Of course!”



HUSTLING BACK TO MY DESK, I picked up my phone and buzzed Daphne.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Get Sam on the phone for me.”

“Okay.”

While I waited, I debated whether or not my idea would work. But unless I could get Sam to agree to come to my office, there's no way I'd find out. Daphne buzzed in.

“Mr. March,” she said. “Sam says she doesn't

want to talk to you.”

Grimacing, I glanced down and noticed one of the lines blinking. “Is that her on hold? Line two?”

“Yes, sir. It is.”

“Okay, thanks,” I replied. “I’ll take it from here.”

Without hesitating, I pressed the button and started to speak.

“Sam, hear me out...”

“No,” she said, her voice full of anger. “I won’t, not after the way you treated me. You wouldn’t even give me a chance to explain myself! Why should I listen to anything you have to say?”

I took an extra second and reminded myself how important it was to coax her. Unless I could, I’d have no chance to get the proof I needed.

“Sam, you’re right,” I said. “You’re absolutely right. That’s why I’m calling. I’d like to make things right with you. Can you give me a chance?”

“No.”

“Look, don’t be unreasonable,” I began, standing from my chair. “We’ve been together for a long time. I never should have fired you. I want to bring you back. In fact, I’ve got a generous bonus in mind if you reconsider.”

She went quiet. I had her attention.

“How generous?” she asked.

I didn’t hesitate. “You have to come in and find out.”

“Um, okay,” She replied, exhaling into the receiver. “When?”

“How soon can you get here?”

About an hour later, Sam arrived. Daphne alerted me and I got up from my desk to greet Sam at the door to my office.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, smiling at her. “And for giving me a second chance.”

Frankly, she still looked to be pretty goddamn pissed. But, that really didn’t matter because what I had to do wouldn’t take long. That’s a good thing because she was in no mood to talk.

“I’m only here to discuss the bonus,” she said, crossing her arms at her chest. “It better be huge, otherwise, forget it.”

“It is,” I began, gesturing for her to sit. “Have a seat.”

Walking together, we headed in the direction of my desk. Sam sat down and looked up at me.

“How much? I want to know now.”

I stood next to my desk. “How does fifty-thousand dollars sound?”

Sam’s eyes looked as if they might pop out of their sockets. “Fifty-thousand dollars?!?”

I circled around my desk and slid into my chair.

“Yep,” I replied. “In fact, I’m prepared to pay you right now.”

She sat there speechless.

“There’s just one thing,” I said, raising my

index finger. “I need your bitcoin wallet address.”

A blank expression came to Sam’s face. “My what?”

“Your bitcoin wallet address, Sam,” I replied. “I’d like to keep this bonus off the books, so I’m paying you in bitcoin instead of a check.”

She frowned, her confusion growing deeper by the second. “What’s a bitcoin?”

“Digital money,” I said, keeping a straight face. “Everyone knows what bitcoin is.”

“Well, I don’t,” She replied, shaking her head. “I’ve never heard of it in my life.”

I nodded at her and a smile came to my face. *She’d passed the first test.* Not having any clue about bitcoin meant she couldn’t have made the payment.

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“What the hell is going on?” Sam said, frustration in her tone. “Why are you acting so weird?”

I picked up my copy of the order from Kenner Additives and passed it to her.

“This is why.”

Frowning, she took it from me and spun it around, scanning it. Not long after, Sam’s eyebrows darted upward.

“What is this?” she said, stopping and looking at me. “An order for methylparaben? Why is my name on here?”

“That’s what I was hoping you could tell me. That’s your signature, isn’t it?”

She grimaced and looked at the order again.

“I mean, it looks like it, but I swear, I had nothing to do with this,” she replied, pausing and staring me in the eye. “Someone’s forged it.”

She extended her arm, trying to pass the order back to me.

“I didn’t do it. Someone is pretending to be me. I promise.”

“I know,” I said, taking the paper from her. “Whoever ordered it paid in bitcoin. All we have to do now is find out who that person is.”

Puzzlement framed her face. “How do we do that?”

I smiled and picked up my phone, buzzing Daphne.

“Yes, Mr. March?”

Leaning back in my chair, I ran my fingers through my hair. “Get John Martinez for me.”

“Right away.”

I hung up and looked at Sam. “So, do we have a deal? I need to know if you’re coming back.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, what about the fifty-thousand?”

“It’s yours, just like I promised,” I replied. “Although, I won’t be paying you in bitcoin. How does a check sound?”

Sam took a few extra seconds to think it over,

debating the pros and cons. She looked at me again.

“Okay, Rex. I’ll do it.”

I clapped my hands together. “Great, I’ll have Daphne...”

My phone buzzed, distracting me.

“Mr. March,” Daphne said. “Deputy Police Commissioner Martinez on the line for you.”

I glanced at Sam. “We’ll wrap this up later.”

She nodded at me and got up from her chair, turning to leave.

“Hey, Sam?”

She stopped and looked at me. “Hmm?”

“Welcome back,” I said with a wink.

She smiled at me and turned around, exiting my office not long after. Turning my attention to the phone, I picked it up.

“John!” I exclaimed. “How the hell have you been? Long time, no talk...”

CALM BEFORE THE STORM (CHERRY)

I'd tried calling Rex a few hours earlier but wasn't able to reach him. Although I was grateful he'd decided to help me, I seriously didn't like being in the dark about what he was doing. Every hour that went by without contact, made the situation worse and...

BOOM!

"Jesus Christ!" I shrieked, clutching my chest.

A brilliant flash of white filled my kitchen followed by a gut rumbling vibration.

Not helpful!

That seemed about right though, that it would be storming outside. Life had been raining nothing but misery on me for weeks now.

Would it ever end?

While I considered my fate, the doorbell rang. I dropped what I was doing, hoping it was Rex.

While I walked, I battled a sinking sensation in my stomach. If it was him, what would he have to say?

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the doorknob and twisted it. I opened the door to see Rex standing there, holding a bottle of wine. He raised it in front of his body and a smile came to his face.

“I’m here to celebrate.”

I frowned at him. Celebrating was pretty much the last thing I felt like doing.

“Celebrate?” I replied. “Celebrate what? This time tomorrow night I’m going to be finished, *bankrupt*.”

“Are you gonna invite me in?” he replied, ignoring me. “Getting soaked here.”

Shaking my head, I stepped to one side while he entered. I closed the door behind him.

“Rex, I...”

“Let’s get this opened,” he said, interrupting me and holding the bottle up once more.

Clenching my jaw, I started to walk past him. “I’m in no mood.”

I hadn’t gotten far when he reached for me, grabbing my arm. It wasn’t hard, just enough to get my attention.

“Hey,” he said, letting go of me.

“What?” I replied. “Am I supposed to be excited about something? Why would I want to celebrate?”

I wasn't mad - just over everything, exhausted and confused.

"Because I've got a plan," he said. "We'll talk about it tomorrow. I promise."

A plan?

"Why not tell me now?" I began, crossing my arms. "We can't afford to wait until tomorrow. It will be too late by then!"

He shook his head. "Everything is going to be fine. Just put it out of your mind for tonight."

I wasn't about to give in, there was too much at stake.

"I don't need your protection," I said. "This is my company, remember? I have a right to know."

Rex looked at me in silence for a few seconds. At last, he nodded his head and spoke.

"You're right. It is your company. I..."

"Thank you," I replied, interrupting him.

"I'm not done. Let me finish. If it wasn't for my involvement, none of this would be happening to you. I respect the hell out of you and what you've accomplished for yourself but I've got to undo the damage I've caused."

I shook my head. "Rex, that's not true I..."

"Cherry!" He snapped. "I'm not discussing this with you and the subject isn't open for negotiation. Here's the deal, I'll give you a choice. I can leave and meet you at the warehouse in the morning when I'll explain everything. Or, I can stay tonight,

so long as we don't speak a word about what's happening. Decide."

Pulling my arms tighter against my body, I bit my lip. He turned his back on me and walked away, headed toward the kitchen.

"Rex!" I exclaimed. "Come back here!"

He disappeared from view and I stormed after him, turning a corner into the kitchen not long afterward.

I spotted him across the room, standing next to the dining room table. Rex had his back to me, taking off his suit coat. Next, he undid his tie and draped it over one of the chairs. Last, he removed his cufflinks, rolling up his shirt sleeves and revealing his lean, muscled forearms.

When he turned around again, I noticed he'd unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt, exposing his pecs.

Damn. No fair.

I swallowed hard. My lips separated. Seeing him standing there, I began to lose focus. While I stared at him, Rex walked toward me, stopping about a foot away. He leaned in, wrapping his fingers around the back of my neck. After a single kiss on my lips, Rex pulled away.

"Now, where's that bottle opener?"

"Um," I stammered, still reeling from his kiss. "I'll... I'll get it. Hang on."

I grabbed the bottle opener and two wine

glasses. After passing the opener to Rex, he had the bottle open in a flash, pouring each of us a glass of wine.

“To you,” he said, raising his glass.

I touched my glass to his. “Me? Why me?”

While I spoke, Rex took a big swig.

“Because you are incredible, you’ve got it all,” he replied. “You’re smart and tough, a real winner. Not to mention absolutely fucking gorgeous, inside and out.”

I can’t lie.

The frustration I felt at his unwillingness to tell me about the plan still simmered. But hearing those words from him... *soothed me*.

I smiled. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he replied. “Meant every word.”

It felt so good to be *with him* again.

Having Rex in my corner took a huge weight off. Not only that but I’d been so sure things between us were over for good. Now that he was here, in the midst of this crisis, I felt incapable of denying the truth any longer.

I was in love with him.

I knew it and couldn’t pretend anymore.

“Now, what’s it gonna be?” Rex said, topping off his glass. “Am I staying? Or going?”

I didn’t say a word, instead stepping toward him and pressing my free hand against his chest, curling my nails into his flesh.

Tomorrow would be here soon enough.



BREAKING EYE CONTACT WITH HIM, I traced my fingers down the center of his chest, my nails caressing the thick muscles of his pecs. His taut skin glistened, light enhancing the striations while I made lazy strokes.

My lips drifted apart when I thought of him above me, flexing and thrusting as I'd run my hands along his thick backside down to his perfect, rock-hard ass. Just the idea of it caused my nipples to harden, brushing against the silky softness of my robe and sending a tremor straight to my core.

Blinking, I looked up at Rex to see him staring back at me with a familiar glimmer in his eyes.

His jaw flexed and he raised the wine glass to his lips, hammering back a final gulp of the maroon liquid. Rex placed the glass down on the kitchen counter. I watched, noticing the maroon streaks of alcohol settling in the bottom of the glass like ghostly fingers.

Without a word, Rex motioned for me to pass my glass to him.

“I’ve fucking missed you, baby,” he began, taking it from me and setting it aside.

Rex reached toward me, sliding his fingers into

my hair. Without wasting a second, he pulled my face toward his, devouring me with a hungry kiss. I moaned and melted into him while our tongues intertwined, lashing against each other. Needful heat passed between our lips, the result of denying our desire for too long.

I reached toward his shirt, fumbling for buttons.

Unfastening the final three in a flash, my fingertips sizzled, shaking with greed for his flesh. I slid my hands beneath the fine fabric of his shirt, groping and clawing at him.

Licking my lips, I reached for his shirt and tugged, desperate to get an eyeful of what my fingers touched. Rex didn't hesitate, pulling his arms free. The shirt floated out of sight and a heated breath escaped from between my lips. Reaching for his pecs, I leaned in, peppering the thick slabs with soft, gentle kisses.

“Fuck,” Rex moaned, reaching for my head again.

My eyes flickered closed. The tender smacks turned primal and I started to lick at him like an animal, savoring his unmistakable scent, the one I craved like no man before him. He continued move his hands within my hair, twisting and tangling it between his fingers and pulling me closer.

When he pressed me against his body, my mind shifted gears, changing my focus from his chest to somewhere much, much lower. Dropping a hand

away, I glided it down the center of his body, tickling the edges of his six pack until I reached the massive bulge between his legs.

Shit. Mmm...

I shuddered, leaning away from him and biting my lip. More than anything, I wanted to get my hands on it, my mouth around it. Sputtering a breath, I reached down with my other hand, eager to set his cock free. But no sooner did I get my fingers on the buckle of his belt than Rex grabbed hold of my hands, shocking me out of my lust.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

I pouted. “Why?”

Wordless, Rex pried my hands free with a gentle tug and then moved his hands toward my tits, teasing my nipples through the fabric. He made tiny circles, tracing them and sending my sensitivity to an almost unbearable state.

Oh Christ. Jesus.

Stop. Wait. Don't. No, keep going...

Our eyes met and he reached for my waist. He shocked me, wrapping his hands around my hips like a vice, picking me up and placing me on the kitchen counter. The speed sent a burst of fright through me, catching in my throat when Rex moved between my legs. Grabbing hold of my thighs, he reached between, spreading them wide.

The cool feel of the counter caught my attention thanks to the wetness pooling in the

center of my thighs. Rex moved in close, curling his huge hands in the opening of my robe and spreading it apart, exposing my breasts. I heaved a deep breath and he dropped his head toward them, devouring one of my nipples with the warmth of his mouth.

Oh. My. God.

I dropped my head forward while he licked and groped my tits, cradling them in his hands and lavishing me with unrelenting heat from his tongue. My nipples pebbled, turning to fleshy stone while I ran my fingers over the broad muscles of his shoulders. Soon, Rex broke free, leaning away and leaving me in a state of delightful confusion.

When I looked down again, I noticed him untying my robe, gliding the knot apart with ease. Once he had, he opened it, exposing me and looking into my eyes.

“Lift your hips,” he said, hooking his fingers around the edges of my thong.

I nodded without a word and also, without a thought. If he’d told me to do a backflip, I would have tried. Angling my hips, I braced myself on the counter with my palms and Rex slid the thong off me with a single, swift tug.

He moved close again, pressing his mouth to mine, while down below, he pressed a finger into my wet, aching folds. I whimpered into his mouth, devouring his tongue while he began to torment me

with his fingers, flicking and stroking. We separated and I sucked in a huge gulp of air, only to blow it out with a grunt a half second later.

“Oh Rex, fuck,” I muttered, my eyes closing.

I sensed him move away, *down...*

Oh shit.

I snapped my eyes open again when he thrust a finger inside of me and pressed his mouth against my pussy, swallowing me. My lower body spasmed, jerking and quaking while he drove his finger inside, curling it under and sending my lust skyrocketing. With his free hand, Rex reached toward my stomach, pressing against it and holding me steady while he continued to torture me from below.

He consumed my mind, each flash of his tongue and stroke of his thick finger, driving me closer to the point of no return. Eager to have him closer, I wrapped my legs around his upper body, hooking my heels together and digging in with all my might. Rex licked and lapped at me, sending my sensitivity to a place I'd never experienced.

“Rex,” I huffed. “I... I...”

He grunted, thrusting his finger in and out, out and in, all the while assaulting my clit with a ferocious tongue lashing. It was more than I could stand, my entire body shook, gripped on the edge of climax. The seconds piled up, jumbling in my mind until at last I couldn't hold out one instant longer.

“Yeah...” I grunted. “I... baby, baby...”

He'd brought me to the cliff, my entire body about to tumble off the edge straight into ecstasy when all of sudden, he stopped. I gasped in a breath, flipping my eyes open to see him standing there unzipping his pants.

Holy... oh, oh. Wow.

In a flash, he tugged his boxer briefs down and stepped between my thighs again, his hand wrapped firm around the base of his swollen cock. Rex dropped his hips and pressed the tip into me for a brief instant before stopping and looking into my eyes again.

“Do you want to cum baby?” he asked.

I didn't blink or speak, just nodded so fast I thought my head might snap off.

With that, Rex pushed himself inside of me and I buckled beneath him, lying flat on the counter and slamming my eyes shut. Wincing in half-pain, half-pleasure, I grabbed and groped at him while he plunged all the way inside of me.

He pulled my lower body close, yanking me across the countertop, right to the edge. With every thrust, I felt the powerful snap of his pelvis crack against my ass sending shockwaves of indescribable pleasure through me. Soon after, he hovered above me, planting his hands like tree trunks on either side of my waist.

Rex drove into me, each thrust diving deeper.

Hard and thick, every inch of his dick filled me. My fingers turned to claws and I grasped for his forearms, digging my nails into his muscles. I started to shake, a storm gathering deep within me. He fucked me like a relentless machine while I squeezed, holding on to him, hoping to get through what was about to happen.

And then, with a single, hammering thrust he sent me into a spiral, my body spasming from head to toe. Climax ripped through me, leaving me crying and howling in its wake. Rex continued to pump harder and faster while I gyrated beneath him, orgasm turning me inside out.

“Rex!” I screamed. “Fuck! Oh my God!”

Just then, Rex slammed his hips into me, his lean figure arching above me.

“Fucking Christ!” he yelled. “Fuck! I’m cumming.”

Still in the midst of my bliss, I felt him move in and out, his body jerking back and forth. With my awareness returning, the heat of his release streaked within me. Powerful jets of warmth coated my insides sending a sense of total satisfaction through my body. I looked up to see an expression of pure pleasure on his face and I smiled, releasing my iron grip on his forearms and gliding my fingers away.

Rex collapsed on top me and I reached for his head, stroking his hair and making tiny circles with

the tips of my fingers. We lay there for a few minutes until he lifted his head and pushed himself up again. He stood and motioned for me to take his hand. After I did, he helped me off the counter and pulled me close.

A smile came to the corner of his mouth. "You never answered my question."

I frowned at him. "What question?"

"Should I stay? Or should I go?"

I licked my lips and reached for his cock, wrapping my hand around it.

"Neither," I whispered.

He leaned away from me. "Neither?"

I smiled and nodded, feeling his dick grow again in my grasp.

"Just come again instead."

He smiled.

Later that night, we lay in my bed together. Rex had dozed off a half an hour earlier but I was far from sleep. I draped an arm across his chest and reached for his face, caressing it with a single stroke. I'd never felt so close to him, to any man.

There were only three words I could use to describe the emotion trapped inside of me. Only three words which were the perfect expression of my heart and my soul.

I looked up at him again, whispering.

"I love you."



THE NEXT MORNING I waited for Rex at the warehouse. He left early, telling me he needed to stop by his office and pick something up. I paced back and forth, chewing on my lip.

Swear to God, passing out seemed like a real possibility.

The settlement deadline was fast approaching. Not only that, but there were *no orders, no business whatsoever* - my entire world was at a standstill.

Ugh, where is he?

No sooner did the thought pop in my head than there was a knock at my office door. I just about sprinted toward it, grabbing the knob in my hand and ripping the door open.

My jaw dropped and I stepped back, pointing.

“What the hell is she doing here?” I said to Rex. “Sam’s the one who set me up with that scammer Peter in the first place!”

Rex raised his hands in front of his body, motioning for me to calm down.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he said, gesturing toward Sam. “It wasn’t her idea to set you up with Peter.”

Huh?

“Well if it wasn’t her idea? Whose was it?”

Rex cleared his throat. “My mother.”

“What!” I yelled.

“Look, listen,” Rex began, walking into my office. “I’ve already taken care of her. There’ll be time to get everything sorted out. Don’t worry about my mother right now.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing!

Before I could say anything, Sam spoke.

“Cherry, I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am,” she began, putting her hand over her heart. “I was jealous of the way Rex treated you. I wanted to get back at him by putting you and Peter together, but I honestly thought Peter would help grow your company, not tear it apart. I never meant for any of this to happen. I also never meant to get so close to you but I did. I hope you can forgive me.”

I glared at her when she first began to speak but by the time she’d finished, the tone in her voice made her words seem... sincere?

“Um, thanks, I guess,” I said, glancing at Rex. “If he believes you, then I guess I probably should consider it. Still, it will take some time for me to get past all this.”

A sad smile came to Sam’s face. “I know. I understand.”

“I guess none of it matters anymore,” I sighed. “The accidental methylparaben contamination will be the end of the company. I just wish I knew how it happened. It makes no sense.”

When I finished speaking, Sam glanced at Rex. I looked at him.

“What?”

His expression turned angry. “Wasn’t an accident. That’s why we’re here. To make the sons of bitches pay for what they’ve done to you and your family.”

Huh? Done to me?

“You mean someone did this deliberately?” I asked, shaking my head in disbelief. “Who? Why? How?”

Rex tightened his jaw. “To get at me.”

“To get at you? This isn’t making any sense. You need to tell me what you know, right now. You promised me you would.”

“You’re right. I did. I will.”

Rex went on to explain everything he’d uncovered after his visit to Sam’s house. It seemed impossible to believe but once he finished telling me, the evidence couldn’t be ignored.

After he finished speaking, I looked at him. “What are we going to do?”

He shook his head. “Not us, Cherry. *You.*”

“Me? What can I do?”

While I spoke, a sly grin came to the corner of his mouth. “Get your revenge. Now come on, we’ve got to pay your partner visit.”

“What partner? Peter?”

“The one and only.”

Rex turned toward Sam. “When you get back to the office go ahead and make the call we discussed.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Don’t you want to wait until after the meeting with Peter?”

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. “No need. He’s expecting a call. Just do it.”

“Okay, I’ll text you once it’s done.”

Rex extended his hand toward me.

“Let’s go.”

ONE DOWN (REX)

Before long, we arrived at that bastard's office, unannounced and uninvited, *just the way I wanted it*. While we made our way into the building, I glanced at Cherry. She was a nervous wreck. Stopping, I pulled her aside and looked into her eyes.

“There's only one way this conversation is gonna go - *ours*. Okay?”

She looked up at me, her expression full of doubt and uncertainty. I leaned in, kissed her on the forehead and we entered Peter's office. I expected friction, and we got it.

Walking right up to his secretary's desk, I looked down at her. “Tell him I'm here.”

She shook her head at me. “Mr. Grimes isn't in the office today. He's...”

I formed a fist and banged my hand on her

desk, sending a jolt through her.

“Bullshit,” I snarled. “That workaholic son of a bitch is here. You tell him I want to see him, *now*.”

Her eyes never left me while she picked up her phone and lifted it to her ear. “Rex March to see you.”

I glanced toward Cherry while the secretary spoke. She still looked nervous but not as much as she had earlier.

“Yes, Sir,” the secretary said. “I’ll contact security right away, I...”

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “Tell him that if you call security, I’ll call the police. I can promise he won’t like what I have to tell them.”

She glanced at me and then turned away, covering the phone with her hand while she spoke. A few seconds later, she hung up and looked at me.

“Mr. Grimes will see you now.”

I straightened my tie. “Goddamn right he will.”

After a short walk, we made our way inside Peter’s office. He stood there glaring at us while his secretary closed the door.

“Make it quick,” he said.

“What?” I replied, pausing and looking at Cherry. “No cocktails?”

He fired back. “Hey asshole! I’m not playing games. What do you two want?”

I winked at Cherry and then looked at his sorry ass again.

“It’s real simple,” I began, lifting my chin. “First, you apologize to this woman for what you’ve done. Then, you are going to write a check to settle the lawsuit, give up your remaining equity in the company and write a second check for another five million - payable to Cherry’s Berries.”

He let out a huge laugh.

“What!” he exclaimed. “Are you insane? Ten million! You know Cherry, I am sorry. I’m sorry you got hooked up with this lunatic.”

“You finished?” I asked.

He didn’t respond, just stared at me.

“Remember what I told your secretary... About calling the police?”

“Yeah,” he scoffed. “What about it? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Sure about that?” I replied. “I mean, if you hadn’t, the threat wouldn’t bother you.”

A look of frustration spread across his face. “Look, out with it already. Whatever it is you think you have on me, just get it over with.”

I didn’t waste any time. “Marshall’s been caught, busted, just like I predicted.”

“You’re a liar,” Peter replied, shaking his head. “He said himself there was no way anyone would double-cross him at customs.”

“Did I say anything about customs?”

He glared at me.

“No, I didn’t. I’m talking about the

methylparaben. I've got all the proof I need."

"So, what?" he said, waving me off with a flick of his hand. "Your old man did this on his own. Doesn't affect me. This conversation is a waste of time."

"Yeah," I began, nodding at him. "You know Peter, you're probably right. And anyway, Marshall's trustworthy enough. Right? I'm sure when he gets locked up for what he's done, he won't say anything about being involved with you."

Let that sink in, you asshole.

He narrowed his eyes at me while I continued.

"Let me ask you... Do you want to take your chances in court? Marshall will flip on you in a second. Would you rather spend ten years behind bars, or part with some of your millions and enjoy your wealth while you're still young?"

While I spoke, he started to pace around, finally stopping to look at me.

"So, say I give you what you want," he began, reaching up and rubbing the back of his neck. "The ten million. How can you guarantee Marshall won't rat me out?"

I shrugged. "I can't. But settling that suit will go a long way in the eyes of a judge or jury. Beats the alternative."

He looked away from me, shaking his head.

"Oh yeah, almost forgot," I said, snapping my fingers. "There's one more thing you're going to do

for us. You will call Marshall as soon as we're done here."

"Are you crazy?" he fired back. "I'm not making any contact with him!"

"You will. You will. Or no deal, and you roll the dice when Marshall gets locked up."

"Fuck," he muttered. "Go on..."

"You tell him we've decided, for better or worse, that he's exposed a weakness in our business. We want to pay him to make sure it never happens again. We want a meeting with him to discuss it."

"No way," Peter replied, shaking his head. "He will *never* buy that."

"No one knows Marshall better than I do," I replied. "I can guarantee his ego would never let him pass up an opportunity to watch his son come crawling to him for help."

Peter wiped his hand down his face. "Christ. Fine. Let's get this over with."

"Get to it," I replied with a quick nod. "We'll wait."

With that, I had Cherry supply him the wire transfer details to the trustee for the class action lawsuit. A few minutes later, he'd made the payment.

"Keep going," I said.

After, Peter picked up the phone and called his attorney, telling him he'd decided to get rid of the

remaining equity he has in the company.

“Yes, I’m certain,” he said. “Do it right now.”

Peter hung up the phone and looked at us.

“Done. Milton will send the final revision to your attorney.”

“Next,” I replied.

He pulled out his checkbook and started to write. After he’d finished, Peter got up from his desk and walked over toward us, passing the check to Cherry. She took it from him and I looked at Peter again.

“Almost done. Now, apologize.”

The look on his face was *priceless*. We’d beaten, embarrassed and humiliated him, and I loved every goddamn second of it.

“Cherry, I apologize for what I did to you. You, um, didn’t deserve to be treated that way.”

I glanced at her. “Good enough for you?”

She held up the check and smiled. “Sure is.”

“You got what you want,” Peter barked. “Now, get the hell out of my office!”

Reaching down, I placed my palm in Cherry’s lower back. “After you.”

We’d just about reached the door when Peter spoke, “Go to hell, March.”

I stopped. Turning to look at him, I pointed.

“Make the call,” I began, issuing my final warning. “Give Marshall my number and tell him to call me within the next hour. If he doesn’t, I can

promise you the police will hear from me - then you find out what hell is really like.”

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM, JOIN 'EM (REX)

Now that we'd settled the claim, it was time to settle the score.

We climbed into the back of the limousine and Cherry shrieked, jumping across the seat toward me, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me.

“Oh my God! That was incredible!” she said, pulling away. “I don't know how to thank you enough.”

I shook my head. “Don't get too excited. It's not over yet.”

She eased back into the seat.

“Right.” She nodded. “That plan with your father. What are you going to do?”

While we drove across town, I explained to her that the only way we'd be able to be repair the company's image is to prove that they weren't responsible for the contamination.

The basic idea is to “hire” him to make sure all future shipments get through customs with no issues by using his connections. After all, if we want to turn Cherry's Berries into a huge brand, we couldn't afford any delays in the production process. It was my hunch Marshall was the one

who paid for the methylparaben in bitcoin.

“That’s how we’re going to catch him,” I said.

Cherry frowned at me. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“We’re going to pay him for his “services” in bitcoin on the premise that we want to keep the arrangement with him anonymous.”

“Okay,” she replied. “Go on.”

“If I’m right and Marshall’s bitcoin wallet address is the same one on the order for the methylparaben, we’ve got him.”

Cherry connected the dots, I could see it in her eyes. “Ah, okay. I think I understand.”

I continued, “The tricky part will be finding a way to make the payment to Marshall without him becoming suspicious. My guess is his ego will blind him to the risk but until we are looking him in the eye, there’s no way to know for sure.”

Not long after, we arrived at my corporate headquarters. After taking the elevator up, Cherry and I walked into my office where Sam and two men waited. Walking away from Cherry, I headed toward one of them, extending my hand.

“John, thanks for coming over,” I began, extending a hand. “I know it’s short notice.”

The Deputy Commissioner of Police took my hand in his, shaking it.

“Of course Rex, anything for one of the city’s largest donors.”

By then, Cherry walked up and joined us. I gestured toward her.

“Cherry Clements, I’d like you to meet the Deputy Police Commissioner, John Martinez.”

Cherry smiled at him. “Hello.”

With that, John gestured toward the man with him. “This is special agent Gil Campos from the FBI field office here in Los Angeles.”

I shook his hand while John continued to speak.

“Rex, I discussed the situation with Agent Campos. If what you’re alleging is true, your father is looking at multiple felonies. However, without any evidence of him interfering at customs, or being involved with tampering, it’s your word against his.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” I nodded. “However, I’m not concerned. Just tell me this... If the bitcoin wallet address from the order matches the one he gives to me, is that enough to take him into custody?”

“Um, yes,” Agent Campos replied. “There have been successful prosecutions with bitcoin used as evidence. Of course, it doesn’t put him at the scene of the crime but it’s unlikely he’ll want to take the fall for any co-conspirators. If you’re successful, there would likely be additional arrests.”

I glanced at Cherry. Agent Campos continued.

“However, I’m curious... Short of asking him, how do you plan on getting him to reveal his wallet address to you? Wouldn’t he be suspicious?”

Looking at Cherry again, I smiled. “Leave that to us.”

Just then, my cell phone began to vibrate in the pocket of my suit coat. I pulled it out and looked at it to see a number I didn’t recognize.

I looked at everyone. “Excuse me for a second.”

Walking away from the group, I swiped the phone on and answered, “Rex March.”

“Rex, it’s Peter. I’ve got Marshall on the other line. I’ll leave you two to discuss things.”

By the time he’d finished talking, I’d reached the windows of my office. Dip shit didn’t waste any time.

“What the hell are you up to? You trying to scam me?”

Looking into the distance, I shook my head. “No, not at all. Peter explained what I wanted. Didn’t he?”

“Yeah. So, what?” he snarled. “After everything you’ve done to me, what the hell makes you think I’m gonna help you?”

I paused and glanced over my shoulder, making sure I was out of earshot.

“How does six figures a month sound?” I replied. “That’s just to start.”

He went silent. I’m sure my offer set his scheming brain on fire.

“In exchange for what?” he asked.

“What you already know how to do - *work the system*. We’re going to get through these problems and grow like crazy. Having a bottleneck at customs slows expansion. Simple as that.”

“Uh huh,” he deadpanned. “How do I know you aren’t trying to set me up somehow?”

“I guess you don’t,” I replied. “Take the meeting with us. Decide for yourself. We need your help and we’re willing to pay for it.”

He went quiet again. A few seconds later, Marshall cleared his throat.

“When? Where?”

“My office,” I said, a satisfied smile coming to my face. “Tomorrow at eleven o’clock. You know where it is?”

“I’ll find it,” he replied, hanging up.

I looked out the window again.

One step closer.

ALL ON THE LINE (CHERRY)

I'd paid a small fortune to get the beater fixed and it's a good thing because I couldn't take any chances I'd miss the meeting with Marshall. In fact, I arrived a few minutes before eleven the following day and parked my car in the shadow of March Enterprises headquarters.

The previous night, Rex spent several hours with me, explaining the basics of bitcoin.

Yeah, yeah. Good luck, right? I know...

He'd installed an app on my phone which I was supposed to use to transfer the payment to Marshall. At the time, I felt like I understood it okay but with the meeting not far off, I began to feel like I would forget something, say or do the wrong thing...

Ugh!

Before my worry spiraled out of control, I

closed my eyes.

“Relax, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Rex is going to be right there with you. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

After avoiding a panic attack, I made my way to Rex’s office and walked up to Daphne.

“Is Rex in yet?”

Daphne shook her head. “No.”

I’d never known Rex to be late for *anything*, especially something this important.

I smiled at her. “Thanks.”

Turning my back, I pulled my cell phone from my purse and tried to call Rex.

No answer. Awesome.

I grimaced and opened my messaging app, texting him.

A few minutes later, he replied, telling me there’d been a slight change of plans but to keep Marshall occupied until he gets there. I opened my messaging app again and fired off a reply.

With my fingers shaking, I typed. “What do you mean occupied! How???”

No sooner had I sent it than the elevator door opened and a man stepped out. I’d never seen him in my life but I’d seen eyes just like his.

Marshall.

I jammed the cell phone in my purse, trying to compose myself. I just had to keep him occupied for a few minutes. Taking a deep breath, I walked

right up to him and beamed a huge smile.

“You must be Marshall,” I said, extending a hand.

He scowled at me. “Who the hell are you? Where’s Rex?”

Before I could say anything, he raised a finger. “You. You’re that Cherry woman aren’t you?”

Crap. Stay cool. Don’t send him running!

“I am,” I replied, smile intact. “Rex will be right here. He asked if you wouldn’t mind starting without him.”

While I talked, Marshall scanned the room.

“Yeah, no thanks,” he said, turning around. “Deal’s off.”

Without thinking I reached out and grabbed him by the arm. “No, wait! Please!”

He didn’t say a word, just looked down at my hand.

“Sorry!” I said, ripping it away. “Look I’ll, um, let me try and call him.”

“Hurry up,” he growled.

I walked a few feet away and dialed his number. Rex answered.

Finally. Seriously. What the hell!

“Rex, your father is here,” I began, my voice not much louder than a whisper. “He says unless you are in the meeting, he’s leaving.”

“I figured as much,” Rex replied. “Look, I’m on the way. Tell him it will be worth the wait.”

I covered the phone with my hand, turning and looking at Marshall. “He’s almost here. Can you give him a few minutes? He promises it will be worth your time.”

Marshall shifted position. It looked like he might walk out at any second. At last, he nodded.

“Okay.”

I told Rex he’d agreed to stay and hung up the phone. I looked at Marshall once again.

“Follow me to the conference room?” I asked.

I walked in ahead of him and gestured toward a seat.

“Care to sit?”

Marshall shook his head. “Nope.”

Not off to a great start here.

I circled around to the other side of the conference table, *cursing Rex*. This guy is totally suspicious. Doing this all by myself wasn’t the plan! Where the hell is he? Time was running out, and I had to try something to stall.

Sitting down, an idea came to me.

I can’t believe I’m doing this.

“You know,” I began, looking at him. “I don’t blame you for what you did.”

At first, he wasn’t paying attention. Instead, he looked around the room, his eyes darting in every direction.

“Huh?” he said at last, focusing on me. “What are you talking about?”

Reaching up, I slid my hand through my hair, shaking it free.

“I mean, going after my business to get even with Rex. He told me what he did to your company, destroying it because you cheated on his mother.”

Marshall crossed his arms. “What’s your point?”

“Well, I had a brief partnership with him, too. It was... *totally a nightmare*. I was lucky to get out.”

“Yeah? Good for you,” Marshall replied, shaking his head. “I’m still trying to recover from what that shit did to my life, my business.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows against the edge of the table. “Wanna know something? This isn’t even his idea. *It’s mine.*”

He looked at me in disbelief. “Am I supposed to be fuckin’ impressed?”

“No,” I replied. “I mean, that’s just like him - always taking credit for things. Right? I told him it’s like when a casino gets robbed... They’ll hire the thief to help them improve their security system, you know, to make it stronger. Not that you’re a thief.”

Oh my God, what are you doing? Have you lost your mind?

I refocused.

“Anyway, he admitted I had a good idea, but he’d have to be the one to propose it because you’d never listen to me.”

Marshall let out a half-chuckle. “Sounds like him all right.”

“Well, that’s not all,” I replied. “I had another idea. He really didn’t like that one.”

Marshall looked right at me. “I’m all ears.”

“So, Rex says I should pay you in cash. You know, so we can keep things private but I told him I’d read about something called bitcoin - it’s like, totally anonymous - wayyyy better than cash. Anyway, I told Rex about it and do you know what he did?”

“No.”

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms. “He *laughed* at me. Rex said that if he had no clue what bitcoin is then...”

I paused and waved a hand in front of my face. “Never mind. I shouldn’t repeat it.”

Marshall took one huge step toward the table. “What? What did that prick say?”

“Um, I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I replied, hoping to God this idea worked. “We really need your help and I don’t want to upset you.”

No sooner had I finished than Marshall banged on the table with his fist, startling me.

“I’m already upset, you bimbo! Now tell me or I’m walking out.”

Bimbo? Oh, hell no. All the anxiety I had vanished.

“He said there was no way someone as old and

pigheaded as you would have any idea what bitcoin is, let alone how to use it. He said we should stick to cash so you can have something to bury in your backyard.”

By then, his breath rose and fell, keeping time with his growing anger. A red hue came to his face.

“Sorry!” I exclaimed. “I shouldn’t have told you!”

“Old?” he stammered, banging his hand on the table again. “Pigheaded? Bury it in my backyard!”

“Oh no!” I replied, waving my hands in front of my face. “Look, let’s forget it. Rex will be here soon and you two can work things out.”

Marshall didn’t say a word. To my surprise, he sat down across from me.

“Why does he want you to pay me in cash?” he said, glaring at me. “Do you know the *real* answer?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“I’ll tell you why,” he said, pausing and pointing at me. “Because in large amounts, cash *is* traceable, that’s why.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “I’m not following.”

He reached in his pocket, pulled out his cell phone and swiped it on. Turning it around, he showed it to me.

“*I know what fucking bitcoin is, okay?*” he began, pointing at his phone. “See? That’s my bitcoin wallet address right there. You see it?”

Oh my God! I had to keep my cool.

“Okay,” I said, keeping my tone calm. “Well, I guess Rex was wrong about that, wasn’t he?”

The old man chuckled and looked over his shoulder toward the door. “Like most things in his life.”

Just then, my cell phone lit up with a text message. Marshall snapped his head in my direction.

“What was that?”

“It’s Rex,” I said. “He’s about ten minutes away.”

Marshall looked to be getting more agitated by the second. “I know that sneaky shit is trying to set me up. I can feel it.”

I leaned forward again.

“You won’t have to worry about him. I mean, it’s my money. Rex isn’t the one paying you, I am. If I want to pay you in bitcoin, I will. Believe me, Rex doesn’t tell me what to do.”

It was like my words had him hypnotized or something.

“My gut tells me you’re a smart broad,” he said. “Hell, you were smart enough to break off that deal you made with my son.”

Rubbing his chin, he eased back into his chair. “Shit, I bet nothing would piss him off more than a deal between the two of us.”

So close! Stay cool...

“You’re probably right. I’m not trying to piss him off, though. I just want to be smart about how I run my business. Having someone with your connections can help me do that and I’m willing to pay.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “*Fuck. Rex. Cash is out. The only way I’d be willing to do this is with bitcoin.*”

All the moisture escaped from my mouth and went straight to my armpits.

“Fine by me,” I said, doing everything I could to pull it off. “Bitcoin it is.”

Marshall nodded. “Do you have an app on your phone? For a bitcoin wallet?”

I swallowed hard. Immediately I scrambled, trying to remember everything Rex told me.

God, where is he!

“Yes,” I said, trying to keep myself composed. “But I don’t have much bitcoin in there right now.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, waving me off. “You can scan in my wallet address with your phone and send me a small amount of bitcoin, even a fraction of one. We’ll work out the details of larger payments later, but this way you’ll have my wallet address saved and there’s nothing that prick son of mine can do about it.”

I had to stop my hand from shaking when I reached for my phone. Somehow, somehow, I managed to steady it and start the bitcoin app.

“Sorry,” I said, tugging a strand of hair behind my ear. “It’s still pretty new to me. What do I do now?”

Marshall turned his phone around and pointed at the screen. “See that QR code? Scan it.”

I nodded and centered the QR code on my phone, taking a picture of it.

“Now what?”

“Send me a small amount,” he said, looking over his shoulder toward the door again. “Hurry, he’ll be here soon.”

With a few keystrokes, I completed the transaction as quickly as I could. I looked at him.

“Did you get it?”

He turned his phone around. “Yep.”

No sooner had he finished answering me than he stood, sliding the chair out from underneath him.

“I’ll be in touch,” he said. “Don’t worry about how.”

I looked up at him and nodded.

Oh. My. God. I had no idea how I’d just pulled that off.

All of a sudden, the door to the conference room opened and Rex appeared. However, he wasn’t alone.

“Marshall!” Gwenny screamed. Rex’s mother lunged toward her ex-husband. Marshall sidestepped her attempts while Rex grabbed hold of her.

“Wait!” Rex exclaimed. “Mother, don’t!”

After dodging them, Marshall made a break for the door.

“Deal’s off, son! Go to hell!”

Gwenny continued to thrash in Rex’s arms. After Marshall slammed the door, Rex let go of her, fury in his expression.

“Mother! We discussed this! You were supposed to be a distraction, not attack him!”

“I’m sorry!” she replied, clearly frazzled. “I don’t know what came over me. Just seeing him like that... I wasn’t prepared.”

Rex let out a long exhale and raked his fingers through his hair.

“Christ... We are never gonna get that bitcoin address now.”

Smiling, I cleared my throat and held my phone up. “I wouldn’t say that.”

Rex snapped his head in my direction.

“What did you do?”



LATER THAT DAY, Rex and I, along with his mother, arrived at police headquarters.

After Marshall left Rex’s office, I turned my phone over to the FBI. They confirmed the bitcoin address used to make the methylparaben purchase

matched the one from Marshall's phone.

We were in the Deputy Commissioner's office, discussing what would happen next.

"In spite of the evidence you've provided," John began, pausing to look at each of us. "The process ahead of us is a long and convoluted one. It's going to involve local, state and federal forces."

"What do you mean?" Rex asked.

John placed his hands on top of his desk, interlocking his fingers.

"Even though Marshall is in custody, it will take some time before he's formally charged. He's already claiming innocence. In any case, we've only just begun."

Rex glanced toward me while John continued.

"I should add... Both of you should be ready to help with the investigation. There are lots of unanswered questions we're going to have to resolve soon."

Rex nodded. "Obviously, we're willing to help in any way we can."

"Absolutely," I added. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

With that, John stood from his desk.

"Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Rex, I'll keep you posted on any developments in the coming days and weeks."

The Deputy Commissioner reached across his desk, extending his hand toward Rex. The two men

exchanged a brief handshake and not long after, all three of us exited the office. We hadn't gotten far when Rex positioned himself between me and Gwenny, putting one arm around each of us while we walked.

"I could use a drink," he said.

I looked up at him and smiled. Rex started to say something when a voice from behind caught his attention.

"Rex!"

We all stopped. Rex turned toward the source to see John standing there, waving at him.

"You got a sec?"

Rex nodded at him, then looked at both of us. "Be right back. You two behave."

We watched Rex walk away, eventually disappearing into John's office. After standing there in silence for a few seconds, Gwenny turned toward me.

"You know, I wouldn't blame you if you hated me."

Wait. What? Where is this coming from?

"Ummm," I replied, frowning at her. "Sorry?"

She didn't hesitate, shaking her head like she was ashamed. "After everything I've said to you, the things I've done..."

I couldn't believe my ears.

She continued, "I know how important you are to my son. I wish I can take back the things I said

and did, but I can't. The only thing I can do is ask for your forgiveness and, hopefully, a second chance. Would you be willing to give me one?"

I'd never heard a kind word out of this woman's mouth. I can't lie. A part of me wondered if she had a sketchy ulterior motive.

Then, I remembered what Rex told me, about how he'd talked to her. Was this her way of making amends? After everything I'd been through, I decided it would be easier to forgive and forget.

"Sure," I said, looking at her. "I'd be willing to give you another chance. After all, you're Rex's mother."

She smiled at me. "Thank you. You know, I'm sure you are suspicious of my sudden attitude change. It would be easy to assume Rex had a hand in this conversation."

I shrugged. No kidding.

"It crossed my mind."

"I don't blame you." She chuckled. "It makes me cringe when I think about how rude I was to you."

I felt a smile spread across my face, stretching from ear to ear. "It's all right. I understand. A mother's love is a powerful thing."

"Yes, it is," she said, nodding. "However, so is the way Rex feels about you."

No sooner did she finish speaking than she waved her hand in front of her face.

“But who am I to tell you that? I’m sure you already know how important you are to him.”

Just then, I noticed Rex exiting the Deputy Commissioner’s office. Whether it was seeing his face or hearing Gwenny’s words, I felt a sudden hollowness inside. If I judged Rex by his actions alone, I’d be an idiot to think he’d done it *just* to protect a business investment.

But I didn’t want to be a fool either.

The truth is, I’d never heard the words from his mouth. I wonder how long it might be until I did, if ever.

I turned, looking at his mother again. “Well, it looks like he’s coming back. Thank you for what you said, I really appreciate it.”

Without thinking, I leaned in, trying to give her a hug.

I know. I know! A hug?

Anyway, I caught her by surprise. At first, her body stiffened in my embrace. I didn’t give up though, pulling her close.

By then, Rex closed on us.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...” He said. “How long have I been gone?”

We both turned and looked at him.

“Shut up, Rex,” We responded in unison.

I turned and looked at her, we laughed. Rex shook his head. “Now I really need that drink.”

Later that night I was back at his place. We sat

together, relaxing on the couch and enjoying some wine. A combination of stress, not enough sleep and a little bit of alcohol fueled my confidence.

I had to know. I didn't want to wait any longer. Right here, right now. What did I mean to him? Summoning all of my courage, I opened my mouth to say something but before I could, Rex spoke.

"I can't tell you how impressed I am with what you did today. You were incredible. The way you manipulated Marshall... I didn't realize you could be so devious."

I finished another sip of my wine. "Um, thanks?"

He looked at me. "What?"

"The whole thing was about deception," I began, scooting closer to him and reaching up toward his face, running my finger along his jawline. "Honestly, I think you're jealous I did it without your help."

He chuckled at me. "Come here."

I leaned in toward him and we shared a quick kiss.

"Jealous is not a word I'd use to describe how I feel about you."

My eyes widened, I forced a hard swallow down my throat. Rex turned and looked at me, staring into my eyes.

Why isn't he saying it?

What's holding him back?

How much more do I have to go through?

Unable to control myself, I blurted it out. “Rex, I love you.”

“Yeah, I know,” he replied with a stone-faced expression. “You told me already.”

I pulled away from him, frowning. “What?”

“Remember? At your place, the other night.”

“Wait, you heard that?”

“Of course.”

Uh!

“I thought you were asleep! You jerk! I...”

He paused, leaning back into the sofa. “Oh, so you didn’t mean it?”

Without thinking, I balled my hand into a fist, ready to strike. “Well, no. I mean...”

He interrupted me. “The time wasn’t right. I didn’t want my feelings for you to get in the way of what I had to do.”

My tiny fist of fury fell into my lap. “What do you mean, your feelings for me?”

Rex motioned for me to pass my wine glass to him. I did and he placed it on a nearby table before returning his attention to me.

He reached for my face, cupping my jaw in his palms. “You really want to know how I feel?”

I nodded, choking down a lump of anxiety at the same time.

“I. Am. Absolutely. Fucking. Crazy. About. You. Baby. I love you like nothing else in this

world.”

With that, he pulled me toward him, our lips crushing into each other. From head to toe, sensations I’ve never felt overwhelmed me with bliss and joy.

At last.



SOMEHOW OR ANOTHER Rex and I managed to keep working together and growing the business. We had our ups and downs along the way but we vowed to never let anyone else get between us again.

So far, so good.

I’d taken the five million from Peter and plowed it into the company, expanding it into a brand-new manufacturing facility. Not only that, but we’d revamped our entire manufacturing process from the ground up.

As for Marshall, he decided to cooperate with authorities, turning over the names of those involved with him at customs in exchange for a reduced sentence and a speedy trial.

I’m sure his buddies were like...

Dick move!

In spite of his effort to save his own skin, a jury still found him guilty, convicting him to ten years in prison. Rex took advantage of his father’s

conviction, using the opportunity to prove that the company was innocent all along.

Rex spent millions of dollars of his own money to rebuild our image in the public's eye. So anyway, between manufacturing upgrades and Rex's public relations efforts, things were bigger and better than ever. In fact, today was a huge day for us.

We'd finally completed the ten million dollar order for Masters Mercantile!

Trent was coming by later in the day to deliver the check in person and welcome us back to Masters' shelves in style.

I decided to have a celebration because...

Yay! Winning!

My entire family was there, of course, along with Daphne and Gwenny. I might've had one too many, or three, by the time Rex walked up to me.

"Steal you away for a second?"

I smiled at him and excused myself from the group, walking away.

"Doesn't get much better than this does it?"

I looked at him and smiled.

"Some days, I have to pinch myself. After everything that happened, I have to say it's the definition of a miracle."

While I spoke, Rex nodded. Not long after, we stopped and he looked at me.

"You know, I never should have made Peter cough up the extra five million."

I frowned at him. “What in the world are you talking about?”

He shrugged. “Well, you might have still needed me for my money...”

“I wouldn’t have taken it,” I replied, teasing him. “I’d never be partners with you again. I’d rather go bankrupt first.”

“Oh really?” he replied, fighting a smile. “Why is that?”

“You’re too bossy.”

Rex took a step in my direction. “Seems to me you rather enjoy being told what to do.”

“What are you talking about?” I scoffed. “I do not!”

He leaned away from me, arching an eyebrow.

“You sure?”

“Uh, yes!”

Half-ignoring me, Rex looked over his shoulder toward the partygoers before turning his attention in my direction again. I narrowed my eyes at him, he was up to something.

Rex opened his arms. “Hug me.”

Without thinking, I leaned in toward him, but before we embraced, he chuckled.

“See? You love it when I order you around.”

I froze in place, smacking him across the upper arm. “Hey! No fair. You tricked me.”

He smiled. “Kiss me.”

Oh no, no, no.

“No way,” I replied, crossing my arms at my chest. “I’m not falling for that again.”

His eyebrows tented upward. “Oh no?”

“No. No one tells me what to do, especially not you!”

With that, Rex nodded and turned his back on me. He raised his hands, cupping them together around his mouth.

“Everyone! Everyone!” he yelled. “Can I have your attention, please?”

The room went silent. They stared in our direction.

He really has lost his mind.

“Your fearless leader,” he began, gesturing toward me. “The lovely Cherry seems to think I am, as she puts it, ‘too bossy’. By a show of hands, who here agrees with her?”

At first, everyone took turns looking at each other, wondering who would be first. To my utter shock and surprise, the first hand to go up was Trent’s.

Rex pointed at him. “Hey, you don’t count. Put that hand down, man!”

“There!” I exclaimed, pointing at Rex. “You see! Bossy!”

No sooner did I finish talking than one hand after another started to shoot up. I covered my mouth, trying to stifle the laughter within me.

Surrendering, Rex raised his hands in front of

his body. “Okay, okay. Fair enough.”

With that, he turned and looked at me. “Guess you enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“I did, a little. Yeah.”

He chuckled. “Well, I guess that’s it then. Time to make our relationship ‘boss free’.”

“Boss free?” I replied, frowning at him. “What does that mean?”

Stillness overcame him, Rex looked into my eyes.

“It means were equals Cherry. You’ve made me realize how important it is to value the opinions of those closest to me. Thank you for that.”

He caught me off guard. However, I wasn’t the only one, all of a sudden, the warehouse went silent.

Rex took notice, raising his voice. “But, there’s one last thing, I want, no *demand*, you do for me.”

Even though I wasn’t sure where he was going with it, I did know he was teasing. I decided to play along.

“No! I will never...”

My words screeched to a halt.

Without a sound, Rex lowered himself onto one knee. Once there, he reached inside of his suit coat and pulled out a small box. Looking into my eyes, he held it up and opened the lid, revealing the most immense rock I’d ever seen.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my

God. Oh my God.

I covered my mouth with my hands, trying not to come out of my skin.

“Marry me, Cherry,” he said. “I *insist*.”

I squealed and dove on top of him, tackling Rex to the ground and smothering him with kisses.

“Yes, yes, oh my God, yes!”

Applause broke out, the sound echoing around the warehouse. Our eyes met.

“I thought you didn’t want to be told what to do,” he said.

I smiled at him. “I’ll take an order like that any day.”

Rex groped around for the box, grabbing it and pulling out the ring.

“Here’s one last command for you, woman. Give me your hand.”

Vibrations consumed me, my hand trembled. Heat rushed to the corners of my eyes. Rex took my hand and slid the ring over my finger. Once he did, I raised my hand in the air and looked at it, tears trickling down my face.

Rex reached up and wiped the heated streaks away. “So... Do we have a deal?”

I looked at him and leaned in, whispering into his ear.

“Yes. Forever.”

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